Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 9065
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9065

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Open Access Journal

Twenty-First Century Autocrats and Their Followers: A Comparative Inquiry

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Submitted: 29 July 2024 **Accepted:** 1 October 2024 **Published:** in press

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Legitimacy and Followership in National and International Political Leadership" edited by Femke van Esch (Utrecht University) and Rudolf Metz (HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences / Corvinus University of Budapest), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i387

Abstract

Leadership and followership have long been considered to be defining features of democratic politics. However, more recently, both conceptual redefinitions and real-world developments have put issues of leadership and followership in regimes from beyond the family of established liberal democracies center-stage. This article looks into the nature of authoritarian leadership and followership from a comparative perspective and in light of theories of democratic political leadership. As the inquiry suggests, the rise and nature of leadership activities in contemporary authoritarian regimes reflects both the turn towards more competitive types of autocracy and the aspiration of many authoritarian powerholders to be seen as democratic. At the same time, some of the most spectacular manifestations of autocratic leadership relate to democratic rather than established authoritarian regimes. While followers of autocratic leaders can control their leaders only to the extent that a regime provides mechanisms of vertical accountability, authoritarian followers, even in established autocracies, are not in all regards less important or powerful than their democratic counterparts. Many authoritarian followers do not just support autocrats, but actively attack and chase non-followers or followers of other leaders, and thus play an independent role in the legitimation or de-legitimation of leaders and regimes.

Keywords

authoritarian; autocracy; autocrats; followers; followership; leaders; leadership

1. Leadership and Followership Across Political Regimes

Despite the inherent tensions between leadership and democracy (see e.g., Kane, 2007), leadership has been widely considered as a principal feature of democratic governance (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 639), rather than

autocratic rule. In fact, eminent authors in the field, such as Burns (1978), suggested reserving the very term leadership for particular manifestations of agency committed to improving the human condition, strictly distinguishing the latter from instances of mere power-wielding. This obviously marked the beginning, rather than the end, of the leadership debate in modern political science. Ever since the conceptual discovery of bad or toxic leadership (Helms, 2012a, 2014; Heppell, 2011; Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005), leadership is no longer understood as any kind of morally advanced activity, intrinsically devoted to increasing the overall amount of happiness, which is at the centre of Burns' famous concept of "transforming leadership" (Burns, 2004). There is good and bad leadership, as well as everything in between, and leadership analysis is largely about distinguishing between leaders' goals and means, and assessing the combination of both regarding its intended and unintended effects (see e.g., Mearsheimer, 2011; Nye, 2008).

Further, leadership, both good and bad, has been acknowledged to include, by definition, followership. As Keohane authoritatively contended: "there cannot be leaders without followers" (Keohane, 2010, p. 13). More than that, mainly as a result of large-scale technological and cultural change, followers have significantly gained influence and power across the board (see Kellerman, 2012). Issues of followership have long been ignored in the study of political leadership and deserve more attention for the sake of more substantive and complete assessments of leaders and leadership. This is the central premise that the various contributions to this thematic issue share with each other.

Last but not least, and of special importance concerning the purpose of this article, the realist turn in leadership studies implies that leaders and leadership can be found both across and beyond the family of democratic societies (see e.g., Huskey, 2016; Maseti & Gumede, 2011; Patapan, 2022). Subject to the more specific characterizations to be developed in this article autocratic political leadership is understood here as a form of leadership that combines an authoritarian style with actions that display a tangible disregard for the defining features of democratic government. Importantly, there is not always a perfect fit between the nature of leaders and leadership on the one hand, and the type of regime they are operating in on the other. While in authoritarian regimes autocratic leadership prevails by definition, with possible instances of democratic leadership typically being confined to areas and levels beyond the control of national leaders (such as within parties and associations representing the opposition), there is good reason to associate democracies with democratic forms of leadership. However, authoritarian leadership can emerge and flourish in democracies just as in autocracies (see also Shaw, 2022). It is an empirical question to what extent, and under what conditions, established democracies are sufficiently resilient to stand autocratic leaders and leadership without being transformed into an authoritarian regime (see Weyland, 2024). The US under the presidency of Donald Trump (2016–2020) provides a case in point for that second option; while Hungary, starting out as a liberal democracy just about half a generation ago, experienced the birth of an electoral autocracy over the course of Victor Orbán's second premiership (since 2010).

While there have always been autocratic or quasi-autocratic leaders in democratic systems, e.g., party leaders of extremist parties (see e.g., Zaslove, 2004), a hallmark of the present and more recent past is that genuine autocrats can now also be found among the national leaders of countries that once have been established democracies. Overall, the leadership and followership of autocrats operating in democratic contexts share more with those of other autocrats in authoritarian regimes than with their democratic counterparts in democratic systems. In fact, the regime type would seem to be of limited importance in its own right. It fits the bill that, during the presidency of Donald Trump (2016–2020), the president of the US

became not just a committed endorser of, but also a role model for leaders in authoritarian regimes around the globe (see e.g., Baptist & Clark, 2024; Garrity & McGraw, 2023; Walt, 2020)—a feature that has intensified rather than withered ever since. That said, Trump's case is not entirely unprecedented. If on a lower scale, and in a more gentle way, it was foreshadowed a quarter century earlier by four-time Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (see e.g., Newell, 2018).

Twenty-first-century autocrats operate in an era marked by advanced levels of personalization, polarization, and post-truth (see Naím, 2023, p. XV), in which at the same time democracy persists as a powerful ideology. These features apply to both autocrats in democratic contexts and their counterparts in authoritarian regimes, though the implications thereof are much more dramatic for the latter. Unlike Hitler, even many of the worst kinds of present-day dictators feel pressure to allow elections to take place, however unfree and unfair they may be. This requires a particular leadership effort in the electoral arena, in addition to a wealth of other leadership activities, and the mobilization of potential supporters. From this perspective, it is clear that contemporary autocrats are not all the same, even if their regimes may fare similarly in continuous typologies of authoritarianism (see Lindstaedt, 2023, pp. 106–107). Compared to autocratic leaders formally holding an electoral office, which usually involves a certain amount of leadership-like outreach activities, the rule by military officers in military regimes or monarchs in absolute monarchies rests on categorically different foundations (see e.g., Geddes et al., 2018; Lindstaedt, 2023). Other things being equal, in particular, military officers tend to be rulers rather than leaders, though there is no hard-and-fast rule for valid assessments across the board.

For all the ambiguities highlighted above, leadership and followership could still be argued to be more at home in democracies than in authoritarian regimes—if only because the very idea of followership implies an element of voluntariness and freedom of choice (whom to follow or not; see Metz, 2024, p. 439), which marks a defining feature of free and democratic societies. For good reason, coercion and legitimacy have long been considered fundamentally opposite modes of rule, separating tyrannies from democracies (see Barker, 1990). From that perspective, the systematic use of coercion would seem to make committed followers in non-competitive authoritarian regimes largely dispensable, and genuine followership—involving followers "creating change and changing leaders" (Kellerman, 2008)—impossible. Unsurprisingly, followers and issues of followership have been widely ignored even in the most sophisticated research on autocratic leadership and the informal power constraints that leaders face (see e.g., Fakhri et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024).

This article seeks to revisit the nature of autocratic leadership, with a particular focus on followers and followership, and on how these affect the legitimacy of leaders and their regimes. By legitimacy, we mean the capacity of a leader or regime to be seen as appropriate and proper in society. In real-world politics, legitimacy is fought over, with different actors seeking to legitimize or de-legitimize actors, actions, or structures (see Nullmeier et al., 2012; Tannenberg et al., 2021). The central goal of this inquiry is to better understand the nature of autocratic leadership in the advanced twenty-first century, the status of followers, and the difference they may make. Specifically, we shall argue that followers of autocratic leaders can be considerably more powerful than widely assumed. In order to put autocratic leadership and authoritarian followership in perspective, we shall revisit the concept of democratic political leadership in Section 3, which will then be used as a yardstick of comparison.

The next section sketches out the changing nature of authoritarian regimes, which is designed to prepare the ground for further developing the argument that leadership and followership have significantly gained

importance even in many authoritarian regimes. In the sections to follow, rather than offering any particular case study testing the argument, we shall draw on scattered evidence from different regimes in order to substantiate the theoretical assessment put forward empirically.

2. The Changing Nature of Authoritarian Regimes

Political thinking about democratic and autocratic regimes has changed a lot over the past generation of scholarship. In contemporary comparative politics, the study of democratic and autocratic regimes has long come to be dominated by notions of a continuum stretching from liberal democracy (via electoral democracy and electoral autocracy) through closed autocracy (see Lührmann et al., 2018). Also, there is a growing acknowledgment that countries may move back and forth along this continuum, and thus find themselves in different categories even within just a few years. As the prominent diagnosis of a "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) suggests, the overall global trend in the more recent past has been clearly towards the autocratic end of the continuum, if starting from very different locations. This general assessment is shared also by most authors that have voiced skepticism about the more particular argument of a third wave. The group of "autocratizers" includes both former liberal or electoral democracies turning into electoral autocracies as well as electoral autocracies turning into ever-sinister types of autocracy (see Nord et al., 2024). Quite a few current national leaders, such as Hungary's Victor Orbán or India's Narendra Modi, originally set out as unsuspicious, democratically elected leaders before eventually turning themselves into the political heads of regimes that are now generally categorized as electoral or competitive autocracies. These developments come as a distinct challenge to the established scholarly wisdom that executive leaders in autocracies "are selected by any means other than free and fair elections" (LaPorte, 2020, p. 695). Indeed, the initial winning of a democratic mandate marks a distinct feature characterizing many autocrats in the post-modern era of authoritarianism.

Given the global appeal of democracy as a distinct set of values and procedures, many contemporary autocrats operating in established authoritarian regimes have shown a notable interest in introducing certain elements of rule that may be superficially reminiscent of democracy, while the motives for doing so are usually about reducing insecurity and stabilizing their regime rather than liberalization or democratization. The "menu of autocratic innovation" in contemporary regimes beyond liberal democracy has largely centred on attempts "to cultivate the pretence of accountability without permitting the actual practice of it" (Morgenbesser, 2020, p. 1053). The most basic measures of this kind are holding elections and formally allowing opposition parties to join the race—both of which tend to carry considerable benefits to autocrats in terms of information and control, though also certain risks, such as unintended gains in public attention for opposition leaders (see Cunha et al., 2022; Knutsen et al., 2017).

A more particular feature characterizing recent developments in many autocratic or autocratizing regimes has been a personalist turn (see e.g., Anceschi et al., 2024; Escribà-Folch & Timoneda, 2024; Grundholm, 2020), i.e., an increasing importance of personalist rule and the transformation of different types of regimes into personalist autocracies. While Hungary, Turkey, and Russia under Orbán, Erdogan, and Putin, respectively, developed into personalist autocracies out of electoral democracies, China under Xi Jinping represents the most important example of an established one-party dictatorship gradually being transformed into a personalist dictatorship. However, importantly, categorizing a regime as personalist does neither imply that institutions are of little or no importance nor that leadership is exercised by only a single person. There

is no effective leadership or rule in the absence of reasonably strong institutions, even in personalist regimes (see Baturo et al., 2024, p. 326), and popular notions of all-mighty leaders going it alone are nearly as unrealistic for personalist autocracies as for any other regime (Brown, 2014). Indeed, even the most power-centralizing absolutist rulers of the past did not really rule on their own (Blondel, 1982, pp. 45–46).

There seems to be a distinct logic of regime stability and support characterizing contemporary personalist or personalized autocracies. For one thing, even obvious violations of rules may harm the leader in charge only marginally among supporters. A study on election fraud in Putin's Russia found that "while fraud revelations cause regime supporters to adjust their views on the regime, their opinions about Putin remain largely unaffected," which implies "that dictators can maintain popular support among their political base while manipulating elections" (Aarslew, 2024, p. 1978). At the same time, personalist autocracies have experienced considerably higher levels of repression (Keremoğlu et al., 2022). This is because autocratic regimes have to fight opposition and resistance in the most uncompromising way whenever they feel attacked at their core. Other things being equal, there is a greater chance in leader-centred autocratic regimes that anti-regime protests are to be repressed at any cost because they directly challenge the regime's central legitimacy base and public discontent cannot be externalized and credibly blamed on other actors or sources.

Many autocracies of the past relied strongly on coercion and force. Contemporary autocracies still use threats of repression, and carry out acts of repression, but as "even credible threats of repression are costly," they are employed sparingly and "reserved for moments when collective action is most likely" (Carter & Carter, 2022, p. 671). Apart from recurrent threats of repression, and actual incidents thereof, contemporary authoritarian regimes have developed complex legitimacy regimes and strategies of legitimation (see Mauk, 2024; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). While performance (e.g., stability or economic growth) is one potential source of legitimacy among others that largely speaks for itself, personalist rulers have to make a special effort to create reasonable support by cultivating followers and followership. Indeed, the structural reason behind the rise of new forms of authoritarian leadership is the rise and spread of electoral and especially personalist autocracies.

Before we look into the politics of contemporary autocratic leadership and followership, the next section briefly revisits the concept of democratic political leadership, which will be useful for contrasting selected key features of both forms of leadership.

3. The Concept of Democratic Political Leadership Revisited

There is little consensus on what constitutes democratic political leadership. While good democratic leadership has been argued to rest on authenticity, effectiveness, and responsibility (Helms, 2012b), this set of criteria does not lend itself easily to a comparison of democratic and autocratic leadership. After all, while autocratic leadership is rarely if ever responsible, it can be marked by authenticity and effectiveness, which undermines the discriminatory power of these criteria for a comparative assessment. By contrast, for the purpose of this article, a short but important article by Teles (2015) marks a useful starting point. The central point of reference for discussing democratic political leadership in that article is leadership in the private sector, rather than in authoritarian regimes, which provides an excellent opportunity for reassessing the nature of autocratic political leadership, taking advantage of Teles' criteria, in Section 4 below.

Teles' first feature concerns the existence of "conflicting sources of leadership," and "the need to combine authority leadership with legitimacy leadership" (Teles, 2015, p. 29). As the author contends: "the political leader is not solely dependent on formal authority given by election and appointment to a particular public role (authority by office holding), but also needs approval and acceptance, which will contribute to the leader's legitimacy" (Teles, 2015, p. 30).

The second hallmark of democratic political leadership singled out by the author is "non-ascribed followership" (Teles, 2015, p. 30): The "people" are nearly completely "unknown" to national political leaders, "and certainly most of them are not faithful and loyal followers" (Teles, 2015, p. 30).

Teles' third element is "follower dependency": In democratic contexts, "followers are shareholders….They hold all powers: they appoint the leader, follow him or her, assess his or her decisions, 'feel' the consequences of his or her actions and decide on his or her stay in office" (Teles, 2015, p. 30).

The fourth characteristic of democratic political leadership suggested relates to "complexity and diversity," or the need to operate in "multi-contextual settings" (Teles, 2015, pp. 30–31). In contrast to the typical demands of private sector leadership, political leadership requires leaders to tackle a wealth of dispersed, complex, and divergent issues, stretching across all kinds of fields of public policy, often simultaneously and in deeply conflicting settings. This challenge is responsible for what Teles identifies as a fifth defining feature of democratic political leadership: a notable amount of "ambiguity" in what leaders say and do. The settings provide a structural incentive to leaders "to adopt more indistinct and vague actions," as this "allows greater opportunities to adapt in the future and more chances to satisfy different individuals and to guarantee an excuse in case of failure" (Teles, 2015, p. 31).

The next two features identified are, again, closely related to each other: For one thing, democratic political leadership is about "conflict promotion": "Political leaders are—more often than not—promoters of conflict (…), *expected* to generate disagreement and divergence" (Teles, 2015, p. 31; emphasis in the original). This can be seen as both a reflection and a result of the "limited acceptance" of democratic political leaders: "The fact that the political leader is not accepted by all followers, right from the beginning of his or her 'consulate,' poses different problems from those of the private sector" (Teles, 2015, p. 31).

An eighth attribute of democratic political leadership that stands out in particular when compared to private sector leadership, but which also echoes the "authority/legitimacy" issue (i.e., Teles' first feature) is its "mandate-given" nature (Teles, 2015, p. 31). Political leaders operating in democratic contexts need the "consent from those they govern," which "requires the mobilisation of individuals and groups to build consensus and acceptance" (Teles, 2015, p. 31). Finally, Teles draws attention to the "political and administrative tension": the fact that "politicians operate within the constraints set by the tension between political and administrative spheres" (Teles, 2015, p. 31).

Some of the distinctions sketched out above are more intriguing than others in our context. The following three suggested features of democratic political leadership, highlighted as distinctively different from leadership in the private sector, would seem to denote features of political leadership more generally, including leadership in authoritarian settings: (a) the need to operate in multi-contextual settings, and (b) to be deliberately ambiguous at times to reserve a reasonable room for maneuver is nothing that fundamentally

separates autocratic leaders from democratic leaders. Also, (c) all political leaders depend on bureaucracies and administrations when seeking to give direction to government, though autocrats are likely to be even keener to control the bureaucracy, as "permitting autonomy may be seen as weakness and failure" and, thus, "authoritarian rulers will be willing to use more Draconian methods to enforce accountability than would be true in democratic regimes" (Peters, 2021, p. 3).

This leaves us with six features of democratic political leadership that are useful for gauging the nature of contemporary autocratic leadership (i.e., conflicting sources of leadership; non-ascribed followership; follower dependency; limited acceptance; conflict promotion; and the mandate-given nature of democratic leadership). Several of those issues specifically concern the status and role of followers and followership, while others frame them in particular ways. We shall use these different suggested features as signposts for our assessments offered in the next section.

4. A Comparative Perspective on Authoritarian Leadership, Followership, and Legitimacy

By highlighting conflicting sources of leadership as a crucial characteristic of democratic political leadership, Teles reminds us that democratic leaders cannot bank on authority flowing from holding a particular office alone. This is in line with the recent work of other scholars who have specifically looked into the conditions that allow office-holders to actually exert leadership, including the enforcement of contested and unpopular decisions. However, there is room for alternative conceptualizations. For example, rather than distinguishing authority from legitimacy, Bennister et al. (2015) focus on identifying different sources (skills, relations, and reputation) that feed the authority of an incumbent beyond mere office-holding, i.e., in terms of their capacity to act. This concept-driven exercise identifies an empirically variable combination of resources, which the authors refer to as an incumbent's "leadership capital," subject to change over time. While leadership capital usually includes elements of input legitimacy—such as in particular democratic support from electoral contests, be it intra-party or general elections, or a compelling leadership rhetoric designed to garner public support for a particular decision—leaders may compensate certain weaknesses in this area by displaying particular strengths in others (see Helms, 2016). Indeed, whenever—and however—political office-holders bring about major decisions that are being perceived as effective and viable solutions, this may create legitimacy, or more specifically "output legitimacy," a concept originally put forward in the context of EU governance (see Scharpf, 2009). Thus, in terms of Bennister et al. 's (2015) conceptualization of authority, legitimacy—rather than representing a separate "source of leadership"—can flow from a leader's authority, or more precisely from his or her personal political authority.

What is true for democratic leaders applies in even more apparent ways to autocratic leaders or, more specifically, leaders in authoritarian contexts. Office-holding as such tends to be of conspicuously limited importance in many authoritarian regimes. Many autocrats are not powerful because they hold any particular executive office; they rather hold office because they are powerful. In authoritarian regimes, "there is less clear congruence between formal offices and de facto sources of authority" (LaPorte, 2020, p. 696). For example, Vladimir Putin represented the apex of power in Russia even during his second stint as prime minister (2008–2012) when the institutionally much more powerful office of president was temporarily left to a handpicked loyal caretaker, Dimitri Medwedew, to avoid an open constitutional crisis about the breach of presidential term limits. Some authors have suggested that "if Putin chose to become minister of transport, the minister of transport would rule Russia" (Fish, 2017, p. 70).

Especially in personalist regimes, legitimacy may flow to a considerable extent from the charisma of a power- or office-holder. However, to make a difference, charisma must be perceived and acknowledged by others. Indeed, charismatic leadership belongs to the realm of relational rather than personality-centred approaches to leadership (see 't Hart & Uhr, 2008, p. 11; Subedi & Scott, 2021, p. 488). Also, the centrality of an individual incumbent for the legitimacy regime of a given autocracy obviously does not preclude the importance of additional sources of legitimacy, such as a strong economic performance. The more leadership is understood as a result, rather than a process (see Grint, 2010, pp. 8–11)—a position that even some democratic leaders, such as former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, have famously postulated as the ultimate yardstick for assessing government performance ("*Entscheidend ist, was hinten rauskommt*")—the more it can create legitimacy by securing certain standards of policy performance even in the absence of much input legitimacy.

A related question concerns the possible net effects of charisma in autocratic leaders: Can strong charisma create some legitimacy in the absence of open, fair, and transparent decision-making or welcome results? There is reason to believe it can. More than that, there can even be a quasi-schizophrenic distinction among followers between their hero leader and the regime, though the regime may still to some extent benefit from the leader's glory. This phenomenon is not new; it marked a striking feature of Adolf Hitler's infamous personality cult:

> The cult provided protection against disillusionment with the system. People blamed the party, not the leader. The more disenchanted they became, the more they characterized Hitler as a man kept in deliberate ignorance by his underlings.... "If only Hitler knew" became a popular expression. (Dikötter, 2019, p. 55)

Recent research suggests that contemporary personalist regimes tend to display weaker forms of a cult of their leader's personality than their historical predecessors. While historically, leaders in personalist regimes were often presented as superhumans operating in a sphere of their own, the introduction of direct national elections in many contemporary authoritarian regimes has provided a strong incentive for leaders to portray themselves as "men of the people" (Baturo et al., 2024, pp. 314–315). A personality cult that characterizes many contemporary autocratic leaders, if usually on a lower scale than in the past (with notable exceptions, such as North Korea, see Vu, 2022), is not to be confounded with mere popularity (see Sundahl, 2023). The more important thing to note is that autocratic leaders actually can be popular (see Guriev & Treisman, 2020). Comparative politics has only just begun to uncover the complex dynamics driving this phenomenon and its implications. However, even by what we know as yet, there can be no doubt that popularity matters. As Buckley et al. (2024, p. 1051) found: "perceptions of incumbent popularity might themselves inflate incumbents' approval levels."

Teles' emphasis on the mandate-given nature of democratic leadership and the mandate-based authority to lead is no doubt compelling. That said, it is not fully being lived up to even by all contemporary democratic regimes or leaders for that matter. There has been a longstanding debate about (if or) to what extent directly elected presidents in presidential regimes can claim a mandate to govern. For Dahl, presidential mandates in the US have been little more than a myth (Dahl, 1990), and the more recent trend has been towards further weakening credible claims of a presidential mandate (see e.g., Azari, 2014). However, especially in many parliamentary democracies that have experienced takeover prime ministers (Worthy, 2016)—i.e., candidates

following a departing prime minister from the same party between two elections, especially in systems with no parliamentary investiture vote for a new government—there is no clear-cut mandate for the new chief executive to govern the country. At least, there is no personal mandate that, in an era of advanced personalization of politics, tends to be considered increasingly important by many voters. Still, there are major differences between democratic and autocratic regimes regarding this issue as well.

While autocratic leadership in authoritarian regimes is clearly not of a mandate-given nature—at least if the focus is on a democratic mandate emerging from free and fair elections—contemporary autocrats are usually firmly committed to creating the impression that they do have a right to rule the country. This can include the winning of semi- or less competitive elections, but may also flow from other sources, such as primogeniture in absolute monarchies (as to be observed across much of the Middle East) or a constitutionally codified supremacy of the ruling party in one-party regimes (e.g., China, North Korea, or Vietnam). Of all different kinds of authoritarian regimes, personalist regimes have the greatest need for mobilizing the public to lend support to the leader, which is usually pursued by a particular follower-seeking leadership effort (see e.g., Brunkert & von Soest, 2023). China under Xi Jinping provides arguably the most impressive recent case in point of how the silent transformation of an established one-party regime into a more personalist regime was accompanied by a particular leadership effort (see Nesbitt-Larking & Chan, 2024; Shirk, 2018).

Very much unlike democratic leaders, autocratic leaders in authoritarian regimes are clearly not expected to generate disagreement and divergence. If at all, the exact opposite is true. Autocratic leaders operating in authoritarian contexts seek to create the illusion of unity, and actively oppress other opinions and views that threaten to challenge the regime's official narrative—which is exactly what their diehard supporters expect them to do. Interestingly, this may be valued even by more indifferent individuals and groups, not belonging either to the regime's outright supporters or opponents. To some extent, it seems, there is a deep-seated desire of societies, first identified and specified in the *History of Political Thought* by Thomas Hobbes, for security and stability, even if this may come at the expense of freedoms and diversity, which tends to be systematically exploited by modern autocrats (see Patapan, 2022, pp. 962–963).

In politics, both democratic and autocratic leaders have to deal with the issue of a non-ascribed followership. Followers must be won or sometimes groomed; the aim is to secure the greatest possible followership from a larger population of people. This separates political leadership even in fundamentally different regimes from leadership in the private sector, where leaders can be the owner of a given enterprise with staff members being expected to be loyal followers, and CEOs being able to dismiss those unwilling to follow. This notwithstanding, it is obviously possible to distinguish between caring and inspiring leaders, and autocratic leaders even in the private sector (on the latter, see e.g., Harms et al., 2018).

The sphere of politics is different. At the same time, there are important differences between democratic and authoritarian agents and structures. In democratic regimes, potential followers are essentially voters that competing leaders seek to convince to support them (and their parties) at the polls. In authoritarian regimes—with elections being much less central in terms of authority and legitimacy—followers are not necessarily, or not in the first place, voters. There can be followers even in closed autocracies with no regular elections taking place. Under the surface, many autocracies are marked by a latent struggle between different would-be leaders who all may have followers of their own, which may challenge the present powerholder, and therefore have to be co-opted into the existing regime to guarantee its persistence (see e.g., Gerschewski, 2023; Svolik, 2009).

That said, the related suggested feature of democratic political leadership—namely that leaders tend to enjoy limited acceptance, i.e., that they are not accepted by all followers—is even more true for leaders of authoritarian regimes. Specifically, non-followers are most unlikely to accept an autocratic leader who usually declares them official enemies of the regime who are actively being discriminated against and often chased or expelled. Moreover, even followers, to the extent they exist, may not truly accept the leader in the narrower sense of the term. As Kellerman highlighted, some followers follow mainly out of fear of the consequences of not following (Kellerman, 2008, pp. 56–61). Further, very much unlike the political process in democracies, politics in autocracies usually does not allow "antagonism to be expressed freely, with the opposition occupying important and relevant positions and characteristically having a constitutional right to a legitimate place in the 'governing bodies'" (Teles, 2015, p. 31).

Finally, then, there is the feature of follower-dependency that stands out as perhaps the single most important feature of democratic political leadership. Contrary to popular contentions, even democratic leaders are not dependent on their followers all the time, though. It is well possible, perhaps even desirable, to pursue responsible rather than purely responsive leadership (see e.g., Sartori, 1987, p. 170), and face the electorate's verdict in an act of retrospective voting only at the end of a term. Still, overall, democratic political leadership is indeed a conception in which the authority to lead depends on sufficient support of followers (though many of whom will be conditional and temporary backers). This is fundamentally different in authoritarian regimes in which leaders are not really empowered by followers and, as a consequence, much less vulnerable to possible followers withdrawing their support. More specifically, there is no established conception of autocratic leadership and rule that would assign followers the status of the principal in an imagined chain of delegation (on the chain-of-delegation in representative democracies, see Strøm, 2000).

This is not to say, however, that the followers of autocratic leaders are necessarily less important in any respect. In fact, under certain circumstances, the contrary would seem to be true. Some of the most impressive examples relate to autocratic leaders in democratic or mildly autocratic regimes, such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsenaro, or Narendra Modi. Their followers had a deeply emotional bond with the leader that was fueled by their leader's perceived unique charisma, supported by a sophisticated social media management effort that eventually turned voters into followers (see Cesarino, 2020). As Naím suggests, in many cases (especially relating to populist leaders in hybrid regimes), it seems justified to speak of fans, rather than supporters or followers, which carries distinct implications:

> Much like sports fans or music fans, political fans build their sense of identity largely through their identification with their favorite celebrities. Fans perceive attacks on the celebrities that organize their identity as attacks on them first and foremost. They defend the celebrities to defend themselves. (Naím, 2023, p. 58)

This type of unconditional, super-loyal followership, which typically closely corresponds to leaders' insistence on unconditional commitment and loyalty (see George, 2024; Goldsmith & Moen, 2024), may provide autocratic leaders, especially those operating in the context of genuine authoritarian regimes, with a particular legitimacy reserve. After all, to have committed followers is better than not, at least in terms of status and prestige, even though followers in many authoritarian regimes cannot really claim to truly empower their leaders. At the same time, the very same followers—in particular when leaders have managed

to turn from challengers into incumbents—tend to de-legitimize the regime that those leaders have installed by reinforcing its exclusionary nature. Specifically, neither autocratic leaders nor their followers (to the extent they exist) have any respect for non-followers or followers of other leaders. Even in democratic regimes, the size of the satisfaction gap between winners and losers at elections and beyond is inversely related to the democratic quality of a given regime (Nadeau et al., 2023). In the theory and practice of autocratic leadership, there is usually no room whatsoever for the principle of losers' consent (Anderson et al., 2005). Importantly, authoritarian followers may play a distinct and largely independent role in undermining the acceptance of a given regime among minorities. A particularly delicate example relates to the deadly mob attacks on cattle traders, beef-eaters, and dairy farmers by fringe Hindu groups in India a few years ago, which were perceived by many to have been inspired by the aggressive anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Modi government (see Siyech & Narain, 2018).

Some of the most intriguing patterns concerning the losers' consent theme have been observed in hybrid regimes, such as Bolsonaro's Brazil:

> The core takeaway from the losers' consent argument is that losers pose a greater risk to democracy than winners. Yet…authoritarian winners' support for the political system is at best contingent. If an authoritarian incumbent who retains popular support refuses to adhere to democratic norms in subsequent contests, this contingent support may dwindle, with authoritarian winners increasingly favoring antidemocratic machinations. (Cohen et al., 2023, p. 273)

And as opposition actors begin to consider themselves as permanent losers, autocratization dynamics may soon reach a point of no return.

Especially in established authoritarian regimes, autocratic leaders have good reason to reduce the need for consent by non-followers to an absolute minimum, which often involves mercilessly hunting down its most prominent and exposed opponents. After all, while this does not normally incur any costs in terms of electoral legitimacy or political leverage, there are obvious gains in terms of performance-related sources of legitimacy, such as in particular increased levels of public order, safety, and stability—or perceptions thereof—that are likely to bind followers even closer to their leader. Indeed, it has been shown that dictators do benefit from greater perceived public safety in terms of greater personal popularity (see Guriev & Treisman, 2020).

5. Conclusion

Leadership, understood as a particular form of agency and a social relationship that is neither good nor bad *per se*, comes in countless shapes and forms. That said, it is possible and useful to distinguish between contrasting core features of democratic and autocratic leadership. Different types of regimes provide different conditions for exerting political leadership but do not have any determining effects. While there is little if any room for democratic leadership in autocracies, with even political oppositions to autocrats not necessarily representing committed democrats (see Helms, 2021), several contemporary democracies have produced and witnessed particularly impressive and influential examples of autocratic leaders and authoritarian leadership. It is interesting to see how the shared exposure to global trends—such as the latent recognition of democracy and the rule of law as valuable currencies on the international stage—has left a mark on the actions of autocrats from different regimes. The mimicking strategies of genuine dictators

(Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2015) have found an equivalent in the activities of many autocrats in democratic systems that eagerly present themselves as the real saviors of democracy, as no one did more unashamedly than Donald Trump.

The politics of followers and followership in authoritarian contexts differs no less strongly from democratic standards than autocratic leaders and leadership themselves. Perhaps most importantly, many die-hard followers of autocratic leaders are every bit as uncompromising and authoritarian as their leaders. Further, while followers of autocratic leaders in established authoritarian regimes can rarely claim to empower and control their leaders, as autocracy is by definition not of a mandate-given nature, autocratic followers are not in all regards less important or powerful than their democratic counterparts. In many regimes beyond liberal democracy, a considerable part of the pressure put on non-followers and minorities comes from fanatic followers, which can make them one of the regime's most valuable resources.

Again, some of the most fascinating features relate to autocratic leaders and their followers from democratic contexts with established vertical accountability regimes. Just like their democratic contenders, those leaders are ultimately empowered by their followers who can decide contests for power at the polls; and these followers' desires and demands may well be the driving force behind a leader's big public gestures and his or her electoral success. This has been observed already for the complex relationship between Silvio Berlusconi and his supporters (see Chirumbolo & Leone, 2014), and may apply to an even greater extent to Donald Trump. As Smith contends: "Trump…is less an architect of Trumpism than its reflex. However effectively he performs in the public arena, he remains an emissary, personifying a social movement that preceded him and will survive him" (Smith, 2024, p. 813), which obviously does not preclude that toxic leadership can fuel further followers' expectations and demands. Crucially, authoritarian followers' expectations of their leader are typically not confined to absolute loyalty to them but extend to showing unrelenting hostility to their adversaries, which effectively turns followers into key agents of pernicious polarization (McCoy & Somer, 2019). As the global contest between democracy and autocracy rages on, with even some of the most consolidated democracies experiencing major incidents of democratic erosion and backsliding, that kind of followers definitely deserve much more attention from both scholars and practitioners than they have received in the past.

Acknowledgments

Parts of this article were written while the author was a visiting fellow in the Department of Government at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, in July 2024. The Department's hospitality and support are gratefully acknowledged; I am particularly indebted to Professor Siripan Nogsuan. Special thanks are due to the various anonymous reviewers of this journal, the two academic editors of this issue, Femke van Esch and Rudolf Metz, as well as Gregor Handrich, who all provided invaluable support in improving this article. The usual disclaimer applies.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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