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INTRODUCTION

Studying Leadership in American Politics

Jeffery A. Jenkins and Craig Volden

There is a leadership gap in American politics between the leadership needed to address the country’s most pressing problems and that provided by the nation’s elected and appointed leaders. If we turn to political scientists to shed light on such leadership issues, we find their work often lacking. As important as leadership is in explaining political choices and policy outcomes, studies of leadership are limited in many subfields of political science research and are missing altogether in others. Yet the tools and talents of political scientists have much to offer in shedding new light on leadership within and across American political institutions. We therefore urge a rebirth in the study of leadership within political science, and we put forth this volume in an attempt to draw renewed attention to the causes and consequences of the actions that public leaders take.

To help advance this broad research agenda, we assembled top scholars across many of the major subfields of American politics in a conference at the University of Virginia, jointly sponsored by the Miller Center of Public Affairs and the Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy. We asked these scholars to discuss the importance of leadership within their areas of expertise and to help set an agenda for future research. Their responses comprise the chapters of this volume, and they chart a fascinating course forward. In this introductory chapter, we briefly summarize the main arguments and insights from each chapter, then distill the commonalities down to a set of five lessons for how to study leadership in American politics.

Part One, Leadership from the Top, features five chapters exploring leadership across the three branches of the US federal government—legislative, executive, and judicial.

The first two chapters explore leadership in Congress, focusing separately on the House and the Senate. In “House Leadership and the Speakership of John Boehner,” the late Barbara Sinclair (UCLA) and Gregory Koger (University of Miami)
argue that Great Man narratives miss the broader context in which congressional leaders operate. To capture that context, scholars need a solid theoretical grounding. Sinclair and Koger offer such in discussing how to apply principal-agent models to congressional leadership. Such an approach highlights collective action problems and the difficulties of reaching agreement when party leaders and party members lack trust and a common vision. Contrasting Newt Gingrich and John Boehner, Sinclair and Koger review budget battles in different eras to make their case for the importance of context, common understandings, and significant resources at the disposal of party leaders.

On the other side of the Capitol, Steven S. Smith (Washington University in St. Louis) examines “Leaders and Partisanship in the Modern Senate.” He argues that there is no single model of effective leadership, but that it is important for a leader’s skills to fit the circumstances he or she faces. For example, Harry Reid and Mitch McConnell, the most recent Democratic and Republican majority leaders, do not exhibit many traditional leadership qualities, often lacking eloquence as the public persona of the party or being too quick-tempered as a negotiator. Yet in the context of a highly competitive and polarized era of congressional policy making, and in the rather open lawmaking institution of the Senate, they found ways to rely on committee leaders, adjust procedural strategies, and identify when and where compromises were possible. In short, Smith underscores that in the modern era, Senate leaders like Reid and McConnell must be flexible and innovative in order to be successful.

The next two chapters examine presidential leadership. In “A President’s Decisions and the Presidential Difference,” Matthew N. Beckmann (University of California, Irvine) makes an argument for why the study of leadership in American politics has receded in recent years, even by scholars focused on the presidency. Specifically, as political science research has become more quantitative, scholars have worked to detect leadership influence with a variety of measurable but ultimately overly blunt instruments. While such variables seem plausible on their face, they fail to capture the nuance and context-specific nature of leadership decisions. The exercise on the whole thus reveals little difference in outcomes across divergent leaders in American politics, including little influence of presidents over domestic and foreign policy. To escape this morass, Beckmann argues that scholars need greater specificity in developing context-guided theories and well-tailored measures.

Philip B. K. Potter (University of Virginia) likewise notes the constraints and opportunities available to leaders, specifically in the foreign policy realm. In “Presidential Leadership in American Foreign Policy,” Potter argues that institution-based incentives and constraints better explain presidential policy choices than do presidential personalities. Such incentives can be broadly captured in terms of trade-offs. When foreign policy crises arise, the president has access to better information than do other actors in the American government. Presidential choices at that point can
influence whether the policy becomes highly salient (such as with a military intervention) or not (as with diplomatic actions). On highly salient issues, the president becomes constrained by congressional and public reactions arising from increased information and scrutiny. On less salient issues, the lack of widespread concern with the issue means the president gains little credit and support. Taken together, these circumstances point to a president in American foreign policy who rarely exerts what might theoretically be thought of as effective leadership. Potter illustrates these considerations by comparing President Obama’s intense interest in health care reform to his limited efforts on the Middle East peace process.

In contrast to studies of Congress and the president, Charles M. Cameron (Princeton University) and Mehdi Shadmehr (University of Calgary) tackle the question of how to conceive of leadership within an institution that lacks classical instruments of power such as the sword or the purse. In “Great Judges: Judicial Leadership in Theory and Practice,” Cameron and Shadmehr argue that leaders in courts—or “great judges”—exercise power not through formal mechanisms but rather by persuasion. That is, great judges innovate, and other judges follow voluntarily. Cameron and Shadmehr offer a framework for understanding such leadership, based on a formal model grounded in game theory, in which a judicial leader uses an information-provision role to help followers coordinate on mutually beneficial outcomes. They then explore the plausibility of the theory by reviewing the actions of three commonly acknowledged great judges—Benjamin Cardozo, Roger Traynor, and Henry Friendly—and find general support for the theory’s assumptions in the relevant case material. They conclude by noting the many avenues for further study, including analyzing why certain bids for leadership fail (or why certain judges are not perceived to be great) and more thoroughly examining the motivation of judicial followers.

Part Two, Leadership across Institutions, contains four chapters that show the challenges that leaders face in attempting to bridge institutional actors, including those located beyond the federal level in the American political system, as well as those outside of formal institutions of governance.

David Karol (University of Maryland) begins these examinations with his study “Parties and Leadership in American Politics.” Parties often feature diverse coalitions of interests; discerning who leads at what point in time can be difficult. This is especially the case when those holding formal roles within the party actually lack true political power. Karol argues that politicians use a wide range of skills and techniques to manage partisan groups and individuals with intense demands. Context matters immensely, helping explain the different styles of Democrats and Republicans. Karol illustrates successes, failures, and complexities of party leadership with wide-ranging examples across levels of government, from the Daley machine in Chicago to gubernatorial nominating conventions in Virginia to party switching in the US Senate.
In “Leadership and Interest Groups,” Timothy M. LaPira (James Madison University) explores leadership from outside of the institutions of government. He notes how scholars of interest groups have done an excellent job in studying both interests and groups while simultaneously neglecting the importance of the leaders of such groups. LaPira argues that effective interest group leaders must cultivate institutional access and issue expertise, making them valuable to policy makers. He then identifies and discusses four distinct theories of leadership along with four perspectives on interest groups, and articulates a framework for connecting them. At the heart of this framework is a way by which leadership scholars might envision interest groups as leaders in their theories.

John W. Patty (University of Chicago) then follows with his study “Leadership and the Bureaucracy.” As in other areas of American politics, Patty notes how leaders within bureaucracies are understudied relative to their importance. Bureaucracies are often seen as broad organizations that react to political principals rather than as proactive participants in policy making headed by active and dynamic leaders. To change the direction of this scholarship, Patty argues that a three-part focus—on the information obtained by bureaucratic leaders, the decisions they make, and the implementation and management that follows on those decisions—will collectively help reorient the field of study toward the important actions available to leaders.

Finally, in “Leadership in the States,” James Coleman Battista (University at Buffalo, SUNY) makes a strong case for studying leadership at the subnational level. There is significant variance across state legislatures in their constitutional and institutional structures as well as their policy problems and partisan considerations. This diversity of context helps researchers identify which factors blend well with different leadership abilities and styles to result in effective lawmaking. Defining leadership as the exploitation of institutional authority in pursuit of desired objectives, Battista highlights some of the lessons derived from previous scholarship on state legislative leaders. He ultimately concludes that for researchers to take the variance in institutional settings and the abundance of new data to their full potential, scholars need to develop some consistency in research designs, building on one another’s strengths. Otherwise, the field will be littered with numerous inapplicable lessons that do not hold across cases.

The volume concludes with Part Three, Assessing Leadership in American Politics, which contains three chapters that are integrative, conceptual, and evaluative in nature. In “Leadership: A Definition,” William G. Howell (University of Chicago) and Stephane Wolton (London School of Economics) assess the core elements needed to define leadership in general as well as in the context of American politics. They first survey existing leadership studies and find them lacking in a variety of ways. In contrast with prior approaches focused on the functions of leaders, the consequences of their actions, and the essence of their leadership styles,
Howell and Wolton develop a set of empirical and conceptual criteria that any working definition of leadership would need to meet. On the basis of these criteria, they offer the following provisional definition: “A leader publicly defines, extols, and eventually personifies high objectives, thereby orienting and coordinating the efforts of followers who seek to advance such objectives.” The authors illustrate how this definition aptly fits a large number of leaders drawn from American and world history, as well as how this definition is open to such modifiers as “good,” “authentic,” or “effective.” This definition therefore has the potential to guide future scholars in their endeavors.

Alan E. Wiseman (Vanderbilt University) then notes the importance of how American leaders are selected and of the contextual skills that they cultivate. Specifically, in his chapter “Filters and Pegs in Holes: How Selection Mechanisms and Institutional Positions Shape (Perceptions of) Political Leadership,” Wiseman explores how the efficacy of leaders is profoundly related to the criteria that are used when they are being selected, as well as the political and institutional constraints that they face upon assuming positions of authority. He argues that normative claims about the quality of a particular leader are often influenced, at least in part, by the particular selection mechanism that was used to choose the leader, the institutional circumstances that she inherited with the leadership position, or both. As a result, Wiseman cautions that scholars of leadership need to be cognizant of these considerations when advancing arguments about ways to cultivate good leaders in a variety of political institutions and environments.

Finally, in his chapter “What Do Political Leaders Do?” Eric M. Patashnik (Brown University) reflects on the broad enterprise of studying leadership. He notes that leadership is an elusive topic to study, in part because it manifests itself in a number of ways. Thus, a deeper understanding of leadership requires an analysis of multiple questions about leadership: What does leadership mean? What do leaders in fact do? What are the constituent actions at the core of leadership? What contextual factors affect leadership? And what is the relationship between leaders and followers? While this complexity might seem daunting, Patashnik is more optimistic and sees a number of rich avenues for study. Moreover, he believes that a rigorous academic pursuit of such questions is vitally important because leadership lies at the heart of American democracy.

Taken together, this volume features top scholars of American politics wrestling with how to think about leadership within the contexts they know so well. These works are far from the last word on the subject. Rather, the authors here seek to start new debates and develop new literatures. Without a doubt, their essays examine how leaders struggle with the major policy issues of our time, including terrorism, foreign policy crises, health care, budget crises, and the fundamental values that Americans hold dear. It is in these many areas that we can truly understand the stakes involved in effective or poor leadership. It is in the coupling of theories
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and definitions with concrete applications that we develop new understandings of leadership in American politics.

Readers of this volume will undoubtedly come away with the view that studying leadership is a challenging endeavor. As Beckmann points out, leadership will seem irrelevant in empirical analyses that do not carefully and properly characterize the conditional roles of leaders. And, as Patty establishes, the constraints placed on leaders by other institutions and their own organizations make any assessment of the performance of specific leaders a difficult task. That said, for those scholars who wish to take up this important challenge, we believe that the authors in this volume offer at least five crucial lessons, which we summarize here.

Lesson 1: Build on a Coherent Definition and Common Terminology

Although many definitions of leaders and leadership have been offered across the years in numerous settings, it is beneficial for scholars of American politics to struggle themselves to develop a common definition and framework through which to study leadership. Howell and Wolton here offer one provisional definition that may serve the field well. It will undoubtedly be confronted and refined over time, but their approach sets one clear path forward. Battista’s chapter shows some of the pitfalls from not developing common definitions, terminology, and scholarly approaches. When each researcher adopts a different research design, examines a new set of variables, and studies related phenomena from divergent angles, gaining a cumulative understanding that is more than the sum of its parts is difficult, despite the attractive opportunities for exciting research offered across state political institutions.

Lesson 2: There Is No Single Model of Effective Leadership

While commonality is attractive in the definition of terms, such commonalities should not be taken to imply that a single model of leadership exists or is effective in all circumstances. Smith, for example, raises a set of characteristics that are commonly associated with effective legislative leaders. He then goes on to establish that senators Harry Reid and Mitch McConnell have succeeded despite being limited in their skills across many of those classic dimensions. In other cases, it is hard to even identify leaders. For instance, LaPira offers examples of four lobbyists in order to illustrate some of the challenges involved in discerning who is an interest group leader. Finally, Karol demonstrates that those in seemingly key positions within political parties are often not the major brokers behind political and policy deals. For leaders who stretch across multiple institutions, identifying what actions they take to become successful may be more of an art than a science.
Lesson 3: Develop Fundamental Theories of Leadership

In part as a result of the lack of a single model of effective leadership, it is important for scholars to ground their research endeavors in sound theoretical frameworks. Just as there is no single best leadership style, so too is there no single best theoretical approach to studying leaders. Examples of useful approaches are found throughout this book. For example, Sinclair and Koger link principal-agent models to party leadership within the House of Representatives. Potter develops a theoretical framework of the demand for foreign policy action placed on presidents. Cameron and Shadmehr build a game theoretic model of the coordinating role of leaders within the US court system. Each theory helps researchers structure their thinking about the essence of leadership, and each offers predictions that can be explored and tested.

It is also likely the case that a true overarching theory of leadership is not possible, and that midlevel theories need to be developed within particular institutional contexts. Moreover, the temporal aspects of leadership might also deserve greater attention. Does our conception of what leadership entails and involves change at different points in history? A different way of thinking about this might be, how do leaders' choice sets differ based on historical context?

Lesson 4: Leaders in American Politics Operate within a Complex and Constraining Landscape rather than Mainly as Powerful Individuals

Many of the scholars in this volume express discomfort in characterizing the influence of leaders as powerful autonomous individuals, as visionaries or great men able to overcome challenges with the sheer force of will. Rather, they describe leaders in terms of their followers or in terms of the opportunities and constraints they face. Even considering the significant powers of the American president, both Beckmann and Potter note a variety of constraints on his ability to advance his policy objectives, as Presidents Eisenhower and Trump both took time to realize. Patty notes how bureaucratic leaders are hemmed in by their vast organizations and by political actors in the executive and legislative branches; he also describes challenges these leaders face in information acquisition and policy implementation. Sinclair and Koger argue that the Speaker of the House in Congress is limited by the powers that the party members are willing to give to their leaders.

Yet while agreeing that Great Man theories yield little utility, we also think that personal characteristics might be better incorporated into various theoretical accounts. One way to do this rigorously would be to establish types, such that general skills and abilities might be identified for effective (or ineffective) leaders. Thus,
given contextual circumstances, certain types of leadership might be needed, and thus particular leaders might be chosen or avoided. Thinking in terms of congressional politics, when the majority party is divided, as the House Democrats were in the mid-twentieth century, an accommodating, conciliatory leader like Speaker Sam Rayburn was needed; however, when the majority party is quite homogeneous, as the House Republicans were in the 1990s, a bold, proactive leader like Speaker Newt Gingrich fit the bill.

Lesson 5: Context and Conditionality Are Crucial in Empirical Studies of Leadership

With the above four lessons in hand, the path forward in the study of leadership in American politics thus becomes one that demands careful attention to the conditions under which leaders matter and the contexts in which they exert the greatest influence. For instance, Beckmann notes how looking for broad impacts of presidents on policy outcomes may miss the nuanced but very real influence that presidents exert in specific settings. Wiseman highlights how the selection processes producing leaders and the institutional positions they inhabit together influence how they can and do lead and therefore how they should be evaluated. And Battista discusses how to use the variance found across institutions to uncover the circumstances under which leaders have the greatest effect. In combination, these five lessons offer the broad outlines of a research path forward while simultaneously setting a standard for assessing the value of new research contributions. In a variety of ways, the scholars contributing to this volume have offered examples of research that has been valuable to this overall endeavor, but they also note examples of where these research lines have not developed as fully as they might.

In sum, we believe that leadership in American politics is simultaneously woefully understudied and immensely important. We hope that the essays brought together in this volume serve to rejuvenate scholarship on leadership. At a minimum, they illustrate that scholars of American politics have the tools and capacity to significantly contribute to this endeavor. Indeed, they set a path forward that will fruitfully serve the scholarly community for years to come.
PART ONE

Leadership from the Top