

The Complex Challenges of Modern Leadership: A Scholarly Overview of Ethics, Democracy, and Political Leadership

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Abstract

Considering how 2025 compares with 2020, which was described as one of the worst years ever in part because of the Covid-19 pandemic and other challenging events, sharpens our appreciation of the complexity of modern leadership. The nine articles within this thematic issue adeptly engage with the collection’s main themes of ethics, democracy, and political leadership at the theoretical and empirical level. As a group, the authors present an impressive range of specific examples of political leadership as well as citizen-based social action. The complexity found in exercising competent, democratic, ethical leadership in today’s political context is a common theme across these works. As well, the continuing importance of trust in the exercise of leadership signals the necessity for more academic scholarship on this topic.

Keywords

comparative politics; democracy; ethics; government; leaders; leadership; politics; populism; trust

1. Introduction

Five years ago, I was privileged to serve as the academic editor for an earlier *Politics and Governance* thematic issue, one devoted to “Leadership, Populism, and Power” (de Clercy, 2020). It is remarkable to return to that issue and consider the state of the world at the time. There were several large challenges to democratic leaders that year, a year which some writers argue ought to be considered the worst one ever (Lindsay, 2020). The WHO declared the Covid-19 outbreak a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020, and governments around the world responded to this unanticipated event (WHO, 2025). As the year wore on, leaders faced large tasks in reassuring frightened citizens, prioritizing vulnerable groups, and spurring their administrations to oversee the acquisition of scarce medical supplies

like swabs and ventilators. Populations were masked and immobilized. Workplaces, schools, and public meeting spaces emptied, economies diminished, and many states faced fiscal difficulties.

At about the same time, there was much tension among European leaders as Britain departed from the European Union on January 31, 2020. This was a contentious event that was realized four years after the Brexit vote. Prime Minister Boris Johnson sought to reassure anxious citizens by predicting that the end of the United Kingdom's 47-year membership would usher in "real national renewal and change," although on the continent, leaders expressed skepticism about this rosy prediction ("Boris Johnson promises Brexit," 2020).

In American politics, 2020 was the final year of the first Trump presidency. International attention was focused on the Republican President's impeachment trial. The United States House of Representatives impeached Trump on two charges: abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The impeachment trial opened on January 16 in the Senate, and on February 5, the president was acquitted on both articles, mainly by Republican senators (Fram, 2020). In the election nine months later, Democrat Joe Biden won the presidency, although Trump refused to concede the election. The levels of trust among Republican voters in their electoral system plummeted in the wake of this election, and some analysts warned that Trump's behaviour would encourage authoritarian leaders in other parts of the world (Bruen, 2020).

Looking back, the events of 2020 clearly demonstrated the large challenge of exercising democratic leadership facing political leaders. Democratic leaders managed large-scale change, public fear, and controversy in the context of an unfolding pandemic and a host of related economic, political, and social issues that were a consequence of Covid-19. As a scholar of political leadership, I appreciate the enormous leadership challenges that 2020 presented. Yet, compared with the state of the world in 2025, I have to admit that, to my mind, 2020 arguably appears to be a simpler time.

Many complicated and troubling events that face us now were still in the offing. As examples, in 2020 Russia had not yet invaded Ukraine (2022), the events of October 7th leading to the Gaza war had not yet begun (2023), artificial intelligence had not yet been democratized for the masses (2022), the second Trump presidency had not yet been inaugurated (2025), and the international trade regime had not yet been disrupted by punishing trade wars (2025). It is quite a comment on the state of our world today to look back five years and conclude that the leadership environment of 2025 is the more complicated one. This comparison sharpens my appreciation of the truly significant hurdles facing today's political leaders.

There is another way in which comparing 2020 and 2025 is a helpful, clarifying exercise for those interested in studying leadership. Setting aside the question of which period is more complex, focusing on these two periods underscores the pressing need for effective, ethical leadership in modern democracies. Leaders then and now must navigate a myriad of complex issues within a rapidly changing context marked by rising authoritarianism, declining public trust, a turn toward political extremism, enduring economic and racial inequality, critical climate change events, and economic instability. Now more than ever, much power and responsibility rests on the shoulders of our political leaders. And so the necessity to understand leaders and apprehend the nature of modern leadership is also more pressing and more urgent.

In contemplating the rich array of studies presented in this issue, there is evidence of the complexity facing today's leaders within every single study. Each of these analyses represents significant aspects of leadership that merit our close attention. Let me state as well how impressed my co-editor, Susan Dieleman, and I are with the scope of the research studies we received in response to the call for papers inviting the submission of new research on "Ethics, Democracy, and Political Leadership." The contributors utilized many different methodological approaches in their work, and there are studies with dense theoretical insight alongside careful empirical analysis of specific sets of parliamentarians and party leaders.

At the outset of this project, I hoped that this thematic issue would, in its final form, represent some of the latest research being undertaken, and I am so pleased that this goal was achieved. Alongside the established scholars who have contributed their expertise to this issue, it is exciting to publish the very latest research authored by scholars at an early stage of their careers. There is certainly room for new theories, new analyses, and new topics. Finally, as one of five endowed Jarislowsky Chairs in Trust and Political Leadership, which were created two years ago with the intention to improve research and teaching about ethics and political leadership, I am delighted that three of my fellow chairs—Susan Dieleman, Michael MacKenzie, and Stéphane Paquin—contributed to this issue.

To preview the thematic issue for readers, in the following sections, I discuss the studies in light of this thematic edition's three main themes. While the nine studies generally touch upon all of these thematic elements and the interplay among them, some authors put more focus on one of the three themes as compared with the others.

2. Ethics

It is worth reminding ourselves that the extensive canon of knowledge about political leadership accumulated across time and cultures has focused much attention on what is good leadership, how to shape ethical leaders, and how to challenge unethical ones. This owes to the nature of leadership as "a process of influencing others; it has a moral dimension that distinguishes it from other types of influence such as coercion or despotic control." (Northouse, 2022, p. 440.) Several studies in this collection directly engage the moral dimension of leadership. Martinsson (2025) asks which virtues, and why these ones in particular, are most important for politicians. Martinsson interviewed 74 Swedish parliamentarians and analyzed their views using a structured multi-level coding approach. He presents three main claims: First, the cardinal virtue in the Swedish parliament is the ability to separate ideas from those who hold them. This virtue is considered to be key to building political trust in the legislature and the polity. He notes, secondly, that virtue pluralism is essential within parliamentary and party groups. A third conclusion from the research is that the virtues espoused by his interviewees can be categorized into five main themes. Martinsson (2025, p. 2) concludes that "the institutional structure and context of a political system...shape the virtues politicians value in themselves and their colleagues."

In their contribution, Pérez-Escobar et al. (2025) focus on the ethical deficiencies marking the Vox party's 2023 election campaign in Spain. Noting that Vox's populist presence, particularly since 2013, has reshaped the country's political landscape, in this study, they analyze the party's 2023 election communications to test whether candidate rhetoric in 15 accounts on the social media platform X reflects the country's regional diversity or constitutes a hate-based mobilization strategy. Among their findings, the authors underscore that

a significant portion of the party's communications reference hate narratives or target migrants and ethnic minorities. They conclude, "the ethical implications of these findings are significant. The growing prevalence of hate speech, both explicit and implicit, poses a direct threat to the integrity of democratic institutions and social harmony" (Pérez-Escobar et al., 2025, p. 18).

With a similar focus on the ethical aspects of populist leadership, but with specific attention to the events surrounding the removal of the Law and Justice Party from power in Poland in 2023, Kuczyński (2025) presents a unique perspective on how to build and fortify democratic opposition. The author carefully delineates the emergence and interplay of social and civic activism, which illustrates the process of learning politics by social actors, divided into successive stages. He concludes:

Poland's experience from the last decade shows that significant protection against authoritarianism and populism is provided by the constant activity and vigilance of leaders of democratic social movements and civic initiatives, provided they are able to mobilize their supporters to act in the next parliamentary and other elections. (Kuczyński, 2025, p. 15)

3. Democracy

The second theme guiding the research contributions centers on democracy, and four of the studies fully engage the connection between democracy and leadership. As with Pérez-Escobar et al.'s study (2025) and Kuczyński's (2025) focus on resistance to right-wing populism, Paquin (2025) frames his analysis in a context marked by declining public trust and the rise of populism. He observes there is a lack of knowledge concerning the relationship between anti-establishment populist radical-right parties and democratic accountability mechanisms such as "open government" policies that fortify transparency and institutional integrity (Paquin, 2025). Paquin explores how the Sweden Democrats weaponized transparency to amplify anti-elite populist narratives, and so this work provides analytical insight into a paradoxical problem: how open and transparent government mechanisms—which are so prized by democratic governments—can be employed for partisan gain and may ultimately diminish, rather than amplify, public trust.

In a similar vein, Esfahani and Masoudnia (2025) focus on the relationship between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's populist policies and governance quality from 2013 to 2023. They use critical approaches to populism and garner a combination of quality of governance indicators and quality of democracy dimensions. Deploying empirical indicators from sources including the World Governance Indicators, Freedom House, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, as well as The Legatum Prosperity Index, and comparing the president's rule across his tenure in office, the authors conclude that Erdoğan's more recent policies have adversely affected the quality of democratic governance in Turkey.

MacKenzie (2025) explores an under-theorized aspect of democratic leadership. Noting that many leading theorists assert democratic leadership necessarily requires leaders to consult with their followers and forge joint commitments before taking action, MacKenzie asks: What happens when leaders act without doing so? Is the democratic nature of their leadership compromised in such instances? He argues that there are solid justifications for such cases, and while democratic leaders should justify their actions and account for them, they can, in fact, act with democratic legitimacy before establishing joint commitments with their supporters. He illustrates this position in two insightful cases: Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's decision to

introduce the Goods and Services Tax in 1991 and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's handling of the European "migrant crisis" in 2015.

Dieleman (2025) focuses attention on conceptualizing the trust relationship between leaders and followers. She notes that empirical studies of trust in the political realm are increasing within the social science literature; however, recent work in philosophy on the topic of trust addresses very little of the existing empirical work. In her study, she proposes a conceptual infrastructure that can help to clarify and substantiate the theoretical foundations of existing empirical work on the topic of trust in political leaders. This infrastructure recommends a typology of theories of trust that includes entrusting theories, which focus on what is entrusted, trusting theories, which focus on the values and dispositions of the truster, and trustworthy theories, which focus on the trustworthiness of the trustee. This conceptual infrastructure aims to be theoretically useful in supplying a language to understand and articulate the nature of trust and trustworthiness. It may also be empirically useful by offering a recommended method for determining a set of concepts that can be deployed in empirical work to apprehend the presence or absence, and evolving dynamics surrounding, trust between leaders and followers.

4. Political Leadership

With respect to the third theme of political leadership, two of the studies focus predominantly on these foundational questions: exactly how is leadership effected? What informs politicians' performance and representation in this task, and how do they mobilize people to follow them?

Gaspard (2025) notes that while the academic literature concerning citizens' democratic satisfaction is well-established, the understanding of politicians' satisfaction with democracy is surprisingly underdeveloped. He analyzes cross-national data from The Comparative Candidates Survey, covering 49 elections in 21 countries from 2005 to 2021, to investigate the relationship between the political leadership's perceptions of electoral integrity and their satisfaction with the quality of democracy. He concludes that while electoral integrity affects democratic satisfaction among politicians, this factor matters more for politicians who lost an election. He finds that electoral management bodies' independence does not affect politicians' satisfaction with democracy. And finally, while electoral management bodies' capacity influences politicians' levels of democratic satisfaction, the strength of the effect differs among politicians depending on their left or right ideological affiliation (Gaspard, 2025).

Finally, Ristevska and Prezelj (2025) focus their analysis on a specific mechanism of political leadership, addressing the question of how American presidents shape public understanding of terrorism, legitimate their policy choices, and construct narratives that aim to reconcile security goals with democratic ideals. The authors employ a careful analysis of leader rhetoric concerning counterterrorism policy since the 9/11 terrorist attacks by comparing four key speeches delivered by Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden. While Bush and Trump framed terrorism as an existential threat to justify aggressive measures, Obama and Biden adopted a more moderate rhetoric, balancing security objectives with civil liberties. They conclude that "by understanding how framing devices operate in specific political and historical contexts, policymakers and scholars can better appreciate the challenges of crafting ethical and effective counterterrorism strategies that uphold democratic principles and maintain public trust" (Ristevska & Prezelj, 2025, p. 18)

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the nine studies within this issue adeptly engage with the collection's main themes of ethics, democracy, and political leadership at the theoretical and empirical level. They present an impressive range of specific examples of political leadership as well as citizen-based social action. The complexity found in exercising competent, democratic, ethical leadership in today's political context is a common theme across these works. As well, in considering this fine assembly of some of the latest leadership research from scholars located at many different institutions across the globe, I notice all of the works collected here reference the importance of trust in relation to leadership. In 2025, social scientists continue to seek more knowledge about the concept of trust and its relationship to the exercise of leadership. So, the continuing importance of trust in governance and government signals the necessity for more academic scholarship on this topic, even as a new comprehensive empirical investigation finds that while trust in implementing institutions is stable or perhaps increasing around the world, trust in representative institutions has been declining in recent decades (Valgarðsson et al., 2025, p. 2).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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