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When Power Changes Hands: The Political Psychology of Leadership Succession in Democracies

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Leadership succession in democratic governments and political parties is an ubiquitous but relatively understudied phenomen, where the political becomes intensely personal and vice versa. This article outlines the puzzles that leadership succession poses to political analysts, reviews the literature, and offers a conceptual framework deconstructing the process in terms of a flow from succession contexts and triggers via the role choices of key participants (incumbents and aspiring successors) through to the eventual succession outcomes. It concludes by presenting a series of testable hypotheses to describe and explain leadership successions.

KEY WORDS: Political leadership, leadership succession, political parties

"The trouble with great leaders is that they don't know when to go." (Conservative MP immediately after Margaret Thatcher's resignation as prime minister)

Leadership Succession as a Political Problem

However good and powerful they may be, all leaders have a limited "sell by" date. They get old, weary, and sick. They get out of tune with the times or anesthetized by their own power. Sooner or later they become embarrassments to the people who put them in office or those who keep them there. A leader that stays on for too long provides a painful spectacle. One of the charming features of democracy is that its rules for the acquisition and transition of political power help to secure that it does not come that far very often. Machiavelli (1975) already recognized that a

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robust mechanism for the selection of leaders is essential for the success of the state because "two competent rulers that succeed one another can achieve great things."

Although in theory democracies provide intelligent institutional rules for periodic leader succession, in practice many successions are not the product of election results and fixed-term limits. Moreover, many leader successions do not unfold particularly smoothly. Leader succession involves considerable personal and political risks for the people and parties involved, and the processes by which leaders are chosen often disrupt the fragile social networks that maintain party cohesion and organizational culture (Barrling Hermansson, 2004). This being the case, why are some transitions so conflictual and catastrophic while others unfold so smoothly and successfully?

There is a remarkable dearth of systematic research on this topic, at least as far as leader succession in democratic systems is concerned (key exceptions include Bunce, 1981; Calvert, 1987; Davis, 1998). In contrast, Kremlinologists, Peking watchers, and students of authoritarian regimes have always been active in studying the turnover of leaders in these systems (see, e.g., Korbonski, 1976; McCauley & Carter, 1986; Rush, 1974; Zaninovich, 1983). There is also an extensive literature on CEO succession in business (Kesner & Sebora, 1994; Ocasio, 1999). This work can at best inform but not substitute for the kind of cross-national and longitudinal comparative research on democratic political leadership transitions that is necessary to answer this question.

Moreover, these literatures tend to ignore or undertheorize about the psychological dimension of leadership transitions. In succession struggles, the political becomes intensely personal. The personal role conceptions, leadership styles, and political skills of incumbent and aspiring leaders make up an important part of the succession puzzle. But leadership successions also occur within a certain historical, political, and institutional context, which enables and constrains the behavior of these individuals. Any theory of leader succession that we might develop needs to take these contextual factors and wider consequences into account.

The wearing down of a political leader's personal power base, his perceived public communication strengths and his connectedness to old and new generations of voters is eventually going to erode his or her ability to project authority within the party and, when applicable, the government. The leadership style of an incumbent, especially a long-serving one, constitutes a reference point for anyone presenting a serious challenge for party leadership. Replacing someone like De Gaulle or Churchill demands a strategic approach to his legacy as leader as well as select distinction between leadership qualities that do not create exaggerated expectations or an image of mediocracy. Restoring control after the departure of an incumbent is a subtle art of catering to important party cliques, attracting positive public attention to the party, and displaying governability. Being able to maximize positive effects in these areas during sometimes infected open-leadership struggles, or after behind-the-scenes back-stabbing and deal making is complicated at best, and an intriguing area of study. Leadership succession and its

psychological implications are crucial variables in understanding the impact of leadership on politics, as well as the origins of leadership in politics.

The present article tries to provide some of the necessary conceptual building blocks for studying this complex interplay between personal, interpersonal, and institutional factors in leadership succession episodes. The moving parts of the process will be categorized and studied as analytical units in order to further our understanding of leadership succession. Broadly defined, these parts constitute the following causal chain: the succession context and trigger → the role choices of incumbent and aspiring leaders → the succession process → the succession impact. We shall deal with each of these links in the chain in subsequent sections of this article, but let us first clarify these key concepts:

The *succession context* is here defined in terms of institutional rules and informal political criteria for the replacement of a leader. The interplay between these entities (and occasionally the sheer force of exogenous triggering events) decides whether the replacement of an incumbent leader becomes an issue. *Role choice* refers to how each incumbent and hopeful defines his personal aims and strategies regarding the leadership issue. Some pairs of role conceptions chosen by incumbents and possible successors provide a natural match and increase the likelihood of a smooth succession, whereas others set the stage for an acrimonious battle. The *succession process* refers to the total set of postures, actions, interactions, and decisions with regard to the leadership succession issue, from the moment it can be said to have been put on the agenda of the party in question to the moment that it had been removed from this agenda (irrespective of whether and when succession has actually taken place). Finally, the *succession impact* refers to the observable personal, political, and policy consequences in the wake of successions (as well as aborted succession attempts).

Setting the Stage for Leadership Change: Succession Contexts and Triggers

There are different types of circumstances that induce incumbent leaders to consider a departure and aspiring leaders to consider going for the top job. We assume that different types of succession contexts contain different sets of feasible "scripts" for the actors in question and the succession process as a whole. These scripts do not prescribe in great detail how the chief characters should behave, but they do shape and constrain the actors' room to maneuver.

The "Great Leader" Succession

The (impending) departure of "Great"—popular, long-standing, having led during special periods in history—leaders is a type of situation where it is hard for followers and other stakeholders to imagine a future without the self-evident presence of these towering figures. This is the case most strongly with leaders that have both an overwhelming political persona and a high longevity in office. The

masses of crying and self-flagellating North Koreans at the death of Kim Il Sung may be an extreme and bitter—and perhaps stage-managed—example of this. Less extreme, yet comparable in terms of the political and psychological ruptures they entailed for the organizations they led, were the imminent departures of the founding fathers of the socialist movements and parties in many European countries in the early twentieth century. Likewise, the ageing process of long-serving leaders that personified newly emerging democratic orders in West Germany (Adenauer) and South Africa (Mandela) was one that preoccupied the entire polity.

Leaders that are widely seen as authentic, forceful, and politically successful are often the subject of heroic narratives among their followers (and intense animosity from their critics, which paradoxically also serves to enhance their special status). Their political accomplishments become immortalized in everyday language: Thatcherism, the Reagan revolution, Roosevelt's New Deal. In Germany, the long reign of Helmut Kohl (1982–98) earned him the nickname "Der ewige Kanzler" (the eternal chancellor).

Each of these leaders was "a hard act to follow." The crucial dilemma of succession in the "great/eternal leader" situation is that the mere raising of the possibility of departure is taboo unless the leader himself does so, and that the likelihood of him doing just that in a proactive, forward-looking way is rather low. Great leaders have the habit of convincing themselves of their own irreplaceability. Moreover, however self-evident and "great" he might be, he must fear the "lame duck effect" just as any other leader that speculates about an imminent exit. The dilemma for the people in his environment is twofold: who dares to suggest to the living legend that he has to go, and which aspiring successor dares to reveal himself publicly as such?

The Shock

Some leaders die in office. The Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt drowned swimming. John Kennedy, Anwar Sadat, Indira Gandhi, Olof Palme, and Yitzhak Rabin were assassinated. These leaders were removed from the political scene abruptly and unexpectedly. This brought them instant and often enduring mythic status, but it presented their political supporters and the governments they led with a highly delicate challenge: how to act, when to act, where to act, and who to choose. Even when the law dictates succession rules, such as in the American presidency, there are many tough judgments to be made, and successors or stand-ins may easily make the wrong moves, as exemplified by the White House confusion and in-fighting following the assassination attempt against Ronald Reagan.

The Vendetta

In some sense the opposite situation to the great leader departure context is one where the incumbent leader's position is being actively challenged by one or

more contenders. Modern classics of this kind include the challenge to Australian Labor prime minister Hawke's position by his long-time cabinet colleague and major policy ally Keating in the early '90s, and the long-standing rivalry between Canadian prime minister Chretien and finance minister Martin. In both cases, the contenders had long aspired to the top leadership position but had either been defeated (Martin) or had deferred their ambition for tactical reasons (Keating). They revived their ambition when they felt that their competitors' long-time hold on power (Hawke was prime minister from 1983 to 1991, Chretien from 1993 to 2003) should and could be broken. In both cases, their growing impatience with the refusal of the incumbent leader to make way led them to challenge his authority directly and launch an open leadership struggle. The challenged leader was forced to respond and "come down" from the aloofness of the prime ministership to the dirt of party politics and political survival.

Political vendettas may or may not be the root cause of open leadership challenges, but they are definitely a consequence of them. They are not a pretty sight and may paralyze parties and governments for extended periods.

The Scandal

Leader successions that take place against the backdrop of major political scandal confront both the incumbents and (potential) heirs with a compelling past. Whether they like it or not, they will have to engage that past, one way or another. When the successor has somehow been connected with this tainted past, however indirectly, he has much to lose and little to gain. The political environment expects the successor to make a clean sweep, but his own past or the obligations of the office that he now holds can harbor strong disincentives against doing just that. As Gerald Ford (1979) remembered his dilemma as Nixon's vice president during Watergate: "I was in an impossible situation. I couldn't abandon Nixon, because that would make it appear as if I was trying to position myself . . . Nor could I get too close, because if I did I risked being sucked into the whirlpool myself" (p. 122). This dilemma does not exist at all for a successor whose backgrounds and affiliation are such that he can put as much distance as possible between the past and himself. For this type of successor, the scandal context provides not a major source of constraint but of opportunity: to dramatize and thus forge a break with the status quo and to herald major policy changes.

Succession Initiation: Towards a Typology

There are a number of key dimensions on which we can usefully classify succession contexts and triggers. First of all, a distinction should be made between institutionalized/scheduled and ad hoc/unscheduled succession situa-

tions. The former includes the regular election cycle and the fixed-term limits set on high public offices; examples of the latter are succession triggers such as death in office or voluntary resignations by incumbent leaders. A somewhat related dimension concerns the lead time available to all parties in the succession process. Noninstitutionalized successions usually have a much shorter time line. Surprise is a key factor in them and is sometimes used purposefully by incumbents or challengers to obtain tactical advantage. Examples include snap elections called by incumbent leaders and coup-like leadership takeover attempts. Unforeseeable contingencies such as sudden death or assassination also force the succession issue on the political agenda with great urgency. Thirdly, the succession contexts differ with regard to the political position of the incumbent leader: the rules of the succession game following the exit of a strong, popular leader differ markedly from those that apply when a weakened (unpopular, discredited, chronically ill) leader is nearing the end of his political life. Towards the end of the article we shall return to these distinctions and formulate some testable propositions.

"I Am Not a Quitter": Role Choices of Incumbent Leaders

When an incumbent leader observes that her future in office becomes a matter of serious and sustained discussion within her party, the mass media, and other pivotal corridors of power, she faces a number of critical choices. First and foremost, she has to decide whether she herself is willing to go and thus accept and cooperate with the emerging succession drive or whether she wants to stay and thus resist attempts by critics and possible challengers to remove her. The other two choices concern tactics. One is about timing: whether to be proactive and try to preempt an overt succession struggle or to take a backseat approach and let their detractors and aspiring leadership contenders do the bidding. The other concerns tone and style: to preserve harmony and party unity or to fight and vanquish the opposition. All these choices are premised on the perception of a leader that he or she is actually facing a succession issue. However, we should also acknowledge the theoretical possibility that the leader denies that this is the case. Although it is difficult even for well-placed observers to register how incumbent leaders reason and choose their postures, we perhaps delineate the range of options they entertain by modeling the pivotal choices in Figure 1.

These nine possible role conceptions and related behaviors may be clearly distinguishable in theory, but it remains to be seen if and how they can be discerned empirically. Students of role theory have long grasped with the linkage between role conceptions and behavior: how to measure each separately and how to prevent tautological reasoning (Walker, 1987). Moreover, succession episodes are dynamic, evolving processes, where the main players may change attitudes and tactics over time. With these caveats in mind, let us consider the three main strategic role options: denial, resistance, and acceptance.

Incumbent leader confronted with succession trigger:

a. Deny exit → (unconscious) use of psychological defense mechanisms in order to avoid facing the prospect of impending loss of office/power

b. Resist exit → *consensus-seeking*
- → *proactive:* trying to rebuild political support by ‘trying harder’ to ‘do better’
- → *reactive:* hoping that succession issue will blow over

→ *conflict-accepting*
- → *proactive:* open and covert ‘warfare’ to silence critics and eliminate contenders
- → *reactive:* retaliate attacks made by critics and contenders

c. Accept exit → *consensus-seeking*
- *proactive*: instigating successor selection process without pushing own candidate
- *reactive:* non-interfering in ongoing successor selection process and accepting its results

→ *conflict-accepting*
- → *proactive*: unilateral designation of successor
- → *reactive:* trying to influence of ongoing successor selection process to push preferred candidate

Figure 1. Role choices for the incumbent leader in succession contexts.

Denial and Resistance

Even a perfunctory look at the historical record shows that these logical possibilities do not occur equally frequently. Only a limited number of all incumbent political leaders leave their positions entirely of their own will. As far as this happens, overriding considerations concerning age and health appear to play a dominant role in such personal decisions. And even in these cases one may wonder whose will is actually being expressed: that of the leader himself, or that of his personal physician, a spouse providing him with an ultimatum in the privacy of their home, his most trusted personal advisors, or the political clique to which he owes his position. The fact of the matter is that most political leaders only stop when they feel forced to: by the constitutional limits on their time in office, by electoral defeat, or by the fact that too many powerful figures in their entourage have lost confidence in their ability to win the next election. In that sense, the motto of this paper can be amended: “The trouble with *all* leaders is that they don’t know when to go.”

This does not imply that incumbents never contemplate the prospect of an exit during their time in office. Many do, sometimes frequently, when they dislike the

pressures they are exposed to or when they have just lost a major political battle. But we have to take into account that leaders, even experienced ones, themselves are not necessarily the best judges of their own situation. Political psychology offers a wide range of instances and explanations of defective “reality testing”: avoidance and defensive behavior by leaders, particularly in high-stakes situations that challenge long-held beliefs (Janis, 1989; Janis & Mann, 1977; Kets de Vries, 2001; Lebow, 1981; White, 1984). The “denial” category in Figure 1 is all but empty in history: many leaders were driven to find reasons to stay and to play down the reasons to leave. In addition, there are many cases where leaders actively or passively resent and resist moves to persuade them to step down.

Power holders in denial (unconscious) or resistance (conscious) may employ several standard arguments that analysts can code for as tell-tale indicators. First of all, they can think of and rationalize their continued occupancy of the office as *a matter of duty and honor*. Many, many besieged leaders have mentioned this as the prime reason for their staying on in office in trying times. The phrasing of their speeches and memoirs is almost identical: an early exit would betray voter trust. It would be an act of deceit, if not sheer cowardice. It is not clear where the boundaries lie between this sense of duty as an inner conviction and as a convenient rationalization of other, deeper, less noble motives (cf. Lasswell, 1960). Nixon (1978), for example, clung to the presidency even when the overwhelming majority of the Beltway and the nation longed for his departure. Only when impeachment was directly imminent did he agree to go. And even then it was with the greatest possible reluctance, as he told his closest associates at the time: “How can you support a quitter? . . . I have never quit before in my life. Maybe that is what none of you has understood this whole time. You don’t quit” (p. 1080).

Long-serving and highly praised leaders run a great risk of succumbing to the tendency to believe in the *illusion of irreplaceability*. Their old successes are still alive in their mind and form a double-edged reference point: empirical proof that they and only they are the right person for the job and an incentive to repeat the successes of the past. These types of leaders do not always sense that their political capital is shrinking. Moreover, rationalizations for their diminishing authority are readily available, including reassuring historical analogies (“we have seen tougher challenges than these, and have always come out victorious”) or underestimation and demonization of critics (De Gaulle initially dismissed the leftwing students that shook his government as a bunch of ill-guided idealists). The once grand but now shrunk leader relies on these forms of wishful thinking to sustain a kind of Faustian hope that he will be given more time and that during this extra time he will be able to turn the political tables in his favor. Leaders with this type of mental make-up are almost impossible to persuade that their time to depart has come.

Even when they are not deluded to believe in their own irreplaceability, leaders can still convince themselves that *at the time no suitable replacement is available*. This argument does not force the leader to state that he believes himself to be superior in all respects to possible successors. It simply boils down to

political calculation: the (perceived) power to win and preserve votes. This was chief reason that Hawke gave for breaching the promise he had made to Keating about letting him take over in his third term as prime minister: ". . . it was my profound belief that I had the best chance, certainly better than Paul Keating, of leading the Government to victory at the next election . . . My firm belief was that the Australian people who had on four occasions voted for Labor under my leadership, would respond again if I went to them and explained the issues" (Hawke, 1996, pp. 554–555).

It is difficult to estimate the causal power of these publicly aired, and often post hoc, motives. Most likely, other, private motives are no less important for an incumbent leader, but not all of them can be told to the outside world. One of these "shadow" motives might well be the *fear of the emptiness of a life on the sidelines of power*. Research by Winter (1987) and colleagues shows that many leading politicians have a strongly developed power motive. They are therefore to some extent addicted to the positions that hand them this power. Without a place at the top there is little to keep them going. They are haunted by the specter of retirement and will try to keep at it bay by sticking to life in the fast lane, i.e., at the epicenter of political life. In Descartian fashion: I am—still—the boss, therefore I am.

Finally, it is important not to underestimate *the influence of advisers, courtiers, allies*, and *spouses/husbands*. Often, the members of a leader's inner circle have direct personal interest in his continued occupancy of the leader role. Moreover, they enjoy privileged access to the leader, and some of them might enjoy his deep personal trust (cf. Post & Robins, 1993). In extreme cases, such as those of Tito and Mao, the inner circle attempts to prolong the leader's life by artificial means in order not to have to lose its hold on power.

Acceptance and Cooperation

The various sources of influence upon an incumbent leader that conduce him to deny or resist exit may, in a different constellation, also conduce him towards a more cooperative attitude. Some leaders may get tired of the burdens of high office. Some are known to have regular spells of distaste for the job and speculate more or less openly about making a radical career change. Australian prime minister Keating often ruminated about what he called the "Paris option" and even used it as a veiled threat in his ongoing power struggles: leaving politics, leaving Australia, and pursuing an art dealer career in France. Fantasy or tactic, it shows that some leaders are at least capable of and even willing to contemplate a life after power. Advancing age, diminishing energy, restless spouses, and newly arrived grandchildren are among the key factors that have prompted some—not many—leaders to opt out of politics long before their political sell by date had arrived. In other cases, leaders may themselves retain a realistic picture of their political strengths and weaknesses despite all the flattery surrounding them and may decide that they want to leave of their own will before they are forced to.

From Predeparture To Postdeparture Roles

The final departure from office does not necessarily end the incumbent leader's felt need to define his attitude and take political positions. After departure from the top job, former leaders—particularly recently exited ones—may still be considerable forces on the political stage. Journalists, party members, former colleagues, and even their successors may continue to talk about them and be interested in their opinions. Moreover, some of them might still contemplate a future role in politics. In politics, as in any game, it isn't over till it's over, and for some—although admittedly not many—it is possible to recapture a high office they have lost before. After his 1981 defeat at the polls, former French president Giscard D'Estaing continued to maneuver to be given another go at a second term as president for many years, up to the point of derision by other politicians and journalists. His tragic quest was somewhat vindicated 20 years later when he was appointed to draft the so-called European constitution. It wasn't as good as being president again, but it was a position of considerable allure for some time. Others are more successful. In February 2005, Kim Beazley was reelected leader of the Australian Labor Party. He had held this office from 1996 to 2001, resigning it after having narrowly lost a second election to incumbent prime minister John Howard's Liberal Party. He was returned to office by his party caucus because his two successors had failed to make a dent in Howard's supremacy.

Other leaders have no comeback aspirations. Still, they can seldom escape the choice of supporting or criticizing and even obstructing their successors. In general, the more harmonious the succession process, and the more influence a departed leader has had on the selection of the successor, the more likely it is that he will adopt a benevolent, constructive posture towards that successor. Yet even when the two have a good interpersonal relationship, the former leader's involvement on the public stage and in party politics remains a delicate affair. No successor can afford to be seen to be dependent on his predecessor in any shape or form. This is why it is more likely for former leaders to complain that their offers to help out are being ignored by their successors than the reverse: the successor often has more to lose than to win from a close and overt continued association with his predecessor.

Some departed leaders are considerably less graceful and constructive towards their successors. Thatcher's relentless guerrilla warfare against Major has already been mentioned. Another classic case in point is former German chancellor Konrad Adenauer's dogged campaign to undercut his successor Ludwig Erhard, whom he had long considered unfit for the top job (Koerfer, 1987).

Finding a Path to Power: Role Choices for Aspiring Successors

Being branded as a frontrunner for a political leadership position is a mixed blessing at best. The heir apparent to any incumbent leader is scrutinized relent-

lessly, and often mercilessly, by his peers and rivals. In the case of political leaders, there is the press corps to top it off. If a crown prince tries to be "his own man" too early or too distinctively, loyalists in the incumbent leader's camp (if not the leader himself) will see him as an ungrateful traitor. If he stays loyal and follows the lead of the sitting leader to the very end, he will be criticized as a bland, insignificant straw man. Similar dilemmas beset the successor after the transition has taken place. Like incumbent leaders, succession candidates face a number of critical choices.

Open or Covert Candidacy?

Would-be successors must choose from two risky options: make their ambitions known, and risk mobilizing their own opposition; or be silent about their plans at the risk of handing the initiative to others that do "come out." The case of John Major is illustrative here. As long as Margaret Thatcher fought for her political survival, even to the very end, he did not utter a syllable that might be construed as a sign of leadership ambitions. Even in his memoirs he describes his own role in the succession episode entirely in passive language: "I was informed of," "My name was circulating," "Apparently polling was taking place on my behalf" etc. (see Major, 1999, pp. 167–201). Yet, his biographer clearly dismisses this as posturing: "Without intense ambition Major would not have become Prime Minister. His gift for making people like him, his assiduous building of friendships across the parliamentary party, and his clever and deliberate avoidance of being labeled as belonging to one wing of the party or the other, enabling him to keep in with all factions from left to right, meant that by the time of the leadership election he had many friends and advisors and few enemies or outright opponents" (Seldon, 1998, p. 130).

Hence an aspiring politician can run for a leadership position without waging an actual campaign. Incumbent leaders know this all too well. Their growing awareness in office that the pledges of continued support given to them by even their closest colleagues are always conditional and provisional, and sometimes clearly hypocritical, can bring them to a state of paranoia. Ironically Major, the subtle "noncampaigner" of 1992, soon evolved into a prime minister who was wont to see conspiracies against himself.

Harmony or Competition with the Incumbent?

Secondly, the aspiring leader must determine how he will position himself vis à vis the old leader—both prior and following succession. In the presuccession phase he may seek to work out a deal with the incumbent on some form of "managed transition." But he may also deliberately present himself as a fierce critic of the existing leader and promise "new departures" and "different leadership" to constituencies. In the former case, he makes his political fate dependent

upon the state of mind and loyalty of someone that is not exactly motivated to act altruistically. The Hawke-Keating and Blair-Brown sagas are cases in point.

When he chooses a competitive mode, the candidate leader exposes himself to the ire of the incumbent and his entourage—powerful enemies to make. Moreover, dependent upon his tone and timing he runs the risk of splitting the entire party and hurting its political standing, at least in the short run. This will leave him with even more enemies within the party establishment. For an aspiring leader to take the confrontational route, there has therefore not only to be a strong belief in the popular appeal of his candidacy but also a succession context that makes this political gamble potentially viable, perhaps even necessary. This is when there is widespread or at least growing public (and/or media) dissatisfaction with the existing leadership.

Heir or Innovator?

When the succession has taken place, the new leader will somehow have to come to terms with the record and image of the past leadership and manage the relation with the former leader. How does he want his philosophy, policies, and style to be compared to that of his successor? Hawke and Keating may have waged a bitter war for the prime minister job, but they had no major quarrels on policy substance. Not surprisingly perhaps, since they had collaborated closely for many years within the Labor government. That being the case, Keating initially experienced great difficulties in putting his own stamp on the government after the Labor caucus voted him in the leadership seat (Edwards, 1996, pp. 337–339, 395–442; Kelly, 1992, pp. 615–659). The successor in a managed transition situation has another problem: how can he become seen to be “his own man,” after he has been persistently presented as the “favorite son” of the outgoing leader, without losing that pivotal support? Successors who take control after both the old policies and the old leader have been firmly discredited have a much easier job as renewal is expected and the abandonment of past practices necessary.

Figure 2 summarizes and maps out how these pre- and postsuccession choices combine into successor role profiles that can be traced empirically in comparative research.

Does Succession Make a Difference? Assessing Impact

Most leader transitions do experience problems of some kind or other. Friction and pain are part and parcel of the process, or so it seems. Sometimes it is the departing leader that suffers, sometimes his successor, and sometimes the competitors for the top job that do not make it. The pain can also strike others than the main actors: a political party can start to drift, the public office in question can be damaged, the electorate can feel betrayed, and so on. This gives leader successions a tragic quality, because someone or something is bound to get hurt. At the same

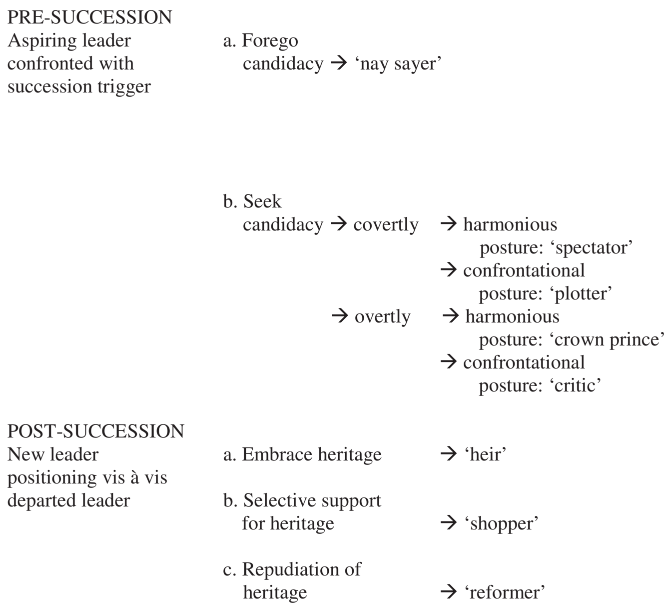


Figure 2. Role choices for aspiring leaders in succession contexts.

time, British research on the effects of party leadership changes suggests that it is wise not to overstate the expected impact of successions and not to assume that because they are such risky, volatile occurrences for the people involved their institutional effects are more bound to be negative and positive (Punnett, 1992; Stark, 1996).

This raises the question of the evaluation of leader successions. Which criteria should be applied to differentiate between successful, or at least less painful, cases from complete disasters? We discern three types of impact domains. First of all, what is the impact on policy? It is not self-evident that leadership changes: (a) make a substantive difference for the direction of party or government policy; (b) lead to more effective policies (cf. Bunce, 1981). After all, many scholars argue that human factors in politics pale in comparison to the force of macroeconomic realities and institutional constraints. Does the new leader place new issues on the policy agenda? Does he put forward new solutions for old policy problems? Does the new leader succeed in gaining political acceptance for his policy preferences? And if his policies are put into effect, does this lead to different and more strongly supported social outcomes?

Secondly, one can question how the popularity of outgoing and newly incumbent leaders and their parties evolves before and after the leadership change. A new leader that does not succeed immediately in matching the popularity of his predecessor is not necessarily politically dead, but he is handicapped. Personal ratings

aside, the bottom line that many of the people keeping leaders in power will apply to assessing the impact of a succession episode is the party's position in the polls or—if they are wise—its de facto election results following the conclusion of a succession episode (Punnett, 1992).

The final criterion to assess the success of leadership transitions focuses upon the legitimacy of the regime. What does the leader succession do to public trust in politics and to the legitimacy of the government? How do citizens value the rules of the political system before and after the succession episode? It is plausible to expect that a sudden and premature departure of an incumbent leader, or open warfare between incumbent and aspiring leaders not only do damage to the political stature of these people and their party, but also contribute to a decline of trust in politics as a whole. In democracies, the legitimacy criterion is particularly relevant when leader successions coincide with changes in the ruling political party or coalition.

The three types of criteria are largely independent. This means that one and the same case of leader succession can be judged a failure from one perspective and at the same time a success from some of the others. But these criteria are not equally important in every transition. In established democracies regime legitimacy is so self-evident that it is hardly useful to evaluate leadership changes on this basis. It is more sensible to focus on the popularity and policy success criteria. In new, less institutionalized political orders such as the Central and Eastern European democracies, the "diffuse support" (Easton, 1965) criterion becomes much more relevant: new incumbents of high offices are not just expected to bring peace and prosperity, they should also bestow authority on their office and their political system as a whole. Whether we find any succession effects on policy, organizations and institutions remains an open question.

Explaining Leader Succession Dynamics: The Literature

How to explain the course and outcomes of leadership successions? As we argued at the outset of the article, we believe there is a causal chain that runs from succession context to role choices to succession process and outcomes. Having described each of these parts of the equation in some detail, we are now able to put the pieces together, and articulate some testable propositions. But before we do so, we review a number of existing bodies of knowledge that may help us identify some of the larger forces and mechanisms governing the coming and going of political leaders. Scanning relevant literatures has yielded four potentially relevant perspectives.

Leadership Pendulums

A first explanation of leader successions highlights their functions as windows of opportunity. The replacement of an old leader reflects or helps bring about the

dialectical forces of politics, opening up an institutional possibility for rethinking existing policies, initiating new ones, and inaugurating a different political style (Light, 1998; Stimson, 2004). In this perspective, the political environment expects new leaders to want to make a difference, and set themselves apart from their predecessors. This goes especially when the predecessor has been discredited or when his or his party's political power has been eroded. In these circumstances, the new leader is more likely to get the benefit of the doubt when he initiates radical changes and embodies a new political style. When a predecessor is tainted by corruption scandals, the successor should be a "Mr. Clean." When a predecessor has failed to forge political breakthroughs in crucial policy issues, the successor is expected to succeed in doing just that.

The pendulum theory may also be appropriate in grasping the dynamics of successions where the outgoing leader is effective and popular. In these circumstances, the demand for change is low. In fact, the impending departure of the incumbent leader may fulfill the grass roots with a sense of nostalgia. The greatest threat to the successor is twofold: that he acts as an agent of changes that nobody wants or that he is typecast as a mere clone or "B version" of the great predecessor. The succession challenge in this case is not to let the political pendulum swing as widely as possible without creating chaos, but to get the political environment prepared to take leave of, if not to forget, the past ruler (Bailey, 1969). Gently but surely, he needs to correct the inflated image of a perfect past.

Political Cycles

The second perspective on leader succession takes as its starting point the idea that social and political developments have their own cyclical rhythms, which determine the relative viability of particular leadership agendas and styles. The notion of cycle is more complex than that of pendulum. Pendulum presupposes a dialectical view of politics, whereas the cyclical view conceives of it as a perpetual succession of multiple distinctive phases. There is much to be said for this view. Political life has a few well-institutionalized cycles, primarily the electoral and the budgetary ones. From this perspective, it makes a great difference when in the life cycle of an issue a new leader enters the picture, since each phase in the policy cycle harbors a distinctive set of political challenges that the outgoing and incoming leaders may be more or less equipped to handle.

At the macro level, the entire political agenda and the public mood with regard to politics and government may be subject to cyclical forces (Schlesinger, 1999). Likewise, Skowronek (1993) has argued that the evolution of the American political system can be understood in terms of a cycle in which periods of creation, consolidation, and destruction succeed one another. Hence, for some American presidents, the main challenge is to build a new political and policy regime. An example would be Franklin Roosevelt with his New Deal in response to persistent economic hardship and the limits of *laissez faire* governance it exposed. For

others, consolidation and perfection of an emerging and still vital regime inaugurated by their predecessors is the key challenge (Johnson's Great Society was presented as an extension and deepening of Kennedy's New Frontier expansion of the welfare state). For yet others, a repulsion of the existing order, and an almost revolutionary fervor in replacing it, is the name of the game. This would apply to Reagan's succession of Carter, for example. In Skowronek's view, the success of a succession and a successor is much less determined by the management of the succession process or the qualities of the successor as such, as by the degree of "fit" between the incoming president's agenda and style, and the contingent requirements of their role and office presented by the state of the country at the time of their arrival in office. This makes some presidents "lucky," whereas others are tragic figures.

Political Capital

The basic presumption of the third perspective is that the ups, downs, and exits of political leaders can be compared with the operation of the stock market. A new leader achieves his position when he possesses more "investor" confidence than his competitors. He offers them a solid brand that they are willing to vouch for. On the political stock market, this implies that they publicly endorse the leader, help finance him, vote for him, and loyally support his policies. Once in the leadership position, an effective leader must continuously satisfy various types of "institutional" investors (i.e., his political constituencies): by paying attention to them, by calibrating his rhetoric to their needs and preferences, by obtaining concrete results on pivotal issues (cf. Bailey, 1969; Renshon, 2000). As long as he succeeds in doing so, the value of his shares remains stable or rises even: the leader is firmly in the saddle. His position becomes problematic when the investors begin to lose confidence, decrease their loyalty, and even begin to move assets towards other corporations (i.e., competitors for the leader job).

Is there any pattern to the development of the political capital of leaders? Breslauer (2000) suggests that over time, the evolution of a leader's political capital has the shape of an inverted U. He argues that although an incoming leader has a support base that puts him above all the contemporary contenders, he is in fact still on probation. His power base is relatively narrow and follower loyalty is relatively weak. Consolidation therefore is his prime imperative: broadening the support base, empowering trusted allies, and deepening others' confidence in his ability and willpower. When he succeeds in doing so, a period of peak strength follows: his leadership has become institutionalized and he can now optimally wield power instead of being preoccupied by obtaining and consolidating it. This is the period in which the leader enjoys maximum leeway to control the agenda, push particular policies, and make tough decisions.

For different leaders the three periods mentioned so far succeed one another at a different pace, and while some have long periods of consolidated leadership,

others are undermined quickly. Whatever the shape of trajectory of arrival-consolidation-fruition, every leader will at some point see a reversal of fortunes: the peak has passed, and a descent is imminent. The machinery of leadership reproduction begins to experience hiccups and disturbances. The leader will, obviously, seek to repair it, for example by attempts to pacify the growing choir of critics by modifying his policy preferences in response to theirs. In due course, however, the end of his reign is inevitable, if only because the psychology of political investors likens that of economic investors: periods of sustained rise in share values "have to" be followed by a "correction," and even the most venerable firms need to be seen to innovate, if only by putting new faces in charge.

The inverted U curve has face value plausibility. Many leader careers fit the general thrust. The chief question for comparative analysis is perhaps whether and why in a particular case of a leader's career its shape is closer to that of a steep mountain peak or of a long plateau, and whether his decline likens a free fall or a gradual decline. At the same time, there are many significant exceptions to the hypothesis, illustrating the final part of the analogy between stock markets and political markets: although analysts are able to understand their modus operandi in general terms, they can never reliably predict how each individual company will perform. For one thing, some leaders' careers do not have a unipolar but a multipolar shape: they come back from major losses and recuperate leadership positions that seemed all but lost. "Comeback kids" such as the French president Mitterand and the American president Clinton come to mind. During their tenure in office, both suffered major, debilitating losses of political capital, but both managed to overcome these by "reinventing themselves" and by outsmarting their political opponents and potential challengers. They managed to extend their political life span and reclaim the space to govern.

Institutionalization of Charisma

The succession of charismatic leaders may be a class of cases of its own—however limited the universe of highly charismatic leadership relations may be in the political world of liberal democracies. To begin with, charismatic leaders enjoy a near superhuman status in the eyes of their followers. Tales of their remarkable capacities and deeds are woven into a heroic epos. Dramatic moments in their life and path to power (poverty, persecution, isolation, disease) are spun into a mythical story that is an essential component of the leader's appeal. The bond between them is continuously presented as sacred by leaders and followers alike. Charismatic leadership moreover occurs often in the context of opposition to established, traditional, or bureaucratic modes of authority and institutionalized rules for accession to and removal from positions of power (see Madsen & Snow, 1991).

Orderly successions of this type of leader may seem to be impossible almost by definition. Yet one thing is certain: if the leader and his inner circle do not take clear and timely measures to secure a managed transition, there is a high chance that the organization or movement that the leader leads will be torn apart by internal strife. In his classical treatise on charisma Weber (1972) mentioned six ways in which a successor for a charismatic leader can be found that may secure "transference" of the charismatic bond. One can wait for divine revelations or seek out oracles. The leader can name his own successor. In case he has not done so, the "charismatically qualified" inner circle around the leader can select one. Or it can undertake a ritualized search expedition for a successor that possesses very specific qualities, a method used for centuries to identify the new Dalai Lama. Alternatively, the leader's position can be transformed by inheritance. Finally, one can try to bestow the charismatic aura of the leader's personality to the office that he occupied. In this last case leader's succession coincides with the development or reinforcement of a particular authority structure. This is what Weber referred to as the routinization of charisma.

One should keep in mind that many of Weber's observations on charismatic leadership referred to sometimes ancient religious leaders and sects. Most of the succession methods that he mentioned seem hardly relevant or contemporary political leader transitions (cf. Blondel, 1987; Lindholm, 1990; Willner, 1984). Still, Weber's checklist remains a useful framework for understanding the succession of highly worshipped political leaders such as the founding fathers of new nations (Gandhi), new political regimes (Mandela, Havel), or political movements (Peron, Fortuyn). Gandhi appointed Nehru as his successor (Erikson, 1969), Peron's aura was transformed on to his wife Evita (Madsen & Snow, 1991), and Fortuyn's collaborator Herben succeeded in claiming the leader position because he was Fortuyn's personal friend.

In a democratic political context the last of Weber's strategies is the most desirable. All the others contain an element of arbitrariness. Routinization of charisma implies a disassociation of the special bond between leader and follower from the aura of an individual; it is channeled into a more or less formalized position in a party or state apparatus. The American and French presidencies are examples of this. In both cases the presidency itself is rooted in the heroic epos of a revolution and indirectly connected to the personal charisma of its early occupants (George Washington, Charles de Gaulle). This aura is maintained as much as possible by embedding the office of the presidency in all kinds of rituals and ceremonies, much like the practice of constitutional monarchies. The reassuring nature of this type of institutionalization of charisma is that the office is also embedded in constitutional checks and balances. The occupant of the American presidency may derive much authority from that office, but when he transcends its constitutional boundaries, he will encounter forceful oppositions of other authoritative institutions in the system (Nixon, Clinton).

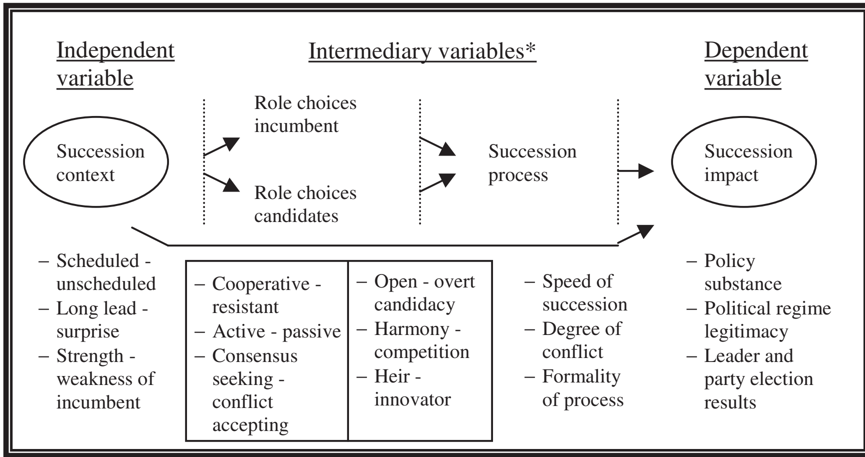
Succession Theories Revisited

Each of the four bodies of knowledge described above has relevance for those who seek to understand leadership succession. But none of them provides a sufficient tool for capturing and explaining individual successions of various kinds. Weber's theory remains limited to one type of leadership (charismatic) only. The pendulum and cycle theories can help us ascertain the macropolitical context in which succession takes place. They help us outline the challenges faced by prospective successors at any given point in political time. They are less useful, however, for opening up the black box of the succession process itself. The political capital approach comes closest to being the kind of process-oriented theory that is necessary to describe, explain, and perhaps predict individual succession episodes. It emphasizes that political stature and power base of leaders is dynamics and that the key to succession lies in the relative strength of incumbents and successors. Whilst this is an important factor, our earlier dissection of the succession process shows that it is at best one of the driving forces of succession processes. Let us therefore integrate this variable in a broader conceptual model.

Explaining Leadership Succession: Towards a Conceptual Framework

If we want to gain a more precise insight into the course and outcomes of succession episodes in democracies, we need to open the black box of the process. In the bulk of the article, we have tried to develop a conceptual language that enables us to do so in a fashion that allows for the precision and systematic comparison of widely different types of succession episodes—something which none of the theories reviewed above offers. In this section, we try to integrate the various pieces of the succession puzzle. Our core assumption is that these pieces can be modeled as a sequence of psychopolitical considerations that shape the succession process in predictable directions. This section will develop a number of testable propositions, claiming to predict (variations in) succession outcomes on the basis of information about the independent and intermediary variables specified in Figure 3. Thus, for example, a succession candidate's chances of landing in the top job are not only shaped by her personal role choice as driven by her personal ambitions, capabilities, style, and ties to the incumbent leader and the relevant party power brokers, but also by how this set of personal characteristics "fits" the nature of the succession context at hand, as well as the personal profiles, role choices, and behavior of the incumbent leader and the other succession candidates.

Each of the key variables in the model has been specified in a number of dimensions. Hence the total number of possible causal effects at the subvariable level is very high. What follows therefore, is no more than a first selection of possible propositions. We begin at the right-hand side of the flowchart and work our way backwards.



*Other variables are likely to intervene into this incomplete model as well.

Figure 3. Modeling political leadership succession.

Process Effects

1. The higher the degree of conflict in the succession process, the lower the likelihood of successful outcomes (defined as: electoral results of the post-succession incumbent's party and political regime legitimacy).
2. The longer the duration of the succession process, the lower the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Role Choice Effects

3. The less active an incumbent leader, the longer the duration and the higher the degree of conflict in the succession process (and thus, given proposition 1, the lower the likelihood of successful outcomes).
4. When the incumbent leader and the chief succession candidates adopt a consensus-seeking/harmonious role orientation, the shorter the duration and the lower the degree of conflict in the succession process (and thus the higher the likelihood of successful outcomes).

   Corollary 4a: When both adopt a conflict-accepting/confrontational role orientation, the longer the duration, the higher the degree of conflict and the lower the likelihood of successful outcomes.

   Corollary 4b: When there is an asymmetry in the role choices of incumbents and candidates (consensual versus confrontational; resisting exit

versus seeking candidacy etc.), the higher the likelihood of interpersonal recrimination and conflict in the succession process and the lower the likelihood of successful outcomes

Context Effects

5. The stronger the incumbent's political position at the outset of the succession episode, the more likely that he takes an active role orientation and the higher the likelihood that his preferences prevail in the succession process.
6. The more scheduled the succession trigger, the longer the duration and the higher the likelihood of conflict in the succession process and the lower the likelihood of successful outcomes.

   Corollary 6a: In case of unscheduled exits, a polarizing effect is likely to occur: the succession process may be either rapid and highly consensual (and thus more likely to produce successful outcomes), or highly conflictual and drawn out (and thus more likely to produce unsuccessful outcomes).

It is not easy to tell which of these propositions will turn out to be robust. We are currently conducting cross-national comparative research in five established democracies to both illustrate (qualitative case studies) and test (a quantitative databank based on a n = 76 sample of all postwar cases of leader change in each country's two main parties) the propositions derived from the model. In the course of this research effort, illustrations of the logic of some of the propositions (cf. Bynander and 't Hart, 2007) have begun to emerge. For example as regards proposition 6a, our case sample contains numerous cases of death in office (Australian leaders John Curtin, Ben Chifley, Harold Holt; British Labor leader John Smith), assassination (Olof Palme), and surprise resignations (Harold Wilson; Willy Brandt) to have reasonable variation on the various critical variables and dimensions. The predicted polarizing effect becomes clear when we compare the various cases. The day after Olof Palme's assassination, a meeting of the Social Democratic party's executive committee nominated Deputy Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson to Palme's post: the only other prospective candidate gave the nod, everybody present expressed their support of the new leader, and that was the end of it. The felt need to "rally around the flag" overcame the incentive the sudden vacancy offered to play politics. Quite in contrast to this is the course of events in a case not in our sample. When Dutch populist leader Pim Fortuyn was murdered, his newly established party, Lijst Pim Fortuyn, unraveled into a series of seemingly unending clashes over the leadership of the party that had just conquered an unprecedented 26 seats in parliament. A strong leader's sudden exit leaves a big void, and the task of filling it may be daunting and creates expectations among the party loyalists that are hard to fulfill, but it also creates a sense of entitlement and duty to carry the fallen leader's standard by his closest allies. In contrast, an heir

apparent can be rushed into office with the legitimacy of the predecessor's legacy, but he may lose it in days by operating without the necessary tact and cunning, thus giving his preexisting rivals and critics in the party scope for exploiting the claim that he proves unworthy to fill the post.

Concluding Observations

Leadership succession occurs on the borderlines of the highly public and the intensely private side of political life. For that reason alone its analysis constitutes a major challenge for political psychologists. First of all, there is the hard work of systematic and comparative "thick" and "focused" description of larger numbers of cleverly selected cases of leadership succession. Then the research effort will have to be directed towards identifying the impact of leadership successions: for who and what do they matter? The third step is to trace causal patterns linking the succession contexts to the role choices by the chief protagonists, as outlined in this paper. Finally, the full model proposed here promises to be a tool for making sense of the apparent madness of leadership succession.

Regardless of whether they matter in policy and institutional terms, leadership successions do provide inherently fascinating episodes of political and psychological drama. Political careers are made and broken in the course of succession episodes. The bonds between key political players are tested severely and often change durably as a result of the succession experience—and, as the various cases mentioned in this paper suggest, often not for the better. This is perhaps why the standard reflex in parties and governments (and perhaps public and private organizations at large) is to shy away from successions. As Punnett (1992) argues, "other than when a natural vacancy occurs, leadership contests should be avoided because they can threaten party unity, provide comfort to the enemy and distract the party from its tasks in government and opposition" (p. 173). Reality, however, is different: many leaders do indeed *not* know when to go, and so many of them slide over into succession dynamics whether they like it or not. To find out what happens, why it happens and what it might result in when this is the case will always remain a worthwhile endeavor for students of politics.

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