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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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Power, Politics, and Paranoia

Powerful societal leaders – such as politicians and chief executives – are frequently met with substantial distrust by the public. But why are people so suspicious of their leaders? One possibility is that “power corrupts” and therefore people are right in their reservations. Indeed, there are numerous examples of unethical leadership, even at the highest level, as the Watergate and Enron scandals clearly illustrate. Another possibility is that people are unjustifiably paranoid, as underscored by some of the rather far-fetched conspiracy theories that are endorsed by a surprisingly large number of citizens. Are societal power holders more likely than the average citizen to display unethical behavior? How do people generally think and feel about politicians? How do paranoia and conspiracy beliefs about societal power holders originate? In this book, prominent scholars address these intriguing questions and illuminate the many facets of the relations between power, politics, and paranoia.

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Preface

Leadership is an indispensable element of a smoothly operating society. We need political and corporate leaders to make important decisions that have a strong and lasting impact on our job prospects, our health, our safety, and our well-being. It therefore comes as no surprise that societal leaders are closely monitored by the media, and are continuously being evaluated by citizens. What is striking, though, is that many citizens seem uncomfortable with such societal power holders. This is reflected in the negative and suspicious remarks that can be frequently overheard in everyday discourse, assuming, for instance, that most politicians have a corrupt hidden agenda, or that most chief executive officers (CEOs) are heartlessly driven by financial self-interest without much regard for the collective interest or the well-being of their employees. Moreover, conspiracy theories abound about illegal secret activities of leaders, as, for instance, reflected in statistics revealing that large numbers of people believe that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in a political conspiracy involving elements of the US government, or that the 9/11 terrorist strikes were an “inside job.” All in all, many people have little confidence in the societal leaders that they depend on.

It is important to find out how such distrust and suspiciousness emerge, and whether it is rooted in actual immoral behavior by power holders, in overly paranoid perceptions among citizens, or both. Does having power influence how unethically a leader is inclined to behave? Is a person’s moral compass predictive of the likelihood that he or she will rise to power? If one can establish such a link between power and immorality, it may have substantial implications for how society should select and monitor its leaders. Are the negative perceptions of citizens towards leaders always justified? How often are citizens paranoid, perceiving immoral behaviors and evil conspiracies when in fact there are none? The less trust the public has in societal leaders, the more difficult it will be for those leaders to function effectively. This may hamper the collective interest, particularly in times of crisis. The importance of these issues is underscored by the enormous attention that researchers within the social

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sciences have devoted to understanding the dynamics associated with the influence of power on people's behaviors and cognitions, as well as the origins of distrustful and paranoid perceptions among citizens.

The "power, politics, and paranoia" project was largely inspired by the observation that many people tend to be rather suspicious of societal leaders. This observation energized numerous thoughts that are nicely captured by the idea of power, politics, and paranoia. For example, some would argue that "power corrupts," that "power and politics often go hand in hand," and that "paranoia" – defined as suspicious beliefs about the evil nature of others' intentions and behaviors – may be a result of such processes. There is also state-of-the-art research on each of these topics. For example, some scholars investigate the extent to which power is predictive of unethical or norm-violating behavior. Others look at how citizens' distrust, paranoia, and conspiracy beliefs emerge in situations where such negative perceptions may be unwarranted. We wanted to capture both sides of the coin as we were deeply interested in illuminating these important issues. Indeed, we felt that these issues are important from a scientific perspective, and that a fuller understanding of them would involve a number of fields and disciplines closely related to psychology and political science. And, as alluded to earlier, we felt that the issues of power, politics, and paranoia are at the heart of societal well-being. How can societies function well if people do not trust their leaders? How can organizations pursue their goals if the leaders are mistrusted?

The next step was to write a grant proposal in which we proposed not only research but also an international conference that would help us further understand the delicate and fragile trust relation between societal power holders and citizens. The conference was held in July 2012 in Amsterdam, and attracted a range of international speakers, who approached this topic from various angles. Some time before the conference, we decided to edit a book on these issues. We approached prominent scholars working in various countries (such as Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, New Zealand, the USA, and the UK) to contribute a chapter, and received many encouraging reactions. These reactions not only confirmed our enthusiasm as such but also strengthened our conviction of the scientific and societal relevance of power, politics, and paranoia across a number of disciplines. We feel greatly indebted to these scholars, whose efforts to summarize their thoughts and ideas about the relations between power, politics, and paranoia in a chapter made the idea for this book a reality.

Besides all the scholars who contributed a chapter, we feel we should express our gratitude to various other people who have been of invaluable assistance. First of all, we wish to thank Hetty Marx of Cambridge University Press, who expressed enthusiasm for the book idea from the

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very start, and with whom we had a very pleasant collaboration throughout the project. We also thank Sarah Green, Joanna Breeze, Jonathan Ratcliffe, Carrie Parkinson, and Rebecca Taylor of Cambridge University Press for their help during various phases of the project. Furthermore, we acknowledge the Dutch National Science Foundation (NWO), for the financial support to start our investigation of political paranoia, which eventually resulted in the conference and in this book (NWO Conflict and Security grant W.07.68.103.00). Finally, we thank Nils Jostmann and Joel Vuolevi for their contributions especially to the research that followed from this grant.

Power, politics, and paranoia are omnipresent. A book that seeks to understand and integrate these topics should be interesting to many people who enjoy being informed about the dynamics of political and corporate leadership. Beside the general interest, we think the book might be especially informative to students and scientists with an empirical or theoretical interest in the workings of power, politics, and paranoia in these domains. We also believe that practitioners might benefit from many of the chapters, as they deal with issues that are clearly relevant to how leaders should optimally behave and communicate in politics and organizations to develop strategies and attain important collective goals. Indeed, newspapers tell us all too often that political and organizational leadership is in need of considerable improvement and refinement. After all, small changes in leadership can bring about big effects. Whether your goal is empirical, theoretical, societal, or any combination, we hope that you as a reader will appreciate the many insights that this book has to offer, and that you will be as fascinated as we are about the intriguing relations between power, politics, and paranoia.