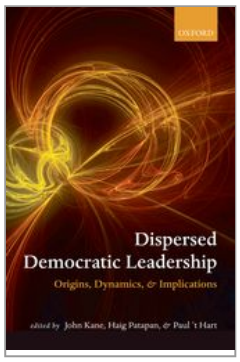


Dispersed Democratic Leadership: Origins, Dynamics, and Implications
John Kane, Haig Patapan, and Paul 't Hart

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# Dispersed Democratic Leadership

John Kane
Haig Patapan
Paul’t Hart

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## Abstract and Keywords

Political decision-making is not only the sole responsibility of constituted government but it is the concern of various individuals and organizations involved in its interests and influence. This chapter emphasizes these interests and influence when taking into account the ability of liberal democracies to foster political pluralism, as freedom of speech and association and the legitimacy of democratic dissent make such pluralism inevitable. An ancient and non-democratic form of leadership is curiously preserved by constitutional monarchies and although this is assumed to be harmlessly ceremonial the chapter asks if this is more significant than the role of the monarch. A variety of contemporary leadership avenues in liberal democracies have resulted in the creation of a complex and opaque political system. An inquiry is made in this chapter on the necessity of a dispersed leadership as it has become inevitable in a democracy.

*Keywords:* democratic theory, democracy, liberal democracies, political decision-making, pluralism, leadership, constitutional monarchies

## Dispersed leadership in democracy

We tend to take it for granted that liberal democracies foster political pluralism, where political decision-making is not solely the business of constituted government but the concern of a variety of organizations and individuals interested in exerting influence upon it (Dahl 1961; Connolly 1995). Liberty of speech and association and the legitimacy of dissent in democracies make such

pluralism inevitable. What is less often noted is that the broad distribution of influence and authority implies a distribution of the public leadership function throughout society. Leadership is not concentrated in a ruling elite nor in a single monarch or tyrant but broadly dispersed. This makes political leadership in a democratic polity very difficult. Elected leaders with large responsibilities must try to govern effectively amidst a multitude of critics and opponents with contradictory ideas and intentions who cannot simply be commanded.

Political science, when it studies leadership, tends to focus primarily upon the elected government, and particularly upon the figure of the chief executive. This is a very important topic, and this volume will certainly not ignore it. The central argument of this volume, however, is that, since many public leaders help shape debate and policy in a democracy, it is important to balance the usual person-centred approach with one that is more contextual, institutional, and relational. How does the dispersal of leadership in a democracy affect good governance? Business leaders in market economies are assumed to wield significant political power, but do they, and how? Media moguls similarly pretend to influence, and are assumed moreover to have a democratic responsibility for scrutinizing governments, but how effective are they and how do they understand their leadership role? Non-governmental organizations proliferate for various specific purposes and are sites of leadership for people who wish either to call governments to account or to supplement their services, but what is the nature and consequence of their political **(p.2)** interaction? Anyone in a democracy with a cause or a grievance, from a rightwing populist to a celebrity singer to a retired American president, may take up a leadership role and effectively mobilize people either to support or challenge elected governments, but how much do we understand of their prospects and power? Constitutional monarchies curiously preserve an ancient and non-democratic form of leadership which is assumed to be harmlessly ceremonial, but is the monarch's role more significant than this?

All these and other topics will be addressed by individual contributors to the present volume. It will become clear to the reader who delves into these chapters that the sheer number and variety of contemporary leadership avenues in liberal democracies has produced a political system that is both complex and opaque. It is one that contains both ancient and newly emergent loci of leadership, institutionalized and ad hoc ones, political and self-consciously apolitical ones. We are likely to assume, as democrats, that this is a good and proper thing, but is this really the case? The dispersal of sites of leadership may be an inevitable thing in a democracy, but is it always and necessarily a good thing? This is a question we will address and try to answer after having reviewed the fascinating set of chapters collected here. Let us first set the scene by examining the problem of democratic leadership and the dual causes of democratic dispersal.

## Leadership: a blind spot in democratic theory

Democracy is founded upon the core principle of popular sovereignty, implying that the people should rule themselves. In practice, this idea results in a twofold challenge for leadership.

The first challenge is the problem of democratic leadership itself. Democracy needs good leaders but, because of its egalitarian commitments, possesses no clear theory of leadership to counteract its inherent suspicions of strong leaders. The consequence is that the practice of democratic leadership is perpetually fraught with alternating hope in leaders and challenges to their legitimacy. Because it is difficult or impossible, except in the case of very small communities, for the people to rule directly, democracies empower elected representatives to rule on their behalf. Such leaders possess the extraordinary authority that comes from a grant of the popular will, and they rule by consent and ostensibly on behalf of the people. Yet, because democracies fear that their leaders will turn themselves into de facto sovereigns, they constantly challenge their authority and attempt to rein it in. The shadow of democratic illegitimacy haunts every leadership act and decision.

The second challenge arises partly as a consequence of the first. If in a democracy no one has natural or God-given right to lead, then everyone may equally be a leader. With political authority granted but permanently questioned, **(p.3)** democratic citizens are at liberty to find other opportunities for effective public leadership. The idea of popular sovereignty, in other words, works to actively disperse offices and sites in which leadership can be exercised, and contemporary democracies are thus characterized by many avenues for gaining the attention and approval of the sovereign people. This tendency is significantly enhanced in liberal democracies by the liberal–constitutional division of powers that distributes authority among political branches. Liberalism, by definition, fears the danger to individual liberty of concentrated power, including the concentrated power of ‘the people’, and uses the division of offices to curb the potentially powerful democratic impulse to rule without sufficient attention to the rights and concerns of individuals. Pluralists, meanwhile, appreciate the many opportunities that liberal democratic dispersal provides for ‘venue shopping’.

The fact that the permanent tension between leaders and the sovereign people noted above is, in principle, irresolvable gives democratic leadership its special character, explaining both its remarkable strengths and acknowledged weaknesses. Democratic leadership is, indeed, uniquely challenging because it must be most carefully exercised under conditions of peculiar constraint and constant distrust. This is an important subject inadequately addressed in the scholarship, which indeed constitutes a permanent blind spot for most modern students of democracy (Kane and Patapan 2008).

## Democratic solutions to the problem of leadership

We may discern two fundamentally opposed tendencies in attempting to cope with democracy's fundamental ambivalence about leadership. So-called elitist theorists resolve the tension in favour of leadership at the expense of popular sovereignty, the most famous formulation of their position being that oligarchic rule is an ‘iron law’ of politics. More democratically inclined scholars react to this elitist challenge by trying to resolve the tension in favour of popular sovereignty. They do not so much solve the problem of democratic leadership as pass over it in embarrassed silence, typically pursuing more ideally ‘democratic’ political forms that envisage wider or even universal citizen participation in political processes and decisions. The thrust of these strategies sometimes seems to be to eschew the need for leadership altogether but, since this is impractical, they might be alternatively conceived as attempts to disperse an indispensable leadership function as widely as possible. If the dispersal of leadership is taken as characteristic of democracy, then it must follow that the more widely dispersed it is the more democratic the polity.

Thus deliberative democrats note the many sites of deliberation that exist in democracies and seek to disperse authority more widely by creating more **(p.4)** of them (Dryzek 1990; Fishkin 1993; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Gastill and Levine 2005). Students of executive governance note that modern democracies are not characterized so much by fixed hierarchies as by networks in which individuals exercise forms of linked yet distributed leadership (Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan 1997; Rhodes 1997). Other scholars argue that leadership in democracies is best understood in terms of a ‘lattice of leadership’ that describes the dispersal and mutual influence of various forms of leadership (Uhr 2005, 2008). Yet these are merely modern articulations of a fundamental insight regarding democratic politics that has an ancient provenance.

British historian, statesman, and diplomat, James Bryce (Bryce 1921: I, 3–14), surveyed six modern democracies – France, Switzerland, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand – to see how well they confirmed Tocqueville's observations on the nature of democratic government, and captured succinctly the consequences of modern democracy for leadership.[1] Bryce argued that, ‘where legal supremacy belongs to the multitude actual power is exerted not only by the persons to whom it delegates its legal authority, but by those also who can influence the multitude itself, inducing it to take one course or another, and to commit executive functions to particular persons’. Consequently, those who form public opinion, for example journalists and authors, also exercise leadership in democracies (1921: II, 605).[2] If the sovereign feels justified in listening to a range of opinion other than that of authorized political leaders, then popular sovereignty by its nature must tend to disperse leadership to a variety of people who may not hold office but who are capable of influencing public opinion.[3]

This tendency for democracy to disperse leadership was strengthened by liberal thought. In Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* we find one of the most famous and influential accounts of how the separation of powers – in effect the dispersing of authority and therefore leadership – provides a guarantee of individual freedom. Through his influence on the American founding and thereby modern liberal democratic constitutionalism, Montesquieu's theoretical justification for dispersal as an essential means of securing liberty by defraying and fragmenting power became a powerful support for the democratic impulse towards dispersion. Thus modern liberal democracies can be said to have both liberal and democratic impulses or drives towards dispersing leadership. But, as all students of American government and modern constitutionalism recognize, such dispersion comes at a cost of considerable inefficiency, policy incoherence, and occasionally logjam. Dispersion is consequently opposed by countervailing impulses founded upon arguments of expertise, efficiency, expediency, and tradition. The result is a distinctively democratic dynamic of countervailing forces that require delicate balancing, and which presents a permanent challenge to all leaders in a democracy.

Moreover, because leadership is both desired and distrusted in a democracy, dispersed leaders confront the same challenges as do elected leaders to their **(p.5)** basic legitimacy. They will be questioned on their democratic credentials if they seem not to defer sufficiently to the popular will, either procedurally or in substance, or if their actions display undue arrogance or seem to deny democratic authority. They must be prepared at any time to justify their leadership before the bench of democracy while contending with other leaders similarly free to speak and challenge. The liberal–democratic dispersal of authority thus results in a twofold politics that any leader must engage: a politics of the democratic dynamic and a politics of democratic legitimacy.

## Democratic leadership: new perspectives

Leadership is pivotal in all political systems. Leaders have extraordinary influence, for better or worse, in invigorating and transforming established institutions, policies, and routines. The scope and depth of this influence and authority can be gauged from the range of functions that leadership may undertake, such as fundamentally defining the character of communities; interpreting opportunities and dangers; articulating and preserving public values by selecting and defending norms and standards; and coping with non-routine challenges and public emergencies by finding pathways to absorb, transform, and learn from them.

Despite being pivotal, public leadership has been described by James McGregor Burns (1978) as ‘one of the least understood phenomena on earth’. Prescriptive, exhortative treatises in the Machiavellian tradition advising executive leaders how to behave are not hard to come by (Meltsner 1988; Lord 2003; Keohane 2005), but empirically the field is unevenly developed. Though our

understanding of political leadership has increased significantly in the three decades since Burns issued his rallying cry (e.g. Elcock [2001]), the developing subfield of leadership studies still suffers from an important bias in both its locus and its focus.

In terms of the *locus* of study, public leadership entails four major domains: political, administrative, judicial, and civic leadership (‘t Hart and Uhr 2008). Each entails a distinct set of roles, which can be embedded in a variety of public offices and performed by a broad range of individuals and groups, not just elected representatives or public office-holders (see Table 1.1). For too long, too many political scientists have equated the study of leadership with the analysis of political leadership, particularly the study of executive elites. Heads of government top the bill. We have countless studies – individual and collective biographies, institutional histories, national and cross-national comparative analyses – of presidents and prime ministers (Rose and Suleiman 1980; Elgie 1995; Sykes 2000; Helms 2005). There are also considerable literatures on cabinet ministers and legislative leaders. Within the field of public administration, there is ample attention for administrative leaders and leadership (Kaufman **(p.6)**

**Table 1.1 Public leadership types and roles**

| |
|---|
| *Political leadership* |
| 1. Identity entrepreneur: mediating collective identity |
| 2. Selector: (re)directing government agendas |
| 3. Decision-maker: choosing rules and policies |
| 4. Crisis manager: regulating collective stress |
| *Administrative leadership* |
| 1. Servant: advising and facilitating government |
| 2. Guardian: safeguarding administrative processes |
| 3. Manager: crafting, sustaining, and adapting public organizations |
| 4. Implementer: delivering public value |
| *Civic leadership* |
| 1. Advocate: challenging and exhorting government |
| 2. Watchdog: monitoring and evaluating government |
| 3. Service provider: circumventing and complementing government |
| *Judicial leadership* |

| |
|---|
| 1. Arbitrator: resolving public disputes not effectively dealt by or directly involving government |
| 2. Steward: preserving democratic regime values by interpreting constitutions and laws |

1981; Terry 1995; Theakston 1999; Weller 2001; Page and Wright 2007), often highlighting the delicate relationships that exist within the executive branch between political and administrative office-holders (Savoie 2003; Hood and Lodge 2006; Lewis 2008). By comparison, we have relatively little comparative insight into the dynamics of other forms of leadership and their interplay. Nor do we know much about the dilemmas involved in asserting these various forms of public leadership within the context of (representative) democracy.

This volume tries to remedy this imbalance. It covers a wide range of forms and loci of public leadership, and examines their interrelationships. We sample the extraordinary range of offices permitted – indeed encouraged and supported – by democracy. By thus broadening the *locus* of leadership studies in politics we make an important addition to our understanding of democratic leadership, highlighting loci and forms of democratic leadership that remain relatively unexplored. For example, the focus on executive political leadership has not been matched by equally detailed examination of other categories of political leader, for instance those exercising the craft of opposition or indeed the enduring role of monarchs. Likewise, the judicial branch has been widely acknowledged as a crucial ‘check’ on executive power, but surprisingly few studies offer insight into the ‘life world’ of senior judges whose beliefs, decisions, and arguments actually shape this ‘check’. To be sure, much is written about the political role of the courts, but we know much less about how this role is understood and elaborated by actual judicial leaders. And although Putnam's work has stimulated much debate about the pivotal role of ‘civil society’ for democratic viability, the roles that various **(p.7)** types of civic leaders – activist, religious, charitable – can and do play in ‘making democracy work’ demand detailed exploration.

The chapters in this volume cover both executive and non-executive democratic leadership. They juxtapose office-based and informal types of public leadership. They study how these various forms of leadership gain and maintain authority within the context of democratic polities. They examine the inherent tensions as well as the potential complementarities between them.

In terms of the analytical *focus*, many students of leadership concentrate on grasping the impact of the character and capacities of leaders – their traits, styles, judgement, choices, and relationships with followers – on their agility in exploiting the possibilities of, mostly, the executive offices they hold. Much of this work borrows concepts and theories from psychology to study individual office-holders (Hermann and Wilburn 1977; Paige 1977; Simonton 1987; Brett 1997; Greenstein 2000; Post 2003). The other cluster of leadership studies in

political science focuses instead on the institutional structures leaders inhabit, and which enable and constrain them in exercising leadership. Thus we get comparative studies of cabinet government (Blondel and Muller-Rommel 1993; Weller 2007), the office of prime minister (Henessy 2001; Rose 2001), the presidency (Neustadt 1992; Waterman 2003; Rockman and Waterman 2008), or socio-anthropological accounts of leadership as a product of ‘culture’ (Wildavsky 1984, 1989; Ellis and Wildavsky 1989).

Yet, as Hermann (1986) and Hargrove and Owens (2002) rightly observe, public leadership in fact arises from the interplay of ‘skill’ (people with their capacities and styles) and ‘context’ (institutions, cultures, situations). It is this crucial interplay that has received comparatively little sustained attention (but see, e.g., Skowronek [2008]). Where the interplay between the two is seriously addressed at all – for example in studies of democratic government by political theorists – it is usually in terms of the limitation of executive leadership by the separation of powers (after Montesquieu), or by the ‘caging’ effect of modern rational–legal structures (after Weber).

We argue that the Montesquieian and Weberian approaches, though revealing important aspects of the dynamics of office, limit our overall understanding of public leadership in democracies. This collection of essays instead aims to examine how democracy not just needs but actively produces and disperses public leadership possibilities. We seek to enhance our appreciation of the variety of possibilities of active leadership (and therefore citizenship) that modern democracies foster, and indeed require, if they are to be intelligent and resilient in addressing complex public problems and socio-political conflicts. Each chapter explores a particular leadership ‘office’ or role. Some of these forms of leadership, like the executive and the judiciary, are legally and constitutionally entrenched. Others exist by convention. Some wield ambiguous authority to challenge or oppose orthodox structures. Each chapter studies how the **(p.8)** various offices and role sets create expectations and possibilities for, but also place limitations on, the people inhabiting them.

We have asked international experts from a range of disciplines to reflect on the interplay between key public leadership roles, the interpretation of those roles by the people performing them, and the broader normative and institutional setting of democratic governance in which both these roles and actors are embedded. Taken together, these essays help us reflect in new ways on the old concern of democratic theorists (what leadership might do to democracy), but more importantly enable us to examine the often-ignored reverse question: what democracy does to leadership.

## Volume overview and acknowledgements

The volume does not begin with a set theory of democratic leadership, nor does it aim to develop one. It instead seeks to highlight the dynamics and

ramifications of dispersed democratic leadership. It studies multiple forms of public leadership which have emerged as products of democratic design or democratic commitment to pluralism and toleration. Each chapter examines a particular form, and explains how its practitioners tend to perceive, interpret, and negotiate the possibilities and constraints of their roles. We begin in the heart of conventional political leadership studies – heads of government – and follow the thrust of democratic leadership dispersal to trace ever more non-executive and/or informal forms of public leadership. The last of the essays takes us full circle, by focusing on the increasingly activist and visible role of the ultimate non-office holders: retired heads of government.

The final chapter reviews the major arguments that emerge from the work as a whole. It shows how the two main doctrinal thrusts of democratic leadership dispersal – popular sovereignty and liberal constitutionalism – have operated and continue to do so. It also shows how the very prevalence of leadership dispersal has generated challenges for each of the various leadership forms thus created: how to relate to other offices or loci of leadership, and how to cope with the inherent trend to further fragmentation of power and authority. If democracy encourages and tolerates ever further proliferation of leadership venues and roles, how in the end does the system hold together?

This volume has been a joy to make, in no small measure due to the wisdom and professionalism of our chapter authors, recruited from far and wide to perform what to many of them may have seemed a rather unstructured and ambiguous task. We thank them for their commitment and creativity. We gratefully acknowledge the financial and logistical support offered by the Utrecht School of Governance of Utrecht University, in particular its research director Mark Bovens, in hosting a highly productive authors' meeting in March 2008. Jaap van der Spek and Wouter Jan Verheul provided a useful **(p.9)** summary of the workshop discussions. Haig Patapan and John Kane enjoyed financial support from the Australian Research Council. Invaluable editorial support was provided by Karen Tindall, without whom the production of this volume would have been much more arduous.

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Notes:

(1.) Bryce discusses 'Leadership in Democracy' in one chapter (II, LXXVI, 605–17) of his two-volume book. Tocqueville's famous *Democracy in America*, one of the first and most profound studies of modern democracy, is arguably a subtle and extended meditation on the unique opportunities and challenges faced by democratic leaders. Tocqueville seldom addresses leadership in explicit terms. For him, America was the nation where the democratic revolution – an irresistible and universal advance of equality – had been most fully and peacefully realized, where the sovereignty of the people had been put into practice in a direct, unlimited, and absolute way. He examined America because, as he admitted, 'he saw in America more than America; it was the shape of democracy itself'. The problem of leadership comes implicitly into play in his accounts of the sovereignty of the people (I, I, 4), tyranny of majority (I, II, 7 and 8), and the influence of equality and freedom (II, II, 1). There are, in addition, specific references to, for example, the nature of government (I, I, 8; I, II, 5), parties (I, II, 2), and public speaking (II, I, 18 and 21).

(2.) The remainder of the chapter considers the question of what are the ‘qualities which fix the attention and win the favour of the people?’ (1921: II, 606).

(3.) Bryce was no doubt alluding to the famous Platonic image of the ‘ship of state’ which outlined the character of democratic regimes. Socrates in Plato's *Republic* depicts a ship owned by a shipowner who surpasses everyone on board in height and strength, but is somewhat deaf and short-sighted, with limited knowledge of seamanship. The sailors, according to this account, are crowding around the ship-owner, persuading, begging, and fighting each other to take over the piloting of the ship (*Republic* 488a–489a). In such a struggle, according to Socrates, the true pilot – the person skilled in navigating the ship – is neglected in favour of the man ‘who is clever at figuring out how they will get the rule, either by persuading or forcing the ship-owner’. This Platonic image of democratic politics confirms an important insight about democracy as rule of the people: democracies make possible a contest for leadership.