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978-1-107-03580-5 - Power, Politics, and Paranoia: Why People are Suspicious of their Leaders

Edited by Jan-Willem Van Prooijen and Paul A. M. Van Lange

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1 Power, politics, and paranoia: an introduction

Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A. M. van Lange

Being a powerful leader is not an easy task in our modern age. Political leaders have the major responsibility of making decisions in the collective interest in the context of economic and financial crises, climate change, poverty, immigration, the threat of terrorism, and war. Corporate leaders must navigate their organization's interest through increasingly fluctuating markets, changing customer demands, and rapid technological developments. The decision-making that takes place in these situations typically has to be negotiated with multiple parties that have different interests, often leading to heated debates and difficult compromises. Many of the resulting decisions have complex moral and financial implications, can potentially have unpredictable consequences, and must be made under substantial time pressure. Moreover, the actions of societal leaders are under continuous public scrutiny. Political leaders are closely monitored by the media, while being praised and criticized by followers, opponents, opinion makers, and other citizens. Corporate leaders are accountable to stakeholders, policymakers, employees, and sometimes also the general public. Yet, the consequences of these powerful leaders' decisions are immense, as they directly impact the life of many citizens in terms of jobs, income, well-being, and health.

Citizens thus depend substantially on the quality of their leaders' decisions, which are made in a challenging and error-prone environment. This raises the question of how citizens cope with the power that leaders within our society have over their lives, and to what extent they are willing to accord them the trust and legitimacy that is needed for them to function effectively as decision-makers (Tyler, 1997). One striking notion is that citizens often respond with suspicion of the morality of the actions and motives of their leaders. One indication for such suspicion is the volatility, polarization, and extremism that can be observed throughout the European Union (EU) and the USA. Due to recent scandals in the media pertaining to societal leaders (e.g., bonuses for managers; bank crashes), there is a substantial public awareness of the possibility of a failing political and economic system. As a consequence, people

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frequently accuse leaders of secret, immoral – and sometimes even criminal – activities, as can be observed in the variety and widespread appeal of the conspiracy beliefs that many people endorse when trying to make sense of distressing societal events (e.g., Robins and Post, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Moreover, according to the global Edelman Trust Barometer 2013,¹ government officials are considered to be the least credible spokespeople throughout the world, and although there is substantial variation both within and between countries, trust in politicians tends, on average, to be low in absolute terms (see also Andeweg, this volume). Moreover, corporate leaders – such as CEOs – are also not considered to be very trustworthy according to this global survey. Still, such distrust clearly is not universal, as many leaders have a remarkable capacity of motivating, inspiring, and mobilizing large groups of people (Bass and Riggio, 2006).

Inspired by these observations, the present edited volume seeks to address the following general question: Why, and under what conditions, are people suspicious of their leaders? There is no simple or straightforward answer to this question. At the same time, we believe that suspicious beliefs about leaders can be better understood by appreciating the intense research efforts of many prominent scholars throughout the social and behavioral sciences. In various disciplines, academic researchers investigate hypotheses pertaining to relevant topics, such as the effects of power on perception and behavior, how the powerless perceive the powerful, unethical decision-making, trust and distrust, corruption, paranoia, and scapegoating. We therefore asked various prominent scholars within the social and behavioral sciences who have relevant research expertise – and are hence able to provide a unique and insightful perspective on this topic – to contribute a chapter representing their core ideas and findings. In integrating the thoughts and ideas of these scholars into the present book, our aim is to provide academics, students, and practitioners with a comprehensive and current overview of theorizing on power, politics, and paranoia, which may hopefully inspire further theoretical integration, empirical research, and societal application. In the following, we describe the purpose of this book in greater detail by illuminating the origins of suspiciousness towards leaders.

The origins of suspiciousness towards leaders

To answer the general question of why people often are suspicious of their leaders, it may be illustrative to first examine how distrust emerges

¹ <http://trust.edelman.com/>

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in a simple dyadic social structure. Suppose in any given social situation that a random actor A (e.g., a citizen) is suspicious of how well intended the actions and motives are of a random actor B (e.g., a leader). This suspiciousness can have at least two possible origins. The first possibility is that the origins of this suspiciousness can be found in the actions of actor B. Actor B may behave in a way that is considered deceptive, manipulative, selfish, or otherwise unreliable by most people. In other words, actor A may be correctly suspicious, as actor B behaves in a way that can and should not be trusted. The second possibility, however, is that the origins of this suspiciousness may be found in the way actor A perceives, feels, or processes information about actor B. Actor A may interpret the ambiguous behavior of B more negatively than B intended in so behaving, a phenomenon that is closely related to errors in attributional processes such as the hostile attribution bias and the related sinister attribution bias (Kramer, 1998). In other words, actor A may be paranoid and misinterpret the good intentions of actor B.

If we extrapolate this simple dyadic structure to the current discussion, the answer to the question of why people are suspicious of their leaders can be summarized as two broad possibilities: (1) leaders on average are less trustworthy than followers, and citizens are right to be suspicious; versus (2) citizens exaggerate their distrust of their leaders, and thus a lot of suspicious feelings are driven by paranoid cognitions among citizens. It is important to recognize that these two possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Powerful people may be less likely than powerless people to be trustworthy, but, at the same time, the power holders that *are* trustworthy may not always be correctly perceived as such by their followers. To fully understand people's suspiciousness towards their leaders, it is necessary to closely investigate both possibilities, while challenging common assumptions that laypeople and scientists sometimes have.

To examine these issues, the book is divided into three complementary parts. Part I – “power” – explores the possibility that power holders are less trustworthy than people who lack power. There are abundant examples of corrupt – even “evil” – power holders in history. At the same time, it must be recognized that such examples of corrupt power holders do not empirically prove that power corrupts, or that corrupt individuals are more likely to rise to power. As noted by Smith and Overbeck (this volume), the actions of power holders are more noticeable – and hence their negative actions are more salient – than if committed by someone who lacks power. In other words, drawing the conclusion that power corrupts based on everyday life examples of corrupt power holders alone is not hard evidence, and may be subject to biased perceptual processes (e.g., the illusory correlation). Moreover, there are also many power

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holders in everyday life who are moral authorities, suggesting that if there is a relation between power and unethical behavior, it certainly is not a straightforward and simple one. What is needed, therefore, is a fine-grained analysis of empirical research that statistically tests whether or not, and under what conditions, power holders are more likely to behave unethically than people who lack power. Four chapters examine these complex relations between power and ethical versus unethical decision-making.

Part II – “politics” – explores the dynamics of distrust and power specifically in the political realm. The decisions made by political leaders influence a large group of people, leading politicians to be a category of power holder that has the potential of being viewed with a lot of suspicion in societal discourse. Political leaders thus constitute a prototypical category of power holder that is frequently distrusted by followers, as underscored by the Trust Barometer findings. We included a section in the book that is specifically focused on examining the question of how trust in and distrust of political leaders originate and are perpetuated. In five chapters, scholars assess citizens’ suspicious perceptions of political leaders from various angles. Specifically, the chapters address issues such as what stereotypes people tend to hold about politicians, how distrust of politicians emerges among disadvantaged groups in society, why citizens sometimes are willing to grant enormous power to political leaders (e.g., authoritarian regimes), why people sometimes endorse leaders who display clear signs of corruption (i.e., the Italian case of Berlusconi), and whether or not the “confidence gap” (i.e., the extent to which citizens distrust politicians) has widened in recent decades.

Part III – “paranoia” – investigates the psychological processes that lead people to be overly suspicious of power holders. A large portion of the population of Western countries believes in various conspiracy theories, and these numbers are too large to be accounted for by clinical forms of paranoia (Robins and Post, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Indeed, it has been noted that paranoid cognition is a frequently occurring aspect of interpersonal perception in everyday life (Kramer, 1998). Moreover, although some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true (e.g., the Watergate scandal; the Iran-Contra affair), the majority of conspiracy theories have turned out to be false (Pipes, 1997). In fact, people’s paranoid beliefs about societal leaders tend to suffer from internal inconsistencies. Research indicates that beliefs in mutually exclusive conspiracy theories – such as the belief that Princess Diana was assassinated versus the belief that she staged her own death – are positively correlated (Wood, Douglas, and Sutton, 2012). This illustrates that it is impossible for all suspicious beliefs that people hold about their

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leaders to be true; hence, a substantial portion of these beliefs can only be misplaced paranoia. In six chapters, scholars examine the psychological underpinnings of paranoid cognition, conspiracy beliefs, political enemyship, and scapegoating. We now more elaborately introduce each part in turn.

Part I – power

One of the editors of this book (van Prooijen) actively investigates belief in conspiracy theories, and has commented on this topic various times in the Dutch media. As a result, he sometimes receives email correspondence from Dutch citizens who are strongly suspicious of power holders and endorse a range of conspiracy theories. The messages vary substantially in reasoning sophistication and politeness (as does the corresponding likelihood of being replied to), but the overarching question is typically the same: “Did you ever consider the possibility that we are right to be suspicious, and that most leaders actually cannot be trusted?” The question is usually posed rhetorically, as if scientists never thought of that possibility. Admittedly, both editors are highly skeptical of most of the rather grandiose conspiracy theories that can be found on the internet. But at the same time, the underlying question whether or not there is a link between power and unethical behavior is a fair one, and one that can be tested empirically.

Power is typically conceptualized and defined as control over other people’s outcomes (Fiske, 1993). Almost by definition, this implies that power holders have opportunities to exploit such outcome control for their own benefit. In other words, power creates the potential for power abuse, and corruption is common in all societies, including modern Western democracies (Graycar and Smith, 2011). Indeed, since the seminal publication of Kipnis (1972) on the question of whether or not power corrupts, decades of research have explored the influence of power on – for instance – perspective taking (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi *et al.*, 2006), stereotyping (Fiske, 1993), ethical decision-making (Blader and Chen, 2012), hypocrisy (Lammers, Stapel, and Galinsky, 2010), disinhibition (Hirsch, Galinsky, and Zong, 2011), and overconfidence (Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer *et al.*, 2012).

It is not hard to find examples of leaders who turned out not to be worthy of the public’s trust, in both the political and corporate world. Richard Nixon’s personal involvement in the Watergate affair underscores that even at the highest political office people are not immune to the temptation of unethical decision-making and corruption. The Enron CEOs, blinded by greed, committed extensive fraud by exaggerating the

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company's profits and embezzling millions of dollars, eventually leading to the Enron bankruptcy. Bernard Madoff, chairman of one of the leading market-maker businesses on Wall Street, robbed thousands of people of their life savings with his fraudulent Ponzi scheme before being exposed as a conman. These are misdeeds of a highly immoral nature, even after we recognize that they are only minor infractions compared to the actions of powerful leaders who committed large-scale atrocities (Hitler, Stalin).

But one cannot draw solid conclusions about the relation between power and unethical behavior based only on examples and anecdotes of immoral leaders. Many other leaders in history have been characterized by a high sense of morality and an admirable concern for the well-being and life circumstances of others. Mahatma Gandhi was the major leader of the Indian struggle for independence, which he managed to achieve through peaceful and violence-free resistance to the oppression of his people. Nelson Mandela spent much of his adult life in prison due to his opposition to the perverse system of apartheid, but he had the incredible capacity to forgive the very people who had incarcerated him once he was elected president of South Africa. Finally, the highly successful corporate leader Bill Gates has donated more money to charity in recent years than most EU countries did. Thus both moral and immoral societal leaders abound. What does the empirical evidence tell us about the relation between power and unethical behavior?

The contribution by Lammers and van Beest (Chapter 2) addresses the effects of power on selfish and corrupt behavior. The chapter reveals that, at least under certain conditions, power leads people to feel entitled to take more than their fair share from a pool of scarce resources, and to compromise less in negotiations. Moreover, the authors suggest that power can corrupt for various reasons, such as its disinhibiting effects. These insights are complemented by correlational findings among societal power holders (e.g., CEOs), revealing that power is associated with increased disinhibition, overrewarding of the self, and an increased likelihood of infidelity in close relationships.

These insights are further expanded upon in the contribution by Stamkou and Van Kleef (Chapter 3). They note that not only does power increase the prevalence of norm violations but also that actors who display certain forms of norm-violating behavior lead others to ascribe power to them – and this may fuel power affordances. Interestingly, such power affordances are fueled only by prosocial norm violations – that is, norm violations intended to benefit others – not by selfish norm violations. The authors discuss the implications of these findings in terms of how the relation between norm violations and power affordances may be influenced

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by culture, as well as how norm violations may reinforce a hierarchical social structure through power affordances.

Chapter 4 by Smith and Overbeck challenges the notion that power necessarily corrupts, and these authors highlight the positive effects of power. They describe that although power may corrupt sometimes, the evidence for these negative effects of power is much more mixed than is commonly assumed, and power frequently has positive effects such as increased individuation, communal relations, and prosocial behavior. Moreover, Smith and Overbeck provide evidence that – at least sometimes, and possibly much more frequently than is recognized by scientists and laypeople – people perceive power holders as *more* moral and *less* corrupt than others. They then discuss the implications of these findings for putting the right people into powerful positions.

Finally, Chapter 5 by Sassenberg, Ellemers, Scheepers, and Scholl notes that power can be construed in two ways: (1) as opportunity to reach one's own goals, and (2) as responsibility for others. They review evidence that power corrupts only if people construe it as opportunity, but not if they construe it as responsibility. However, Sassenberg and colleagues also reveal that the construal of power as opportunity is more attractive – and hence more likely to instigate strivings for power – than the construal of power as responsibility in Western cultures. These authors then discuss how culture and context determine how people construe power, and what the implications of these dynamics are for corruption.

Part II – politics

Part II on “politics” addresses suspicious perceptions in the context of a specific type of leader – namely, politicians. This is in all likelihood the category of leadership that is most visible and debated in our society. Not only are politicians closely monitored by popular media, but also the decisions made by politicians have an impact on the employment, financial status, health, and general well-being of many people. Moreover, sometimes politicians have to make decisions that they believe to be necessary for the long-term collective interest, but that are clearly painful and negative to the specific short-term interests of various groups of people. The benefits of such decisions are typically disputed by opposing parties. Politicians thus are frequently associated with unpopular and debated decisions, and, as a consequence, it is likely that politicians often are target of substantial distrust, paranoid reactions, and conspiracy beliefs.

Ironically, political leaders are presumably also the category of leaders who are most in need of trust by their followers. How long political

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leaders manage to stay in office depends strongly on the trust that they are accorded by citizens. Although all leaders benefit from the trust of their followers (Tyler, 1997), this does not match up to the case of politicians whose re-election depends in a directly linear fashion on how trustworthy they are perceived to be. This suggests an interesting paradox: Citizens on average have little trust in politicians, but the same citizens have the capacity to elect those same politicians to office in modern representative democracies. It is, of course, likely that those who did not vote for a certain elected political leader are highly suspicious of that leader. It has been noted that the political left is notoriously suspicious of the political right, and vice versa (Inglehart, 1987). But an additional possibility is that trust in specific politicians and political parties is fragile. These considerations suggest interesting dynamics pertaining to suspicious perceptions of political leaders, which deserve an in-depth analysis. The five chapters in the “politics” part of this volume provide such an analysis.

In the first chapter of the “politics” part, Fiske and Durante (Chapter 6) analyze the contents of the stereotypes that people endorse about politicians. In a variety of countries, people evaluated how the category of politicians maps on the stereotype dimensions of warmth and competence. The competence that people ascribe to politicians varies by country, but in all countries investigated, people placed politicians at the “cold” part of the warmth dimension – insincere, dishonest, “not-us.” These evaluations can be accounted for by the various negative emotions that politicians elicit, as well as by the interdependence structure that characterizes a politician–voter relationship. Fiske and Durante conclude by discussing how relational accountability may regulate trust among voters.

In Chapter 7, Bou Zeineddine and Pratto note that distrust among the disadvantaged is inherent to asymmetrical power structures due to a heightened sense of vulnerability and uncertainty whether one’s needs will be met. Applying this insight to the context of political distrust, these authors note that disadvantaged groups in modern societies increasingly experience a sense of empowerment to strive for better guarantees regarding the extent to which their basic needs are met. As such, an increased empowerment of the disadvantaged, in combination with a failure of authorities to address their needs, may increase political distrust. In concluding, they discuss the potential positive and negative effects that this distrust may have on emancipatory values, democracy, and social progress.

Chapter 8 by Haller and Hogg addresses the question of why citizens sometimes are willing to accord extreme levels of power to political

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leaders. They note that, particularly in times of crisis and uncertainty, people desire strong and directive leadership. Building on social identity theory, uncertainty-identity theory, and the social identity theory of leadership, they note that uncertainty increases identification with groups and the desire for a prototypical leader. Extreme uncertainty, however, may lead people to particularly identify with groups that are highly entitative, with simple prototypes and a rigid hierarchy. As a consequence, extremely uncertain societal circumstances may motivate people to endorse leaders that are extreme, ideologically rigid, and authoritarian. These insights contribute to the important question of how many authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century could rise to power.

Chapter 9 by Chirumbolo and Leone then addresses a counterintuitive but real phenomenon: Why do many people sometimes vote for political leaders that are quite explicitly associated with immoral conduct and corruption? They specifically focus on the Italian case of Berlusconi, who throughout the years has received substantial support from voters, and has been elected prime minister multiple times, despite official corruption charges, court trials, and other (e.g., sex) scandals. Chirumbolo and Leone then analyze the sociopolitical attitudes, values, and personality, of citizens who voted for Berlusconi, and develop a profile of people who continually support this controversial leader.

Finally, in Chapter 10 by Andeweg, the author notes that there seems to be a confidence gap in the EU – referring to the distrust that citizens display in political parties and politicians – but challenges the frequently held assumption that the confidence gap between citizens and politicians has *widened* in recent decades. This author analyzes longitudinal data about political trust in many EU countries to determine whether there is any evidence for a widening confidence gap. The data reveal that although trust in political parties and politicians tends to be low in absolute terms, there is no evidence for a widening confidence gap. Changes in trust over time seem to be fluctuations rather than trends, and vary substantially between and (particularly) within countries. Andeweg concludes that despite the tenacity of such a belief, the widening of the confidence gap may be as real as the Loch Ness Monster.

Part III – paranoia

The final part of the book – on “paranoia” – seeks to explain the fact that many citizens hold suspicious beliefs about leaders that arguably are far-fetched, or at least inconsistent with other suspicious beliefs that are endorsed by the same perceivers (Wood *et al.*, 2012). On many internet sites one can find conspiracy theories about (for instance) NASA

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faking the Moon landings, the Bush government orchestrating the attacks on 9/11, or climate change being a hoax imposed on citizens to attain some evil goal. Despite the superhuman level of power, organizational skill, and malevolent intent that these theories sometimes assume, a substantial proportion of the human population believes in, or at least takes seriously, many such theories (Robins and Post, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009; see also Swami and Furnham, this volume; van Prooijen and van Lange, this volume). The prevalence of such suspicious beliefs suggests that political paranoia serves some psychological function for perceivers. Indeed, various authors have noted that paranoid social cognition, as well as belief in conspiracy theories, serves the mental function of regulating uncertainty by making sense of distressing societal events (e.g., Hofstadter, 1966; Kramer, 1998; Whitson and Galinsky, 2008). In a related fashion, it has been noted that people attribute increased power to their enemies to regulate uncertainty; after all, one can understand, and anticipate, the actions of a recognizable immoral agent (Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild, 2010). These arguments illustrate that paranoid social cognition, conspiracy beliefs, perceived enmity, and scapegoating may be grounded in the normal underlying psychological processes of seeking control and trying to make sense of the world.

Although paranoid beliefs may be psychologically functional for perceivers, one may wonder how functional such beliefs are for others in the social environment and society at large. It is conceivable that being skeptical and vigilant about the actions of powerful people or groups is adaptive as it might make citizens less vulnerable to exploitation while increasing power holders' sense of accountability for their actions. Moreover, a certain amount of distrust may provide impetus to social change and the development of emancipatory values (Bou Zeineddine and Pratto, this volume). But *exaggerated* distrust and suspicion are likely to be a reason for concern, for various reasons. First, deteriorated relations between leaders and followers undermine the legitimacy that leaders need for good governance (Tyler, 1997). Indeed, empirical research reveals that conspiracy beliefs decrease people's intention to engage in politics (Jolley and Douglas, in press). Moreover, conspiracy beliefs can lead people to make bad choices that influence important life outcomes, such as their health (e.g., Swami and Furnham, this volume; Thornburn and Bogart, 2005). Finally, there is the serious danger of the interpersonal and intergroup conflict, hate crime, and violence that may emerge from these paranoid beliefs. Taking this latter issue to the extreme, historical records suggest that many of the major atrocities in the twentieth century were substantially fueled by paranoid beliefs about other groups. For instance, one of the core beliefs underlying the Holocaust was that