

Leadership, Equality & Democracy

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Abstract: The goal of this essay is to clarify the relationship between leadership and equality as two essential constitutive factors of a democratic political system. The essay is motivated by concern about increasing inequalities in the political system of the United States and other countries that describe themselves as democracies. The first section notes the logical tension between leadership and equality, and spells out my understanding of the key terms I use in this essay. I show how the tension between leadership and equality poses a conundrum for democratic governance. Yet the crux of my argument is that profound socioeconomic inequalities pose the more basic threat. I identify disparities in power, as distinct from leadership, as the root of the problem here.

Leadership and power are often conflated. Eliding the differences between the two impedes our understanding of the dilemmas we face. The classical answer to concerns about the abuse of power is to establish institutional constraints on political leadership. Yet good leadership is essential in solving the problems we confront. Because leaders can take significant steps to reduce inequality, leadership and equality are not always in tension. If we are to emerge from our current malaise, we must recognize and draw upon the positive contributions of leadership to efficacious democratic governance.

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We begin with a conundrum:

1) Democracy, as a system of government, depends upon political equality: each citizen must have a voice and the opportunity to use it to influence decisions made within the political community, particularly those that have a direct effect on the interests of that citizen. Each person's voice should count as much as that of any other citizen.

2) Democracy, like any complex social system, requires leadership. In any situation in which more than a few people want to accomplish some shared goal, leadership will be needed to mobilize their energies effectively.

3) Leaders have more power than those they lead. The disparity is less dramatic when the leadership is gentle and benign, rather than coercive, but it holds across the board. In order to clarify goals and mobilize energies to accomplish a joint project, leaders must persuade others to engage in behaviors that these in-

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dividuals might not otherwise choose to undertake. In that sense, leaders are always, to use the memorable phrase from *Animal Farm*, “more equal than others.”¹

The first principle asserts that equality, in some form, is constitutive of a democratic regime. Other kinds of government may be responsive to popular needs and demands because of a sense of obligation, or from a shrewd awareness of how authority is best sustained. Thus, a regime’s responsiveness to popular needs and demands is not the same as democratic governance.

The term *democracy* usually denotes *popular sovereignty*, government in which ultimate power resides in the body of the citizens. Other definitions emphasize popular participation in determining policies that affect the whole community. Popular sovereignty requires the people to choose their leaders, hold them accountable, and potentially remove them from office. Participation in policy-making is a more active and continuing requirement. In either case, power rests with *the people*, theoretically defined as all citizens of a polity, though democracies throughout history have understood the term with an implicit asterisk, excluding women, slaves, children, felons, or those without property, among other groups.

Despite these exclusions, political theorists from Plato to the present have associated democracy with equality. Readers of the *Republic* will recall how Plato, in book VIII, scorns democracy as a system of government precisely because it can carry its distinctive principle (equality) to absurd and destructive ends. Aristotle defines democracy in book IV of the *Politics* in terms of equality as the principle by which we recognize whether any polity deserves this name. The most basic form of democracy is one that comes closest to abstract equality, where the law declares “that the poor are to count no more than the rich; neither is to be sovereign, and both are to be on a

level...with all sharing alike, as far as possible, in constitutional rights.”²

In discussing the principles of the social contract, Rousseau adds: “From whatever side one traces one’s way back to the principle, one always reaches the same conclusion: namely, that the pact establishes among the Citizens an equality such that all commit themselves under the same conditions and must all enjoy the same rights.”³ More recently, Robert Dahl, listing the basic principles of democratic theory, chose “to lay down political equality as an end to be maximized, that is, to postulate that the goals of every adult citizen of a republic are to be accorded equal value in determining government policies.”⁴

Equality is a notoriously tricky term. For our purposes, I want to concentrate on *political equality*. I understand this term to describe a situation in which each citizen has the same rights as any other citizen to participate in determining the outcome of a decision for the community. No one’s voice is amplified by extraneous factors such as wealth, education, race, or gender. Nor are any voices suppressed by fear of negative consequences for trying to express one’s views.

This first principle – the link between democracy and equality – is one that most readers may already take for granted. The second principle in my conundrum is less familiar. *Democracy, like any complex social system, requires leadership.*

In *Thinking about Leadership*, I argue that “leaders determine or clarify goals for a group of individuals and bring together the energies of members of that group to accomplish those goals.”⁵ This approach builds on an understanding of leadership as set out by, for example, Philip Selznick, who describes leadership as “a kind of work done to meet the needs of a social situation.”⁶ Such a low-key conception of leadership is more often associated with administration or volunteer activities than with political authority, but defining goals

and mobilizing energies are the essential components of leadership in any context, including politics.

Even in this basic understanding of leadership – as a common feature of complex human social interactions – the tension with equality arises. If, with Dahl and other theorists, we define *power* as influence over the behavior of others, whether by persuasion or coercion, it follows that leaders even in this minimalistic sense have more power than other individuals. This is why radically egalitarian movements, including Occupy Wall Street, have always tried to downplay or ignore leadership.

Some political theorists, well aware of the tension between equality and leadership, reason that in order to protect popular sovereignty, leadership must be severely constrained. Ideally, for such theorists, a democracy would do without leaders altogether. Benjamin Barber, an eloquent advocate for democratic government, asserts that precisely because of the tension between leadership and equality, our ideal goal would be to dispense with leadership entirely. He asserts that because it encroaches on individual autonomy, “leadership is opposed to participatory self-government.” Therefore, “one might wish to say that in the ideal participatory system leadership vanishes altogether.” He recognizes grudgingly that “actual participatory systems . . . are clearly burdened with the need for leadership.”⁷ Regarding leadership as a *burden* with which democracies are saddled, instead of an essential part of what makes them work, is part of the problem I want to address.

Leadership, in the sense I am using the term, is a basic feature of all complex human activity, including democratic politics. Thus, the principles of our conundrum, taken together, identify a basic dilemma. Leadership is essential for democratic government. Because leaders have more power than other individuals, leadership is incompatible

with democracy’s basic principle: equality. Therefore, democracy is an inherently contradictory form of government.

How can this dilemma be resolved?

The first step is to acknowledge that democracy can never be achieved in its pure form. As defined above, democracy is an abstract standard, an ideal that governments may approach more or less closely, but never fully reach. Most theorists of democracy, including both Dahl and Rousseau, have recognized this explicitly. Having spelled out eight criteria for a political system in which citizens effectively control their leaders, Dahl notes that, “it may be laid down dogmatically that no human organization – certainly none with more than a handful of people – has ever met or is ever likely to meet these eight conditions.”⁸ Dahl’s mood reflected that of Rousseau, who wrote: “If there were a people of Gods, they would govern themselves democratically. So perfect a Government is not suited to men.”⁹

We must also recognize that a completely egalitarian sociopolitical structure would not provide a habitable environment for humans. Dystopias, including Kurt Vonnegut’s short story “Harrison Bergeron,” make this point unassailably.¹⁰ The differences between us as individuals are fundamental to our species. Inevitably these disparities in talent, aspiration, effort, opportunity, and preference, multiplied by the accidents of fortune, yield a society in which some individuals are more advantageously placed than others. The challenge we face if we aspire to come closer to democracy is to ensure that these differences do not durably aggregate to form a society rigidly stratified into castes or impenetrable social classes, with some members almost inevitably winning in the game of life and others perpetually disadvantaged, no matter how talented they are or how hard they work.

We usually speak of our form of government in the United States as a democracy. The term *republic*, used by Madison and memorialized by Benjamin Franklin, may be more appropriate. As Philip Pettit has shown, a republic is a form of government that concentrates on protecting the freedom of its citizens by avoiding domination. This is not the same as democracy, though the two are closely aligned. As Pettit points out in his Seeley Lectures, it is possible to develop a “republican theory and model of democracy.”¹¹ In the rest of this essay, I will use the term *democracy* to identify republics in which citizens aspire to popular sovereignty and vigorous popular participation, and feature this aspiration as their dominant ideology, as opposed to the abstract ideal form of democracy discussed above.

The tension I have identified between leadership and equality will emerge in any kind of political system. Thus, it is not surprising that the first instinct of some theorists of democratic government is to try to minimize or even do away with leadership. A more familiar response is to create multiple checks and balances, to tie Gulliver down so that he cannot injure the Lilliputians. This was, of course, James Madison’s tactic, which forms the basic framework of the American constitution.

The abuse of power by leaders is a significant concern for democracy, as it is for any form of government. It does not follow, however, that constraints on leadership should be so severe that they make it impossible for our leaders to lead. There is ample evidence that such constraints become self-defeating. *Theorists who regard leadership solely as a threat to good government, a brute force to be cabined and constrained, undermine the performance of the political system they wish to promote.*

Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz have shown the correlation between the multiple blockages in the U.S. political sys-

tem and our increasing inequalities. They cite data based on the Gini index, a familiar way to measure inequality, which show that the United States has a worse score than other “long-standing democracies in advanced economies,” and that this situation has become markedly worse since 1970. They also cite research that shows that “the more veto players there are in a political system, the more difficult it is to construct a win-set to alter the political status quo.” Such actors have “the potential to control a constitutionally embedded, electorally generated veto point” that can obstruct significant political change.¹² The United States has more veto players by this definition than any other advanced democracy; thus, it is not surprising that it has been hard for our polity to tackle the problem of growing inequality.

As Stepan and Linz’s evidence makes clear, the dramatic socioeconomic inequalities in the United States are correlated with the difficulty of taking any bold political action. Such action requires leadership in the halls of government, leadership that can build alliances and find ways to work with, rather than be completely stymied by, the checks and balances.

The next step in resolving our dilemma is to recognize that those who see leadership solely as a threat to democracy are confusing leadership with power and authority. There are connections between leadership and each of these other terms, but it is not reducible to either of them.

At a minimum, *power* involves the kind of relationship so described by Dahl: “My intuitive idea of power is something like this: A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.”¹³ This minimalist definition has been usefully elaborated by social scientists in several ways; but the basic point – getting someone to do what he or she would otherwise not do – remains.

Authority usually denotes some formal office or position that conveys, in the words of the American Heritage Dictionary, “the power to enforce laws, exact obedience, command, determine or judge.” Authority can also connote recognition of someone’s eminence, experience, or wisdom, and a resulting disposition to accept his or her opinion as guidance. In political contexts, someone in authority usually has a title, badge, or office: an institutional position in a bureaucratic hierarchy. This office confers the legitimacy to enforce laws and exact obedience within that system of government.

But authority is not the same as leadership as I have defined it. A title or an office may convey a formal license to direct the activities of others, but says nothing about whether the person occupying the office has any clue about how to lead them. As John Gardner put it, “We have all occasionally encountered top persons who couldn’t lead a squad of seven-year-olds to the ice cream counter.”¹⁴

The key to my argument is the distinction between *power* and *leadership*. Leaders inevitably have some kind of power. But leaders on whom official authority has been conferred are not the only powerful members of a democratic community. Inequalities in power, not leadership as such, threaten political equality. Therefore, constraints on leadership are not the only step we need to take to assure a healthy democracy. Limiting opportunities for the abuse of power, not just constraining political leadership, is the basic goal we must pursue.

Lord Acton’s famous dictum – “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely” – is usually taken as a statement about political leadership. There are good reasons for this: the most prominent and dangerous power-holders in history have been in positions of political authority. However, Acton goes on to say:

“Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority.” It is the capacity to affect or direct the behavior of other individuals that opens opportunities for abuse.

In discussing “great men,” Acton identifies individuals who have unusual influence over others. Powerful persons prone to this “badness” may operate in a very limited domain. Some of the most corrupted power-holders are petty tyrants who abuse their wives and families or mistreat their employees, servants, or slaves. This has nothing to do with leadership; it arises instead when persons prone to this behavior have some licensed privilege to dominate other individuals.

Any leader capable of mobilizing the energies of others to pursue some goal has a form of power. Thus, all leaders are subject to temptations that may lead to corruption because of the power they exercise, however benign and minimal. It can be exhilarating to affect the behavior of other men and women. Power-holders (including political leaders) may in this way experience power as a kind of personal high. They may also use it for their own aggrandizement. Powerful individuals are often tempted to deploy the resources that power allows them to accumulate – wealth, status, access to privileges – to pursue selfish ends. If you possess political authority, you may also be tempted to oppress others in order to keep them docile or magnify yourself.

Arnold Rogow and Harold Lasswell connect the belief that power corrupts with the Christian conception of original sin. Acton thus gave memorable form to “one of the deepest convictions of modern liberals and democrats.”¹⁵ However, Rogow and Lasswell warn against relying so heavily on this conviction that we render our leaders incapable of leading. And they remind us that not all leaders succumb to temptations that may arise. “For every Nero sunk in corruption and debauchery”

they assert, “there is a Trajan or Marcus Aurelius who was notably upright.”

It would be hard to prove that history has produced an equal number of corrupt and upright leaders. Yet we can surely agree that “the personality structure of the power-seeker” goes far to determine how any specific individual will react.¹⁶ Most leaders, like most of us, combine good and bad qualities, strengths and weaknesses. As James David Barber put it, “Power may corrupt – or ennoble or frighten or inspire or distract a man. The result depends on his propensity for, his vulnerability to, particular kinds of corruption or cleansing. . . . Political power is like nuclear energy: available to create deserts or make them bloom.”¹⁷

In the decades since Dahl defined power in the minimal but memorable phrase quoted above – the extent to which *A* can “get *B* to do something *B* would not otherwise do” – social scientists have elaborated on this insight to deepen our understanding of power. The key work here is Steven Lukes’s book, *Power: A Radical View*. Lukes criticizes Dahl’s definition as overly simplistic, identifying only one dimension of power: decision-making about issues over which there is an observable conflict of interests expressed in policy preferences. Lukes follows Bachrach and Baratz in identifying a “second face of power” revealed when “*A* devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to *A*.”¹⁸ In other words, where *A* can control the agenda so that only certain kinds of issues or conflicts are even up for decision, *B* may be precluded from pursuing goals that he would otherwise prefer.

Lukes’s own contribution to this discussion is in naming “the third face of power”:

“*A* may exercise power over *B* by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping, or determining his very wants.” This happens, Lukes goes on to say, “through control of information, through the mass media and through the processes of socialization.”¹⁹ He identifies ways in which *A* can manipulate *B* to *A*’s own advantage, thus getting him to do something which is against his “real interests,” however we might determine these.

When Lukes considers “the necessary conditions for human beings to flourish” – which is another way of describing “real interests” – he supports the capabilities approach subsequently developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The goal is to identify and bring about “the necessary conditions” for all individuals to live “lives fit for human beings, who are treated and treat one another as ends, have *equal dignity and an equal entitlement to shape their own lives*, making their own choices and developing their gifts in reciprocal relationships with others.”²⁰

This linkage of the concept of *equality* with the concept of *power* draws our attention to the ways in which *A*’s exercise of power, in any of Lukes’s three senses, can undermine or constrain *B*’s equal status and capability. There are numerous ways in which *A* can get one or more *B*s to do something they would not otherwise do, and sometimes do things that an objective observer would regard as not in their “real interests.” As might use multiple resources – traditional status, seniority, educational attainments, networks of partners, tribal or ethnic ties, religious authority, intellectual shrewdness, rhetorical gifts, an aggressive personality – to get others to do something that *A* prefers.

The resources used may include force or violence – threats to the safety and security of individuals – resulting in oppression and domination. But in a healthy so-

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ciety, the resources do not always involve coercion, even though coercion is used (or threatened) in some situations. In close relationships of family or friendship, the resources are commonly benign, fluid, and sometimes reciprocal. These include affection, altruism, gentle persuasion, and collaboration, as well as coercion or threats of sanction. In larger communities, the resources are more likely to be used impersonally and less positively for the Bs.

The resources that can be used most effectively to get others to do what you want them to do are often economic. As Rousseau pointed out in his *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men*, wealth is the most important of the various factors that conduce to inequality, because it can be used to purchase or secure most of the others.²¹

The power conveyed by the possession of wealth is especially insidious in democratic systems because of this all-purpose nature of wealth. Among the things that wealth can purchase, of course, is political power or access to influence in governing. A polity that allows the wealthiest citizens to purchase speech that drowns out other voices cannot claim to be a democracy. The problem is even greater when those who have the most wealth are able to adjust the political institutions in such a way that some issues have no chance of making it onto the political agenda – the “second face” of power, in Lukes’s terms.

We have become so accustomed to the impact of wealth in American politics that we accept too readily the ways in which it debilitates our democracy. We may grumble about the consequences of *Citizens United*, or express concern about laws advantaging some voters rather than others, laws passed by legislatures dominated by wealthy citizens or those who finance their campaigns. But if we understand a democracy as a system in which citizens enjoy basic political equality, it becomes hypocritical to speak

of an electoral or governmental system so profoundly shaped by these forces as a “democracy.”

Political scientists in the last few years have provided ample evidence that political decision-makers at all levels, especially in Washington, pass laws and hand down regulations that disproportionately benefit more affluent Americans, particularly the very rich.²² This point may seem unsurprising. But the striking fact is how great the disproportion has become in U.S. politics, despite our cherished conception of our country as governed democratically. Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page note: “The central point that emerges from our research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence.”²³

In his book *Affluence and Influence*, Gilens documents “enormous inequalities in the responsiveness of policy makers to the preferences of more- and less-well-off Americans.”²⁴ He concludes that there is overwhelming evidence that money makes a profound difference in who gets elected in our country, and what policies are adopted. It is “political donations, not voting or volunteering,” that produce this result.²⁵ Borrowing a term from James Snyder, Gilens asserts that very affluent Americans use their wealth to make “long-term investments” in individual politicians whose views accord with their own, knowing that the decisions of these politicians will over time favor their interests. This kind of investment in American politics does not usually involve direct bribery (although such corruption is surely not unknown). But the practice of “long-term investment” raises “the disturbing prospect of a vicious cycle in which growing eco-

nomic and political inequality are mutually reinforcing.”²⁶

Other students of politics make parallel arguments, including Larry Bartels in *Unequal Democracy*, Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson in *The Winner-Take All Society*, Nicholas Carnes in *White-Collar Government*, and the authors of the essays in Lawrence Jacobs and Desmond King’s volume *The Unsustainable American State*.²⁷ The arguments are somewhat different in identifying the culprit. According to Bartels, perhaps the problem is that many American citizens are uninterested in politics and too apathetic to vote, or too uninformed to vote their own apparent interests. Or it may be, as Carnes argues, that not enough working-class candidates are recruited, trained, and encouraged to run for office, so that our government is dominated by leaders from the professional and business classes. Their conclusion, however, is identical: the health of our “democratic” polity is in very poor condition because of glaring socioeconomic disparities among American citizens, reflected in our politics.

As a consequence of these findings, several students of American politics, including Jeffrey Winters and Benjamin Page, assert that it is “now appropriate . . . to think about the possibility of *extreme* political inequality, involving great political influence by a very small number of extremely wealthy individuals. We argue that it is useful to think about the U.S. political system in terms of oligarchy.”²⁸ Gilens argues that “the patterns of responsiveness” he documents “often corresponded more closely to a plutocracy than to a democracy.”²⁹

We can simply accept this state of affairs as the lamentable consequence of the actions of a variety of powerful individuals, and do our best to navigate within it. If, on the other hand, we are committed to the United States as a democracy in the sense understood by Abraham Lincoln, as a gov-

ernment of, by, and for the people, with rough political equality for all citizens, we cannot simply accept what we now face. Even if our goal is more modest – to preserve the republican political system that protects citizens from oppression, and address those areas in which some citizens (particularly young black men) are less well protected than others from abuses of power – we cannot be complacent about our situation.

The vague hope that the unpredictable fortunes of our economic cycles will reduce the glaring inequalities is a very dubious source of amelioration. A rising tide does not lift all boats when some of the boats are firmly anchored in the mud and will simply be swamped by the rising waters. Yet a falling tide will lower all boats without specific human intervention to protect those most at risk.

In the modern era, the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions brought about a dramatic short-term reduction in inequality. The first and second world wars, along with the Great Depression, accounted for significant short-term reductions in inequality in Europe and the United States.³⁰ Yet it would surely be perverse to hope for war or revolution as a means to reduce inequality.

The most common response to the growing power of money in contemporary politics in the United States is to urge citizens to mobilize, to wake up from their apathy, to put pressure on the government and take back the state.³¹ However, large numbers of citizens cannot accomplish this goal individually and spontaneously. Furthermore, this suggestion runs athwart the huge body of evidence about the problems posed by those who want to be “free riders” on the efforts of others to achieve collective goals.³²

Here is where leadership – clarifying goals and mobilizing energies – becomes deeply relevant. Good leadership is a potential source of repair and reconstitution for our political system.

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A number of contemporary commentators assert that complex social systems can do without leadership, relying on crowd sourcing, social media, or other ways of achieving social harmony and pursuing joint purposes. Clay Shirky argues that throughout history until the contemporary era, in order to “organize the work of even dozens of individuals, you had to manage them.” This meant setting up a centralized organization with management by a CEO, a king, a chair. The “new tools” of social media, email, websites, and other technological aids allow us to circumvent this problem. “By making it easier for groups to self-assemble and for individuals to contribute to group effort without requiring formal management (and its attendant overhead), these tools have radically altered the old limits on the size, sophistication and scope of unsupervised effort.” Shirky argues that social media allow potential groups to avoid Ronald Coase’s “transaction costs” for organizing, and thus do without management. Another version of this idea, focusing on the formation of networks, has been provided by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom in *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*.³³

Shirky includes government among the institutions that have lost their “relative advantages,” compared with “the direct effort of the people they represent.” Although the obsolete villain of his piece is management rather than leadership, he occasionally hints at the implications for political life as well. At the end of his book, he acknowledges that so far, in the political realm, technology-aided “collective action is more focused on protesting than creating,” because protesting is easier to do. He is optimistic that as social media continue to develop, this difficulty will be overcome. “Reciprocal altruism” (as in barn-raising in a farming village) will provide the motivation for creative constructive action without leadership.³⁴

But the collective action for protest that Shirky regards as the harbinger of broadly dispersed political activities is, in fact, deeply reliant on leadership in the sense that I have used the term. Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring have been offered as paradigmatic examples of “leaderless” activities. Yet these are surely not instances of spontaneous behavior motivated by “reciprocal altruism.” Fifty thousand people did not magically turn up at Tahrir Square at exactly the same time on January 25, 2011. There had been protests in Egypt for more than a decade, most notably the broadly based strike on April 6, 2008. Dozens of young activists had tweeted and communicated by email for months, planning the January 25 event. They reached out to colleagues and friends to let them know about the chosen date. These activists had identified a goal – to protest against Mubarak’s government – and effectively mobilized the energies of many others to join them. The same is true for the organizers of the Occupy Movement, whose goals were to highlight profound inequalities in our contemporary societies and politics; use social media effectively to mobilize the energies of large numbers of individuals to protest in specific, organized communal spaces; and provide the supplies, schedules, and publicity that characterized these spaces.

In the Occupy protests around the world, the principled commitment to equal status for all protestors prompted aversion to the emergence of identified leaders. However, adherence to this principle made it difficult for the leaders to translate the fluid power they exercised into the work of institution-building. Protest is ultimately fruitless unless you establish a new set of institutions and policies in the space your activities temporarily clear in a political system. The young activists who organized the movement were deliberately contemptuous of “politics as usual,” in-

cluding compromise and coalition-building. They had neither the will nor the tactics to mobilize the political energy potentially available in the broad concern about inequality that their protests both represented and helped intensify.

The only path that promises success in tackling the glaring inequalities that mar the American political system is visionary, pragmatic political leadership. Leadership can make a difference in several ways. Leaders in authority can in some circumstances persuade others to pass laws limiting the acquisition of wealth through the power to tax and redistribute. Leaders can inspire citizens to think collectively and put the public good higher on the list of personal priorities for more of us. We need leaders who can avoid the entanglements of excessive bureaucracy as well as personal corruption and effectively enlist the talents and energies of other citizens. Most basically, we need leaders who are motivated to use their power to help citizens less privileged than others, and work for the creation of a more nearly democratic polity.

This prescription may sound utopian in our current circumstances, in which money is a powerful force in politics, many citizens are cynical and apathetic, and the difficulties of being in the public spotlight deter many potential leaders from choosing politics as a career. Yet history provides multiple examples of leaders who have used their political talents in difficult circumstances to reduce inequalities and work toward a more balanced system. In U.S. history, the list of such leaders includes, most obviously, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Lyndon Baines Johnson.

None of these leaders were perfect, by any means; we could easily recite their flaws. But each was determined to reduce glaring inequalities in the American polity – inequalities of race or wealth – and

each made significant progress toward this goal. It is worth pondering the distinctive qualities such leaders may possess that motivate them to work toward the goal of reducing inequalities, and make it possible to achieve success.

Max Weber's 1918 lecture on "Politics as a Vocation" tells us that "three pre-eminent qualities are decisive for the politician: passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion." By "passion" Weber means not "sterile excitation," but "passionate devotion to a 'cause,'" deep commitment to something a leader believes is worth working for. But passion alone is not enough. The political leader also needs "a sense of proportion" or perspective, which Weber defines as the "ability to let realities work on him [the leader] with inner concentration and calmness." This includes harboring a certain amount of "distance to things and men," rather than being so caught up in dedication to a cause that a leader cannot see clearly how to make wise strategic judgments in pursuing that goal. As Weber notes, this combination of qualities is not often found together. "For the problem is simply how can warm passion and a cool sense of proportion be forged together in one and the same soul?"³⁵

Such a combination may be rare, but it is not unknown. In the broader global context, the premier example of a leader who possessed a passion to reduce inequality, and the sense of proportion that made it possible to do so, would surely be Nelson Mandela. He also possessed in large measure Weber's other desideratum for a leader, "a feeling of responsibility." His passionate commitment to South Africa, and his well-developed vision for its future, led him to feel deep responsibility for all South Africans, white as well as black and colored. His sense of perspective and distance, honed by the long years on Robben Island, made it possible for him to lead without being distracted by parochial goals or petty loyalties.

If such leaders, when they come on the scene, are so constrained by political checks and balances that they can achieve very little, this pathway to social change is effectively blocked. As we have seen, this problem affects the U.S. presidential system especially acutely, compared with contemporary parliamentary systems, for example. But the basic principle should be kept in mind in assessing the health of any polity.

Leaders of the caliber of Nelson Mandela or Abraham Lincoln are rare. Yet we do not need to accept the “great man” theory of history to understand how leadership is necessary to protect the vigor and capacity of democratic governments. Leaders at a less lofty level than the presidency are also essential: leaders in congressional committees, the courts, in local political activities. Leadership by multiple actors within our political system, including leaders of corporations and nonprofit organizations, is crucial if we are to reduce the danger-

ous and growing inequalities that threaten to undermine our quasidemocratic polity.

In the first sections of his essay “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber discusses the special qualities of charismatic leaders and the effects they may achieve. In his conclusion, however, he describes politics as “the strong and slow boring of hard boards.”³⁶ Prominent charismatic leaders committed to decreasing the inequalities in our polity can make a profound difference, and we can hope that more of them will be willing to run for high office. Equally important, however, are the steady, dedicated efforts of less visible leaders at every level of our system, leaders willing to persist through the “slow boring of hard boards” to restore greater democracy and equity in our system of government. Without this contribution, we have little hope of reversing the dangerous trends in contemporary politics that so many of us deplore.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (New York: Penguin, 1956).
- ² Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 22 – 23.
- ³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of The Social Contract*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4, 63.
- ⁴ Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956), 32.
- ⁵ Nannerl O. Keohane, *Thinking about Leadership* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 23.
- ⁶ Philip Selznick, *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 22.
- ⁷ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 237 – 238.
- ⁸ Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, 71.
- ⁹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 92.
- ¹⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, “Harrison Bergeron,” in *Welcome to the Monkey House* (New York: Delacorte Press [Random House], 1968).
- ¹¹ Philip Pettit, *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

- ¹² Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz, “Comparative Perspectives on Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in the United States,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (4) (December 2011): 844. Nannerl O. Keohane
- ¹³ Robert Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science* 2 (3) (July 1957): 203.
- ¹⁴ John Gardner, *On Leadership* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 2.
- ¹⁵ Arnold A. Rogow and Harold Dwight Lassell, *Power, Corruption and Rectitude* (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), 1–6.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33–35.
- ¹⁷ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1977), 12.
- ¹⁸ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 20.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 117. Emphasis added.
- ²¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 184. Rousseau asserts that of the various kinds of inequality, “riches is the last to which they are finally reduced, because, being the most immediately useful to well-being and the easiest to transmit, it can readily be used to buy all the rest.”
- ²² Benjamin Page, Larry M. Bartels, and Jason Seawright, “Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (1) (March 2013): 51–73.
- ²³ Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspective on Politics* 12 (3) (September 2014): 564.
- ²⁴ Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 12.
- ²⁵ This point is made forcefully by Elizabeth Drew, “How Money Runs Our Politics,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 4, 2015, 22–26.
- ²⁶ Gilens, *Affluence and Influence*, 239, 246, 252.
- ²⁷ Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation; and Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jacob S. Hacker and Paul S. Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer – and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010); Nicholas Carnes, *White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Lawrence Jacobs and Desmond King, eds., *The Unsustainable American State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- ²⁸ Jeffrey A. Winters and Benjamin I. Page, “Oligarchy in the United States?” *Perspectives on Politics* 7 (4) (December 2009): 744.
- ²⁹ Gilens, *Affluence and Influence*, 234.
- ³⁰ For the reduction in inequalities in these periods, see the charts in Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 24, 316–317.
- ³¹ One example is Matt Stoller’s blog Naked Capitalism, cited by Jeffrey Isaacs in “Rethinking American Democracy” in a recent issue of *Perspectives on Politics* devoted to the topic of the increasingly oligarchical character of our democracy. Stoller says: “The lesson here is to organize. Citizens can matter, but only if they make themselves heard.” See Jeffrey Isaacs, “Rethinking American Democracy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (3) (September 2014): 560.
- ³² Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).
- ³³ Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 19–21, 44–45; and Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

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- ³⁴ Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 312 – 314.
- ³⁵ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 115. Emphasis in the original.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.