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Democratic Leadership Revisited

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Abstract

Political theorists such as James MacGregor Burns (1978/2010), J. Ronald Pennock (1979), and Eric Beerbohm (2015) have argued that democratic leaders, to be democratic, must forge joint commitments with their followers before they act. But what happens when leaders act without doing so? Does this make them undemocratic? In this article, I challenge this standard, stepwise model of democratic leadership. I outline alternative models of democratic leadership that do not require leaders to forge joint commitments with their followers *before* they act. Democratic leaders must provide justifications for their actions, and they must be held accountable for them, but they might nevertheless act before they forge joint commitments with followers. In a trust-based model of democratic leadership, for example, trust functions as a temporary stand-in for justification, giving democratic leaders leeway to make decisions without first consulting their publics or forging joint commitments with them. In the hindsight model of democratic leadership, the consequences of actions can take the place of—or supplement—the justifications leaders provide. I argue that these alternative models of democratic leadership are more consistent with practices of leadership in the real world of politics. I illustrate the theory with two examples: The first focuses on Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's decision to introduce the Goods and Services Tax in 1991; the second examines German Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership during the European "migrant crisis" in 2015.

Keywords

accountability; Angela Merkel; Brian Mulroney; democracy; democratic leadership; trust; persuasion

1. Introduction

In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela (1994) explained that there "are times when a leader must move out ahead of his flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way" (p. 457). This statement challenges our notions of *democratic* leadership. Democratic leaders should do—or at least try to

do—what their people want. This basic expectation aligns with our democratic intuitions, but it also aligns with most theories of democratic leadership. Eric Beerbohm (2015), for example, argues that democratic leaders must forge joint commitments with their followers *before* they act. Democratic leaders must be authorized by their followers, and they must refrain from intentionally misleading or lying to their followers in order to forge joint commitments with them. But democratic leaders, according to this theory, must forge those joint commitments before they act.

Beerbohm's theory aligns with what I call the "standard model" of democratic leadership. According to this model, democratic leaders must decide what to do with their followers (or constituents) before taking actions to achieve shared goals. That is what makes them democratic leaders. James MacGregor Burns (1978/2010) and J. Ronald Pennock (1979) outlined theories of democratic leadership that also align with the standard model. First, democratic leaders aid the thinking of others, justify their objectives, and make plans with their followers; then they coordinate collective actions to achieve those plans.

In this article, I challenge the claim that democratic leadership, to be democratic, requires leaders to go through a stepwise process that starts with joint commitments and ends with actions. In practice, that is not how democratic leadership normally works. Democratic leaders often make promises to followers or constituents before votes are cast and before actions are taken. But even when leaders win elections (or are authorized in other ways), they rarely (if ever) act on joint commitments that have been forged with all of their constituents. Political constituencies are diverse, and the people within them disagree about what should or should not be done. Disagreement is what makes them political constituencies (e.g., Waldron, 1999, p. 102). The demands of democratic leadership thus require leaders to navigate political disagreements in order to get things done, and leaders often have to act—or decide to act—without forging joint commitments with everyone who may be affected by their actions. Furthermore, there are times when leaders need to act and large numbers of people (even majorities) actively oppose their plans, objectives, or policies. Does this make those leaders and their actions undemocratic? Not necessarily.

To explore this situation in more detail, I examine two case studies of leaders acting without first forging joint commitments with their followers. The first case focuses on Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's decision to introduce the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 1991. The second case examines German Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership during the European "migrant crisis" in 2015. Many people within these leaders' constituencies, and even within their own parties, opposed their actions—and they acted anyway. I use these cases to illustrate that democratic leadership does not always require leaders to forge joint commitments with followers before actions are taken.

The article proceeds as follows: In Section 2, I review the theoretical literature on democratic leadership, giving special attention to the theories of Burns (1978/2010), Pennock (1979), and Beerbohm (2015). I show that these theories align with a standard, stepwise model of democratic leadership. I then argue that these theories are not sufficient given the practical demands facing political leaders. Indeed, I go so far as to suggest that democratic leadership may not be possible if joint commitments between leaders and followers are required before actions are taken. In Section 3, I develop a theory of democratic leadership that does not require leaders to forge joint commitments before they act. This theory is, I argue, better attuned to the practical demands of political leadership. The theory presents three alternative models of democratic leadership: a trust model, a hindsight model, and an action model. Each is democratic but they do not require leaders to forge joint

commitments in advance of taking action. In Section 4, I use the Mulroney case to illustrate the hindsight model of leadership, and the Merkel case to illustrate the trust model of leadership. In Section 5, I conclude with some observations about democratic leadership in practice and a brief mention of Nelson Mandela to illustrate the action model of leadership.

2. The Standard Model of Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership is often understood as a stepwise process. Democratic leaders work with potential followers to identify shared commitments, aims, or objectives. They respond to the needs and demands of potential supporters while at the same time trying to persuade people to support their own aims and objectives. If leaders get enough support from potential followers—if people join their parties and vote them into office—then democratic leaders have to figure out how to put their shared plans or intentions into action. All along this pathway, followers—and publics more generally—should have opportunities to influence their leaders and accept or reject the leadership claims they make. This is the standard, stepwise model of democratic leadership.

James MacGregor Burns (1978/2010), J. Ronald Pennock (1979), and, more recently, Eric Beerbohm (2015) each articulate different versions of the standard model of democratic leadership. In Burns' theory, effective leaders leverage power resources to achieve collective goals or objectives that will elevate or change themselves and their followers in some way. Power resources include money, time, numbers, charisma, celebrity, need, identity, and conflicts, which may be leveraged to unify and mobilize potential supporters.

In Burns' theory of leadership, there is an ongoing and mutual exchange between leaders and followers. Good leaders do not merely seek to serve the existing aims or goals of potential followers. They do not simply seek power by offering followers what they think those followers might want. Doing so would be retail politics. But neither do leaders impose their own aims or objectives on potential followers. Instead, good leaders, in Burns' theory, take the aims of their followers into account, and they integrate those aims into their own objectives to forge a shared understanding of what needs to be done, of what needs to change. And then they act to make change happen.

Burns' theory of leadership is iterative. There are, or should be, regular interactions between leaders and followers as leaders seek to identify and shape shared aims and objectives while mobilizing people to act for change. Good leaders, on Burns' account, start by identifying and forging shared aims and objectives, and then they mobilize collective actions to achieve those objectives. In practice, these processes will be iterative because leaders and followers must continually adjust their aims and objectives in response to their achievements and failures. But it is clear in Burns' analysis that leaders must work with their potential followers to identify shared aims and objectives before action is taken to achieve those objectives.

J. Ronald Pennock (1979) also develops a stepwise theory of democratic leadership. He argues that leaders serve several (essential) functions in democracies, and these functions must be performed in an ordered process. The first function (or step) is to aid the thinking of others. As Pennock explains:

> In part this is simply a matter of identifying and pointing out problems for which political action is appropriate. The problems may already exist in the sense that the public welfare is in some respect

suffering, or its improvement is being hampered; or the leader may anticipate problems. (Pennock, 1979, p. 485)

The second function (or step) "after people's opinions are formulated" is to enable those "opinions to be effective" (Pennock, 1979, p. 485). The leader, still playing the aiding-the-thinking-of-others role, helps people connect their general preferences or opinions to specific goals or actions that people might unite around. Leaders also speak for their followers. They articulate their shared preferences and opinions, and they propose specific plans for how their shared aims and objectives are to be achieved. Thus, according to Pennock (1979), the "leader's success is determined in no small measure by his ability to anticipate how his would-be followers will react to his plan" (p. 486).

The third function of leadership, and the next step in the process, is to build coalitions of others who are not yet followers but whose support will be needed if a leader's plans are to be implemented. In doing so, leaders will have to change the minds and wills of others. As Pennock (1979) explains, they may have to compromise or "alter their purposes and those of their followers" (p. 486) in order to bring others on board. Or they may be able to "discover and suggest means for integrating apparently contradictory purposes" (Pennock, 1979, p. 486) and thereby encourage those who were previously opposed to support their aims, objectives, and plans. All the tools of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise will be needed to build coalitions for action.

The fourth function of leadership in Pennock's theory has to do with translating collective agreements and shared objectives into action. The leaders must energize their followers, they must encourage them to act, and they must mobilize them to make whatever changes are needed to achieve their shared goals (Pennock, 1979, pp. 486–487).

In Pennock's account of leadership, as in Burns' theory, democratic leaders influence their potential followers while at the same time being influenced by them. Leaders and followers work together to make change happen. The stepwise processes of leadership happen over and over again as leaders and followers grapple with new political issues or collective problems, or when they fail (for whatever reasons) to achieve their shared objectives. Nevertheless, in each iteration, the stepwise character of these theories is plain to see: First, leaders aid the thinking of others, then they make specific plans with others, then they build larger coalitions, and then they finally take action.

Eric Beerbohm's (2015) theory of democratic leadership has a similar structure to that of the others. Beerbohm identifies two conditions for democratic leadership and two constraints. The first is the "commitment-setting condition" (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 642). This condition is met when leaders forge joint commitments with potential followers to achieve some shared objective. The second is the "commitment-mobilizing condition" (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 644). This condition is met when leaders "coordinate political action" aimed at achieving the joint commitments they have forged with followers. As Beerbohm explains, "the theory's core element is the creation and sustenance of joint intentional activity among followers" (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 642). Leaders make this joint intentional activity possible. In Beerbohm's theory, these two conditions for democratic leadership must be met in the prescribed order: the first, and then the second.

But leaders, to be democratic, cannot forge joint commitments in any way they might like. They have to do so in democratic conditions using democratic means. Beerbohm thus identifies two constraints on leadership practices that distinguish democratic from undemocratic leadership. The first is a "relational constraint." Leadership is undemocratic when power relations between leaders and followers are imbalanced and unauthorized by followers (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 645). Beerbohm gives the example of a prison warden engaging in "democratic" decision making with prisoners. It is not democratic leadership because of the power imbalances between prison officials and prisoners (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 645). In practice, democratic followers must be free and empowered to accept or reject the leadership claims that potential leaders make. Democratic followers will follow if they are persuaded to do so, but not otherwise. But they must also be persuaded in ways that are democratic. That is the essence of Beerbohm's "means constraint," according to which leadership practices are undemocratic if leaders deceive or otherwise manipulate followers into forging joint commitments with them (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 646). In short, democratic leaders do not lead on false pretenses or "persuade" people using lies, misinformation, or other forms of deception.

Beerbohm argues that this four-part theory can reliably distinguish democratic from undemocratic leadership. He argues that the theory avoids both the over inclusion problem—where undemocratic actions are treated by the theory as democratic—as well as the under inclusion problem—where genuine democratic leadership is not considered democratic by the theory. I agree with Beerbohm that his theory successfully avoids problems of over inclusion, but I am not convinced that it avoids problems of under inclusion. In particular, Beerbohm's suggestion that leaders must first forge joint commitments with potential followers, and then find ways of mobilizing action to achieve those commitments, excludes examples where leaders act before they have forged joint commitments—and, more subtly, where the actions of leaders help persuade people that the leader's aims or objectives, and thus their actions, are desirable in some way and worth supporting.

Furthermore, Beerbohm does not clearly specify who democratic leaders are meant to be forging joint commitments with. In other words, he does not specify who a leader's followers are. We know that the followers are people who freely choose to align with a leader and that leader's goals or objectives. For example, party members might forge joint commitments with party leaders. Or party members might make people who share their existing aims and objectives the leaders of their party.

But what happens when a leader represents a political constituency? In that position, a leader will need to serve the interests of a group of people (a city, region, or country) that does not agree with itself. If political constituencies are defined as groups of people who live together but disagree about what should be done (e.g., Waldron, 1999, p. 102), elected leaders must always act—if they are going to act—against the interests, preferences, aims, or objectives of at least some members of their constituencies.

Pennock's (1979) theory of democratic leadership addresses this problem, at least to some extent, because leaders, in his theory, must work to forge coalitions with others once they have forged joint commitments with their own followers. Nevertheless, coalitions are never comprised of whole constituencies. They are, instead, only ever as large as they need to be to make collective action possible. It seems obvious that elected leaders in all ordinary political situations must act without the explicit support of at least some of their constituents. If this is the case, and if we accept the standard model of democratic leadership, then genuinely democratic leadership, which always takes place in a political constituency that does not agree

with itself, would be an impossibility. This represents an extreme version of Beerbohm's (2015) under inclusion problem. On this account, all the actions of elected leaders, as we know them, would fail to meet the criteria of democratic leadership set out in Beerbohm's theory.

Democratic leaders owe justifications to those who will be affected by their actions. They should be in continual communication with their potential followers as they work together to forge shared plans and objectives. But in almost all cases, leaders will act before they have forged commitments with all the people who may be affected by, or represented in, their actions. Furthermore, the effects or consequences of the actions taken by leaders may themselves serve as justifications for those actions.

Democratic publics—committed followers, potential followers, and opponents—must be empowered to accept or reject their leaders and the decisions that they make. But the idea that commitment-forming processes must take place before democratic leaders can legitimately take any sort of actions is unduly restrictive—it would, in effect, mean that very few (if any) actions could be taken by democratic leaders. Leaders would be unable to respond in the moment. They would be unable to make quick decisions in emergency situations, and they would be unable to take bold actions that many people oppose but which might be precisely what is needed to serve the short- or longer-term interests of society. To render such actions democratic—and to give leadership its proper place in democratic politics—we need a theory of democratic leadership that does not require justification to (always) come before action. In the next section of the article, I explain how this might be done.

3. Democratic Leadership Revisited

Leaders who act before they have forged joint commitments with their followers (or their constituents more generally) might nevertheless be considered democratic leaders if the circumstances of their leadership meet certain criteria. I identify four criteria—(a) justification, (b) accountability, (c) trust, and (d) hindsight—but these criteria might be combined in various ways to render the actions of leaders democratic. The first criterion—justification—must go hand-in-hand with the second criterion, accountability. By justification, I mean that leaders must provide followers, and more generally, all those affected by their actions, with reasons that explain those actions in terms that the affected might plausibly accept. This is similar to what Hanna Pitkin, for example, means by explanation (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 209–210). By accountability, I mean that leaders must be subject to removal by followers and affected publics. Thus, democratic leaders must justify their actions to their constituents, and those constituents must be empowered to either accept or reject those justifications and hold their leaders accountable for their actions.

This account of democratic leadership differs from the standard models that we have just reviewed because it does not require leaders to justify their actions, and seek authorization for those actions in joint commitments, before actions are taken. If justifications are provided and followers are empowered to accept or reject the actions of their leaders, the fact that leaders took actions without or before forging joint commitments with their followers does not render their actions undemocratic. Nevertheless, justification without accountability is not enough, because that would leave democratic publics disempowered; and accountability without justification is insufficient because people need to know why their leaders have acted before they can make informed judgments of those actions.

The third criterion, trust, is a temporary replacement for justification and accountability. When we trust, we empower others to make decisions for us independently and without justification. When I hire a sitter to take care of my child, I am empowering that person to make decisions without me about something I value and care deeply about. Trust, therefore, makes us vulnerable, and as such, when we trust, we are always in danger of having our trust betrayed (e.g., Baier, 1986). In politics, (as in life more generally), trust gives others leeway to act on specific decisions without consultation, justification, or forging joint commitments. As political scientist Richard Fenno explains:

> When a constituent trusts a House member, the constituent is saying something like this: "I am willing to put myself in your hands temporarily; I know you will have opportunities to hurt me, although I many not know when those opportunities occur; I assume—and I will continue to assume until it is proven otherwise—that you will not hurt me; for the time being, then, I'm not going to worry about your behavior." (Fenno, 1978/2003, p. 56)

On this account, trust is a temporary replacement, or stand-in, for justification and accountability. But it will be democratically legitimate only to the extent that it is, in practice, temporary. Democratic followers might trust their leaders and thereby give them leeway to act without consultation, justification, and the forging of joint commitments, but followers will need future opportunities to accept or reject those leaders and the actions they have taken. If those opportunities are not realized, warranted trust, which may be democratically legitimate, will be rendered democratically illegitimate. On this account, trust is a sufficient criterion that will render leadership legitimate, but only temporarily, and only when there are future opportunities for followers to judge and accept or reject the explanations and actions of their leaders.

The fourth criterion, hindsight, may be viewed as an alternative form of justification. The familiar form of justification involves leaders articulating arguments or rationales for their actions that followers might find persuasive. As we have seen, these justifications might come either before or after actions have been taken. Hindsight, as an alternative form of justification, always happens after actions are taken. Hindsight involves assessing the real-world consequences of actions, and judging them on those grounds, rather than judging the persuasiveness of the arguments and claims leaders make to justify their actions. In some cases, the leaders who take actions may be rejected by followers, but the actions they took may be accepted and sanctioned as legitimate in subsequent, and repeated, accountability processes.

We can see how these criteria operate when we compare different models of democratic leadership. Figure 1 presents the standard model of democratic leadership, which involves a series of steps that must be taken in a specific order to render the actions of leaders democratic. Leaders must first provide justifications for actions they seek to take. They must "aid the thinking" of their followers and persuade them to forge joint commitments to act. It is only then that leaders are legitimized to act. Once leaders have acted, they might decide to justify their actions again before they are held accountable by empowered publics. We could include trust in Figure 1 but it is not relevant if Fenno (1978/2003) is right that trust is a temporary replacement for justification. Instead of trusting leaders to act without prior justifications, leaders and followers in the standard model must agree to act together before actions are taken.
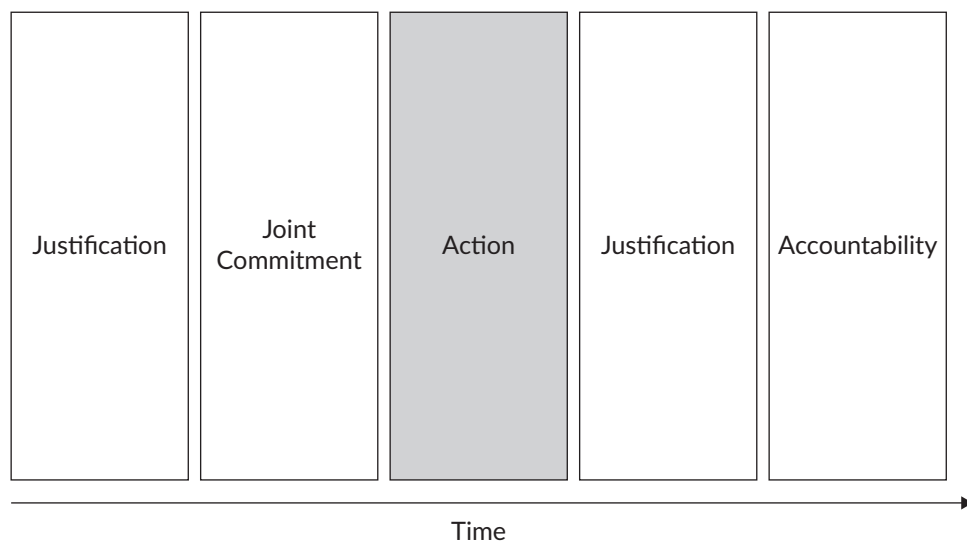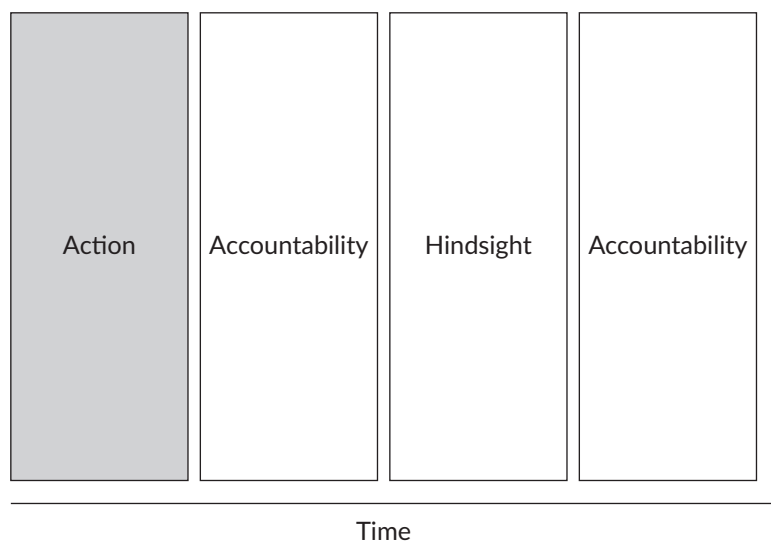
Figure 1. Standard model of democratic leadership.

Figure 2 depicts a trust-based model of democratic leadership. In this scenario, trust precedes actions that are taken before justifications are provided. This form of leadership is democratic because trust involves a willing agreement to let others act in our stead without justification for specific actions. To be democratic, trust must be empowered, conscious, and not predicated on misinformation or deception (e.g., Warren, 1999). But if trust meets these conditions, it can legitimately stand in for justification, at least temporarily. Once actions have been taken, democratic leaders should, nevertheless, justify their actions and be held accountable for them. But in this case, actions are taken before a leader justifies them to followers in a context where no joint commitments to act have been forged between leaders and followers. And yet, such a scenario is democratic because followers are free (or not) to trust, they are given justifications for actions that have been taken, and they are empowered to hold their leaders accountable for those actions.
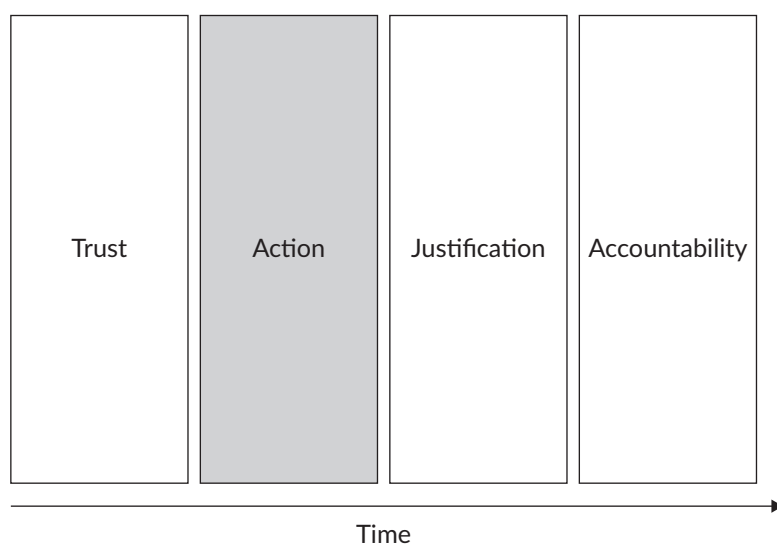
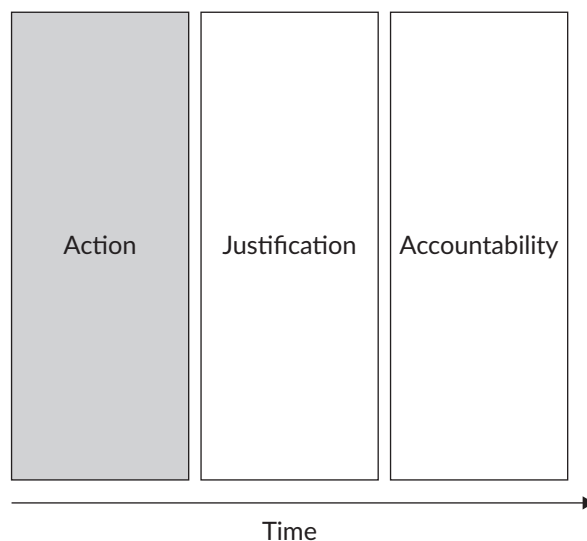**Figure 2.** A trust-based model of democratic leadership.

Figure 3 extends the timeline to include hindsight. In this model, no joint commitments are forged, no justifications are provided before actions are taken, and no trust is assumed. Nevertheless, the leader takes action and is held accountable. With the benefit of hindsight, the leader's actions are reassessed and either sanctioned or not in an election or in some other accountability process where followers (or constituents more generally) are empowered to remove the leader and replace that person if they choose to do so. Let's assume, as well, that the followers are able and empowered to accept or reverse the actions their leaders have taken (they might, for example, elect a new leader who then reverses the policies adopted by the previous leader). In this model, the actions of leaders are justified (or not) by their real-world consequences and not (solely) by the rationales provided by leaders themselves. This is, nevertheless, democratic leadership because followers are empowered to make informed judgments about whether to accept or reject their leaders and their actions.

Time

Figure 3. A hindsight model of democratic leadership.

Figure 4 presents a pure action model of democratic leadership. In this model, followers do not actively trust (or distrust) their leaders. Trust does not come into it. And there are no claims that the policies or actions adopted will, in hindsight, be vindicated (although they might be). Instead, leaders simply act. Once they have acted, they justify their actions and they are then held accountable for them.

In practice, democratic leaders will often provide justifications both before and after they act, but they are not required to do so (or forge joint commitments) before they act if they are to be held accountable after they act. This model of democratic leadership is consistent with standard models of retrospective voting, and it is consistent with Pitkin's theory of representation, in which representatives who act against the expressed preferences of (at least some) of their constituents owe those constituents retrospective justifications for their actions that track their constituents' (supposed) interests (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 209–210). The representational relationship remains democratic if constituents are empowered to hold their representatives (or leaders) accountable for those actions in elections or other empowered accountability processes. One reason to reject the actions of leaders—and the leaders themselves—might be that their actions were taken without joint commitments. But it is equally democratic for constituents (or followers) to accept the justifications leaders provide for actions already taken even in the absence of joint commitments.

Figure 4. An action model of democratic leadership.

Justification and accountability are necessary and sufficient criteria for democratic leadership. But trust can function as a temporary stand-in for justification, and hindsight—or the real-world consequences of actions—can also stand in for the justifications or rationales provided by leaders themselves. Importantly, as Figures 2–4 illustrate, there is no requirement for justification to precede action as the standard model of democratic leadership implies. All of these models depict different forms of democratic leadership.

4. Democratic Leadership in Practice

In what follows, I briefly outline two examples of democratic leaders acting in advance of obtaining joint commitments with their followers and publics. The first case—focusing on Brian Mulroney's introduction of the GST in Canada in 1991—illustrates the hindsight model of leadership. The second case—focusing on Angela Merkel's response to the 2015 "migrant crisis" in Europe—illustrates the trust model of leadership. In both cases, the leaders acted democratically: they provided justifications for their unpopular decisions and they were held accountable for those decisions.

4.1. Mulroney and the GST

In 1991, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of the Progressive Conservative Party and his Minister of Finance, Michael Wilson, adopted the GST, which replaced the Manufacturers' Sales Tax. While the Manufacturers' Sales Tax was hidden in the cost of manufactured goods, the GST was made visible as a price added to the costs of most non-essential goods and services.

Mulroney's GST policy was one response to the massive report of the Macdonald Commission (Government of Canada, 1985), which argued that Canada's economy needed to be modernized to become more productive. Among dozens of other recommendations, the Macdonald Commission's report argued that the Canadian government should negotiate a free trade deal with the United States. This became a primary objective of the Mulroney government in the late 1980s. But Canada's tax system would have to be realigned to meet the requirements of a free trade environment. As Mulroney later explained:

> The proposed tax [the GST] had other advantages. It was consistent with a free trade environment because it provided a mechanism to remove taxes on the inputs of exported goods and service, and did not put our exports at a competitive disadvantage. It also removed a subsidy we were unwittingly providing to imports by taxing them at the value for duty as they came across the border, thus catching them before all sorts of costs were added. (Mulroney, 2007, p. 823)

Mulroney saw the GST as a crucial component of his free trade policy, but the new tax was not widely discussed—or justified—in the 1988 election campaign, which became known as the "free trade election." For example, although Michael Wilson started talking to Mulroney about the tax in 1987 (Mulroney, 2007, p. 822), the party's 1988 election manifesto made no mention of new consumption taxes (Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, 1988). Furthermore, although the election was widely regarded as a referendum on free trade, political scientist Lawrence LeDuc (1989) concluded that "the Conservative victory was achieved as much in spite of free trade as because of it" (LeDuc, 1989, p. 167). According to polls at the time, only 34% of Canadians approved of the agreement that Mulroney had negotiated with the United States (LeDuc, 1989, p. 167). As such, the 1988 election cannot be seen as a sweeping mandate from Canadians to radically modernize the economy, nor was it a mandate to introduce new consumption taxes.

Nevertheless, Mulroney and Wilson moved ahead with the GST after the election. Wilson insisted that the introduction of the tax should be combined with big reductions in personal income taxes. But Mulroney knew that even this approach would be politically toxic:

> I knew enough about politics to predict that this innovation, however neat in its design and conception, was going to cause one helluva big political row. Voters would never accept that this [the GST] was just a simple replacement for the MST [Manufacturers' Sales Tax], a tax that they had never even heard of. (Mulroney, 2007, pp. 823–824)

Initially, the government had set the GST at 9%, but it reduced the rate to 7% in response to strong opposition from retail businesses, the public, and opposition parties. This did not help. The GST was wildly unpopular, as Mulroney predicted it would be. Two Conservative members of parliament resigned from Mulroney's caucus over the tax (Simpson, 2011). By some estimates, 80% of people polled opposed the introduction of the GST (Claiborne, 1990, p. a18). Canadians did not want to pay an additional 7% on the cost of most of their goods and services. Most provinces (except for Alberta) also charge a sales tax which means that with the introduction of the GST, Canadians would be paying two sales taxes on goods and services. This was a difficult proposal for most people to accept.

Despite all of this, Mulroney's government pushed ahead with the tax. At one point, Mulroney employed an archaic constitutional rule to appoint eight additional representatives to Canada's unelected Senate in order to ensure that the GST bill would pass into law (Simpson, 2011). Some have argued that packing the Senate was an undemocratic move. Mulroney responded that allowing an unelected Senate to block the tax bill would have been a "violation of fundamental democratic principles" (Claiborne, 1990, p. a18).

Mulroney's government persisted because it believed that introducing the GST was the right thing to do. As he explained: "I knew immediately that I had a significant choice to make between the easy political way out and a policy that was good for the country" (Mulroney, 2007, p. 824). The GST would provide the federal government

with much-needed revenues to support government services, such as health care, that all Canadians rely on. But it would also help facilitate trade with the United States and enhance Canada's position within an increasingly competitive global economy (Curtis & Kingston-Riechers, 2010, p. 505).

The justifications for the GST that Mulroney and Wilson provided (after the election) did not help win support for the policy. Canadians remained strongly opposed to the tax. There were protests and rallies aimed at forcing the government to reverse course. Quebec called the tax unconstitutional. Alberta, Ontario, and British Columbia took legal action against the federal government, claiming that they were overstepping their powers of taxation.

Did Mulroney act undemocratically when he introduced the GST against the strong preferences of members of his own party and the public more generally? Not necessarily. He was acting in ways consistent with the hindsight model of democratic leadership depicted in Figure 3. He believed that the GST would, with hindsight, serve as its own justification. Its introduction was intended to function as a demonstration of the benefits of the tax itself. The tax was a form of persuasion. During an interview with Joe Chidley in 2006, Mulroney justified the GST in precisely those terms: "popularity," he explained, "is often the antithesis of leadership. Leadership is about having the capacity to look beyond tomorrow and bring in policies that will effect structural change—not for easy headlines in 10 days, but for the country in 10 years" (Mulroney, 2007, p. 44). Mulroney and Wilson were confident that Canadians would come to see, in the long run, that the GST was worth paying and maintaining. But that strategy did not help their re-election prospects.

Shortly after introducing the GST, Mulroney's popularity plummeted: "In November 1992, his popularity was a mere 12 percent—the lowest of any prime minister in Canadian history" (Hillmer & McIntosh, 2025). In February 1993, Mulroney announced his decision to leave politics and Kim Campbell became leader of the Progressive Conservative Party and Canada's first female prime minister. That did not last long. In October 1993, the Progressive Conservatives suffered the worst electoral defeat in Canadian history, going from 154 seats before the election to only 2 seats after the election. It was an electoral earthquake.

The fall of the Progressive Conservatives in 1993 cannot be wholly attributed to the introduction of the GST. Canada was in the middle of a major shakeup in the party system, with the surging Reform Party in Western Canada and the formation of the separatist Bloc Québécois in response to failed constitutional talks (e.g., Erickson, 1995). Nevertheless, the GST was a key factor in the decimation of the Progressive Conservatives. It was a major issue in the election campaign, with Jean Chretien's Liberal Party promising to eliminate the tax immediately after taking power.

Mulroney did not enjoy the trust of Canadians when he introduced the GST. Nor did he forge clear joint commitments with Canadians before introducing the tax. But his actions were not undemocratic. Mulroney did not lie, deceive, or manipulate people into supporting the tax. He provided justifications that could be reasonably defended, and Canadians were empowered to reject those justifications and Mulroney's leadership—which is exactly what happened. But Mulroney's decision to introduce the GST has been largely vindicated by history. Chretien's government never followed through on its promise to eliminate the tax. Stephen Harper's Conservative government reduced the GST from 7% to 5% between 2006 and 2008, but it did not eliminate the tax. The GST has never been popular, but Canadians have largely learned to accept it. Today, the GST is begrudgingly recognized as an essential revenue stream for the federal government. It has

been replaced in Newfoundland, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia by a Harmonized Sales Tax which combines the provincial and federal sales taxes in those provinces. But the basic idea of a federal GST is not going away.

Justin Trudeau's Liberal government implemented a brief "tax holiday" which removed the GST from selected items (including Christmas trees) between December 15, 2024, and February 14, 2025. This was interpreted by some as a desperate move by an unpopular government. It was, for example, described by Trudeau's own Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland as a "costly political gimmick" in her resignation letter (e.g., Rendell & Kirby, 2024). After the tax holiday, the GST was fully reintroduced.

Ultimately, Mulroney was right in predicting that this unpopular tax would be a net benefit to Canadians. It was introduced against the expressed wishes of most Canadians—and Mulroney paid a high political price for introducing it—but the actions that he took to establish the tax were not undemocratic. The tax itself has served to persuade Canadians (and all subsequent prime ministers) of its value and necessity. As journalist Jeffrey Simpson concluded 20 years after the introduction of the tax, and despite its unpopularity, "the GST proved to be a wise move by Brian Mulroney's government. That the tax has stood the test of time underscores its utility" (Simpson, 2011). As Mulroney himself explained in 2006:

> So, history will decide who did the right thing. I'm satisfied that we did the right thing for Canada, and on these major issues [GST and free trade], despite their unpopularity in some quarters. Because popularity has very little to do with leadership. (Chidley, 2006, p. 44).

4.2. Merkel and the European Migrant Crisis

The second case comes from Germany. During the 2010s, millions of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other conflict and war-torn areas came to Europe. Many migrants preferred to settle in Germany and France rather than in smaller European countries. This led to large numbers of refugees seeking asylum in Europe's two biggest countries. In the summer of 2015, during the height of what became known as the Syrian "migrant crisis," German Chancellor Angela Merkel made a decisive decision to adopt an open-door refugee policy. There would be no limit to the number of asylum claims that Germany would accept. The country would not allow everyone to stay; each claim would be processed and assessed on its merits, and many claims would be rejected. But Merkel made a commitment to accepting as many refugee claims as necessary with the intention of then negotiating a more equitable distribution of refugees across Europe with her counterparts in the other EU countries.

As the number of refugee claims kept rising, Merkel famously addressed the nation, saying: "I put it simply, Germany is a strong country. The motive with which we approach these matters must be: we have already managed so much, we'll manage this" (Oltermann, 2020). This last phrase, "We'll manage this"—which in German is "*Wir schaffen das*"—became a much-maligned shorthand for Merkel's open-door refugee policy.

Merkel's decision was made at a time when a new brand of right-wing—Eurosceptic—populism was emerging in Germany, but which had not yet firmly established itself. A new right-wing party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), had failed to meet the 5% threshold required to win seats in the Bundestag in the 2013 elections. The AfD strongly opposed Merkel's open-door policy. At the same time, the policy was supported by some sections of the German public. People donated money and goods, such as clothes, toys, and food,

or volunteered their time to help refugees settle (Helms et al., 2019, p. 359). But Merkel's policy was, according to Charles Lees, "far less popular with many of her own supporters" (Lees, 2018, p. 301). When Merkel failed to negotiate a new EU policy on refugees, and the number of refugees applying for asylum in Germany kept increasing, many people who had previously supported the policy came to oppose it:

> Merkel's refusal to accept an upper limit on Syrian refugees had unleashed hostility. As the summer of 2015 turned into autumn, 10,000 asylum seekers a day had arrived in Germany and political opposition to Merkel's open-door policy began to brew. The anti-euro party AfD, which had been sliding in the polls since the easing of the euro crisis, quickly switched focus to immigration and began to attract supporters. Merkel's chief opponent, Horst Seehofer of the CSU [Christian Social Union, the Bavarian sister-party of Merkel's own Christian Democratic Union], pledged to stop the migrants from coming, threatening to sue the federal government. Merkel's popularity began to wane, both in terms of recorded personal job approval ratings and the electoral performance of her party at state level. It appeared that her principles were undermining her domestic authority and thus her political interests. (Helms et al., 2019, p. 361)

Lees agrees that the 2015 migrant crisis, and Merkel's response to it, drove the radicalization—and subsequent support of the AfD (Lees, 2018, p. 307), which is now, after the 2025 German federal elections, the second largest party in the Bundestag.

The longer-term consequences of Markel's open-door policy will continue to be debated. The pertinent question here has to do with whether she acted undemocratically. It is clear that her decisions on this policy were made in a fashion that departed from her typical leadership style. Helms and van Esch describe Merkel as normally adopting "a deliberately chosen strategy of leading exceptionally cautiously, sometimes coming close to not leading at all" (Helms & van Esch, 2017, p. 39). But this was not how she led during the migrant crisis. Her leadership on this issue is described by Helms and van Esch (2017, p. 30) as "a unique break with her style."

Merkel did work with others, such as Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann, to keep Germany's and Austria's borders open during the migrant crisis (e.g., Hertner, 2022, p. 464). But in doing so, she nevertheless acted without forging joint commitments with many of her followers, and her decisions were actively opposed by many people in her own party. The party's youth organization opposed her. As did some of the party's regional associations, especially those in East Germany. Some members of her party started a new association, the WerteUnion, or Values Union, in 2017 to reaffirm the conservative values that they believed were violated by Merkel's open-door policy (Hertner, 2022, p. 474; the WerteUnion became a new party in 2024, and it is no longer associated with the Christian Social Union/Christian Democratic Union). In short, her response to the migrant crisis provoked deep dissent in her party (Helms & van Esch, 2017, p. 37).

But was this undemocratic leadership? Merkel acted decisively without first building coalitions of support among members of her party, and many people in the general public also came to oppose her decision (e.g., Helms et al., 2019, p. 361). If we accept the standard model of democratic leadership put forth by Burns (1978/2010), Pennock (1979), or Beerbohm (2015), we would have to say that this was an example of undemocratic leadership. Merkel was very clearly leading, and doing so decisively, but she was acting before she had forged joint commitments with her followers to act.

But this conclusion—that Merkel was acting undemocratically—does not feel quite right. Merkel was acting against the expressed preferences of many of her supporters, but her actions were nevertheless consistent with the trust-based model of democratic leadership depicted in Figure 2. Over the course of her entire 16 years as chancellor, Merkel enjoyed extraordinarily high levels of public trust. Using the Leadership Capital Index, van Esch (2021) shows that Merkel scored an average rating of 3.65 on a 5-point scale during her time in office. A score of three indicates that between 40% and 60% of respondents in an aggregation of polls over a period of time trusted the leader. A score of four on the measure indicates that between 60% and 80% of those surveyed trusted the leader (Bennister et al., 2017, p. 13). There were a few periods when Merkel's trust score was a three, and one of them was during the 2015 migrant crisis. For most of the rest of her term, her score on the Leadership Capital Index's trust indicator was around four. An average score of 3.65 over 16 years is unprecedented among democratic leaders (van Esch, 2021).

Indeed, Merkel enjoyed a special sort of trust among the German public. They did not always like what she was doing, or agree with her, but even those who opposed her on policy expressed trust in her leadership. As Thomas Peterson, a researcher at the Allensbach Institute, a polling organization in Germany, explained:

> There is something in [Merkel's] personality that makes people believe that Germany is in good hands with her....They don't like her very much, they don't love her. There is no obvious charisma, but at the same time people have the impression that she's responsible, she's intelligent, she rules the country more or less in a way that you can trust her. And that's a very strong position. (Horn, 2016).

The fact that Merkel was trusted by the public gave her latitude to act legitimately without first forging joint commitments with her party's followers and the public more generally. As explained above, trust can be understood as a temporary stand-in for justification and accountability. When we trust, we empower others to make decisions for us (or without us) without prior justification. We might demand justifications after the fact, and we might decide that we oppose the decisions that were made for us. But trust is an empowerment for others to act in our stead. We might say that Merkel was acting democratically when she adopted her open-door policy because—or at least *in part* because—those she was leading had already entrusted her to make independent decisions without their prior consent. They had entrusted her to do so, and their trust endured when she did so.

But trust, alone, is not sufficient to render an action democratic. In a democratic context, followers must be empowered to accept or reject the decisions that their leaders make and, to do that, they need to know why those decisions were made. That is why "action" in Figure 2 is preceded by "trust" and followed by "justification." Merkel justified her open-door policy after it was adopted. She gave a speech in the Bundestag which emphasized core European values such as freedom, unity, diversity, and solidarity. She pointed out that many of those in EU countries, such as Serbia and Croatia, who now wished to close their doors to refugees were only relatively recently escaping persecution in their own countries and seeking refuge in a united Europe. She argued that it was imperative to treat the refugees in humane ways (e.g., Jacob, 2018, pp. 224–226). During a visit to Switzerland after the announcement of her open-door policy, Merkel explained that "Germany is doing what is morally and legally required of it. Nothing more, nothing less" (Helms et al., 2019, p. 358).

And her justifications were followed by accountability. Merkel acted without forging joint commitments with her followers, but she justified her decisions to them, and they were empowered to accept or reject those justifications. Her coalition partners could have left the government if they opposed the open-door policy strongly enough. The leadership of the Christian Social Union threatened to leave the coalition but ultimately did not act on the threat (van Esch & Erasmy, 2022, p. 195). Merkel's party lost support in the 2017 federal election, but they remained the largest party in the Bundestag and formed a governing coalition with the Social Democratic Party (Lees, 2018). In 2018, Merkel announced that she would not run again, but she stayed on as chancellor until the 2021 election, completing her fourth term.

In the end, Merkel acted decisively without first forging joint commitments with her followers or the public more generally, but she did so in conditions of trust, and she followed those actions with justifications. When she was held accountable for those decisions, she retained power and a very high level of trust among voters.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have challenged the standard model of democratic leadership, according to which leaders must forge joint commitments to act with followers before any actions are taken. I have challenged the practical utility of the standard model as well. Democratic leadership does not—and cannot—work in ways that align with the demands of the standard model because political constituencies are defined by disagreement. That is what makes them political constituencies. If political leaders are to act, they will be acting without joint commitments from at least some (and sometimes a large number) of those who will be affected by their decisions. But does that make their actions undemocratic? Not necessarily. In this article, I have outlined different models of democratic leadership that involve various forms and temporal patterns of justification and accountability, but which do not require joint commitments to be forged before actions are taken.

Merkel acted on a trust-based model of democratic leadership. According to this model, trust can be viewed as a temporary alternative to justification. She acted before she had forged joint commitments with her followers, but she acted in a context of trust, and she did not neglect justification. She justified her decisions and she was held accountable for them. There were consequences: Some people left her party because they were opposed to her open-door refugee policy. The rise of the AfD in subsequent elections has been fueled, in part, by anti-immigration sentiments (e.g., Lees, 2018). But Merkel did not lose her job. The people did not reject her or her open-door policy when they had a chance to do so.

Mulroney, unlike Merkel, did not enjoy high levels of public trust when he introduced the GST in Canada. He was held accountable and his party (badly) lost the next election. But the policy itself has endured. With hindsight, it is clear that Mulroney made a bold (and politically costly) decision to introduce an unpopular tax that has produced public benefits. With hindsight and accountability, and many opportunities for subsequent governments to get rid of the tax, Mulroney's actions were vindicated.

Before concluding, it is worth considering one additional example, because it illustrates the action-based model of democratic leadership depicted in Figure 4. In 1985, Nelson Mandela negotiated with South Africa's racist apartheid government. He started the negotiations by proposing secret "talks about talks." These were to be preliminary talks about the conditions for future negotiations aimed at bringing an end to the apartheid system. Mandela felt that the talks had to be kept secret because he knew that members of his

own party—the African National Congress—would not agree to negotiations with the government, and they certainly would not agree to talk without preconditions. But Mandela also knew that the government would not talk if there were preconditions, and not talking would perpetuate the apartheid system (Read & Shapiro, 2014). This is the context of the quote that begins this article: "There are times when a leader must move out ahead of his flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way" (Mandela, 1994, p. 457).

Once Mandela had gotten the negotiations started, he justified his secret "talks about talks" to his party members. And he was accountable to them. He knew that his party would replace him if they did not agree with his initiative (Mandela, 1994, p. 457). Ultimately, he was supported by his party and his actions helped end apartheid.

Although the standard model of democratic leadership requires leaders to forge joint commitments with followers before they act, we probably do not want our leaders to be bound by this requirement. In many cases, political leaders—to really be leaders—must move out ahead of their flocks, go off in new (and possibly unpopular) directions, in order to lead their people well. Leaders who only ever act on the instructions of their publics would be delegates or "tools," to use Hanna Pitkin's (1967) phrase. Or they would be transactional leaders or retail politicians and managers, to use James MacGregor Burns' (1978/2010) language. Such leaders might fail to act when action is needed because they do not yet have joint commitments with their followers. They might not act at all because they represent constituencies that do not agree with themselves, and thus, they cannot forge joint commitments with everyone they must act for. It is safe to say that we probably want more from our leaders than that. For leaders to adequately aid the thinking of others and solve collective problems so that shared objectives can be achieved, they may have to act before they have forged joint commitments with their followers and publics. And their actions might then, as in the case of Mulroney's GST, have a persuasive force of their own. Instead of (only) making arguments, sometimes leaders must persuade through action and demonstration. They must be held accountable for their actions as well, but those actions, to have their persuasive force, may have to come before joint commitments are made.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

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