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The Many Meanings of Presidential Leadership

THE UBIQUITY OF PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Leadership is an important standard by which presidents and presidential candidates are judged. For example, one voter had this to say about trying to decide whom to vote for in the 2012 presidential election: "What I look for in a candidate . . . Mostly, I want someone that I trust as a leader" (Appelbaum, March 17, 2012). Richard Wirthlin, who has conducted polls and provided advise for Republican presidential candidates, once asserted that "the single most important value of the American public is respect for strong presidential leadership" (Moore 1995, p. 205).

Candidates for the office recognize the importance of leadership to voters in selecting a president. The competing candidates routinely try to convince voters that they will do a better job of providing leadership than their opponent. A major theme of the challengers is that the incumbent does not provide strong leadership, that the incumbent is weak, and that they, the challengers, will do a better job of leading. For instance, during the 2012 presidential election campaign, Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee, continually criticized President Obama for his "appalling lack of leadership" (Memmott, April 4, 2012). On October 22, 2012, during the nationally televised presidential debate in Boca Raton, Florida, Romney stated that "what we need to do with respect to the Middle East is strong, steady leadership, not wrong and reckless leadership that is all over the map."[1] Although it may be uncomfortable for candidates to tout their leadership qualities, as opposed to attacking their opponents, their allies are often not so reticent in extolling those traits. Romney's vice presidential running mate, Paul Ryan, at the vice presidential

1 The text of the debate can be found at the American Presidency Project site, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102344, accessed January 4, 2014.

debate with Joseph Biden, illustrated Romney's ability to work with others and overcome the high level of partisanship in current politics by pointing to Romney's stint as governor. "Mitt Romney was governor of Massachusetts, where 87 percent of the legislators he served, which were Democrats. He didn't demonize them. He didn't demagogue them. He met with those party leaders every week. He reached across the aisle." And later, "Mitt Romney is uniquely qualified to fix these problems. His lifetime of experience, his proven track record of bipartisanship."[2]

In contrast, incumbents seeking reelection will tout their leadership bona fides. At the presidential debate in Boca Raton, President Obama offered several examples of his leadership, usually emphasizing policy accomplishment: "Under my leadership, what we've done is reformed education, working with Governors, 46 States. We've seen progress and gains in schools that were having a terrible time, and they're starting to finally make progress." In that same debate, the president defended his administration's actions in Libya, saying that, "Now, keep in mind that I and Americans took leadership in organizing an international coalition that made sure that we were able to – without putting troops on the ground, at the cost of less than what we spent in 2 weeks in Iraq." Presidential allies and supporters also praise the president's leadership. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, for example, defended President Obama, claiming he demonstrated "smart leadership" on the Libyan crisis during fall 2011.[3] And these presidential allies will criticize opponents of the president, as Biden did at the vice presidential debate. Referring to Mitt Romney's actions with regard to the attack on the U.S. embassy in Libya, Biden criticized Romney, saying, "even before we knew what happened to the ambassador, the governor was holding a press conference – was holding a press conference. That's not presidential leadership."

John G. Geer's data on presidential election campaigns provide us with systematic evidence on the frequency that the competing candidates for the office talk about leadership. Of 732 criticisms by candidates of their opponents' traits in presidential contests from 1960–96, 45 percent (332) mention leadership, while candidates proclaimed their positive leadership traits in 17 percent of 1,345 mentions of their traits in television ads.[4] Leadership is a

2 American Presidency Project, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102322, accessed January 4, 2014.

3 An NBC interview with Clinton, when she makes this claim, is posted on YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwFmWAdTVBQ, October 24, 2011.

4 These data come from John G. Geer's data set on 757 TV ads in presidential campaigns. I thank him for making these data available. To calculate these figures, I coded positive leadership traits as "leadership" (code 29), "strong/forceful" (coded 35), and "strong/good leader" (code 36). Negative leadership traits are "old/bad/weak leadership" (code 129), "weak leader" (code 135), and "weak, not tough" (code 136). Overall, there are 99 positive trait codes and 99 negative ones. Each ad was coded for up to 20 trait mentions. See Geer (2006) for a full discussion of themes in presidential campaigns.

common theme in presidential election campaigns and is perhaps the dominant charge by candidates for the office against their opponents. Presumably, candidates for the office would not raise the leadership theme if it did not resonate with voters.

Like the candidates for office, journalists too commonly evaluate the quality of a president's leadership, both during election campaigns and while a president is serving in office. Journalists and pundits often cite lack of leadership as a primary reason that a president failed. Consider these examples, in which usually friendly journalists criticized Barack Obama for his lack of leadership. In summer 2010, controversy erupted over building a Moslem mosque in lower Manhattan, New York, just blocks away from Ground Zero, the site of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack. President Obama appeared to waffle on the mosque controversy, backtracking from a statement made on August 13, 2010, in which he supported building the mosque at that location as an expression of freedom of religion. The president's position was criticized in some circles, leading Obama to "clarify" his statements by saying that he was not commenting on the wisdom of the proposed location for the mosque. His clarification led the often-supportive *Washington Post* to title an editorial, "President Obama Needs to Show Strong Leadership on the Mosque Debate."[5] Apparently to the *Post* editorial writers, presidential clarification in this instance equaled backtracking and caving into critics. Strong leaders, the editorial implied, should stand their ground in the face of public criticism, especially when constitutional rights are at issue.

In a second incident, President Obama again was criticized from another usually friendly source for failing to demonstrate strong leadership – this time the issue concerned the federal budget deficit. *The New York Times* chided the president on November 20, 2010, in an editorial concerning the release of the Bowles Commission's report on the federal budget deficit. Notably in this case, the Bowles Commission had been set up by the president, and there were expectations that the president would follow its recommendations. Shortly after the report was made public, members of Congress from both parties panned aspects of the deficit reduction plan that the Commission recommended. The *Times* editorial writers were troubled in particular by President Obama's "disturbing silence on his commission's efforts," arguing that, "There is no way to reduce the deficit without strong leadership from President Obama."[6]

Finally, as a third example, Maureen Dowd, *New York Times* columnist, chided President Obama for not demonstrating enough leadership on the gun control issue in the aftermath of the Newtown shootings. The Newtown shootings, where 20 elementary school children and six school staffers were

5 http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/16/AR2010081604600.html accessed July 4, 2011.

6 http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/opinion/21sun1.html?scp=1&sq=important%20president%20strong%20leadership&st=cse, accessed July 4, 2011.

killed, occurred on December 14, 2012. In response to that tragedy, President Obama made gun control a signature issue in his State of the Union Address on February 13, 2013, and assigned Vice President Biden the task of lobbying Congress in the president's name for gun control legislation. But the administration's efforts failed on votes taken on April 17, 2013, because the Senate could not garner enough support to stop an eventual filibuster on gun control. Then columnist Dowd weighed in, blaming the president's lack of leadership for the failed Senate vote, even though strong public majorities supported increased gun regulations: "Unfortunately, he [President Obama] still has not learned how to govern . . . It's because he doesn't know how to work the system . . . Couldn't he [President Obama] have come to the Hill himself to lobby with the families [from Newtown] . . . Obama should have called Senator Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota over to the Oval Office and put on the squeeze . . . Obama hates selling"(Dowd, April 20, 2013).

To give a more systematic sense of the importance of presidential leadership in the news, I conducted a search of the ProQuest National Newspaper Premier database and found "leadership w/5 Obama" mentioned 2,992 times from 2009 through 2013, about 1.5 times per day.[7] Presidential leadership is a major topic of news about the presidency. Academics, too, have invested considerable energy to the topic of presidential leadership. A search in JSTOR for the terms "presiden*"and "leadership" in the article's title or abstract for six journals from 1970–2010 recovered 131 article hits.[8]

Presidential leadership is thus a common topic for voters, candidates for the office, sitting presidents, journalists, and academics. Yet it is not clear what voters, candidates, journalists, and even academics mean when they use the term "presidential leadership." This is a book about *perceptions of presidential leadership*. I focus specifically on voters' perceptions of whether presidents in office offer good and/or effective leadership. This is a narrower take on presidential leadership than is often found in the literature. But this comparative narrowness has its virtues. It allows me to be more specific and precise about this one aspect of presidential leadership – voter perceptions – and, thus, to study these voter perceptions empirically. In this study, I ask three questions that are amenable to empirical scrutiny:

What do voters mean when they say a president is a good and/or effective leader?
What affects voters' assessment of the quality of presidential leadership?
What are the consequences for the president and the political system when voters think a president is a good leader or not a good leader?

7 The ProQuest National Newspaper Premier database consists of the largest 42 daily newspapers in the United States. One limitation of this search is that it cannot determine whether "leadership" refers to the president or not without reading the text of each article.

8 The *American Political Science Review*, the *Midwest/American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, the *Western Political Quarterly/Political Research Quarterly*, *Polity*, and *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.

Furthermore, even though I have narrowed my empirical concerns to voters' perceptions of presidential leadership, these perceptions are quite important to both the presidency and American politics more generally.

Despite the volume of research on presidential leadership, we lack solid answers to the preceding questions. First there is considerable debate, confusion, and ambiguity over the definition of presidential leadership. This chapter reviews the literature on presidential leadership and tries to clarify the issues involved in conceptually defining presidential leadership. The intention here is not to settle on one definition of presidential leadership. Doing so is impossible because presidential leadership is a complex concept with several dimensions and levels (Goertz 2006). Yet by conceptually clarifying presidential leadership, it is easier to make sense of existing research on presidential leadership and provide a roadmap for future studies.

The conceptual clarification exercise enables us to address the first question: What is the basis of voter perceptions that a president is a good or bad leader? Briefly, voters perceive that a president is a good leader when that president is both strong and representative. With this definition in hand, we can then begin to address the second question: Where do these perceptions of presidential leadership come from; that is, what leads voters to view a president as strong and/or representative? News reporting on the president is the most important source of information for voters' perceptions of a president's leadership qualities.[9] As a research strategy, content analyzing news coverage on the president is overwhelming, due to the massive volume of such news. Thus, I take a different tack, looking at one type of presidential behavior that should be important to voter perceptions of presidential leadership and that the news media cover in enough quantity to inform those voter perceptions – presidential interactions with Congress.

Then I turn to the "so what" question: Does it matter for presidents and American politics whether voters think the president is a good leader or not? I show that voters' assessments or perceptions of presidential leadership affect presidential approval, presidential election outcomes, approval of Congress as an institution and its members, and, finally, trust in the political system. Public assessments of a president's leadership have rippling effects throughout the political system. Whether voters think the president is a good leader or not is consequential for American politics and policy making.

WHAT IS PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP?

What is presidential leadership? No consensus currently exists on how best to define the term. With regard to presidency research in particular, Waterman and Rockman (2008), in a chapter titled, "What is presidential leadership?"

9 Not everyone attends to news about the president. These nonattentive individuals may learn about the president's leadership qualities through conversations with family members, friends, and co-workers, who may pay more attention to the news. On this indirect path of news coverage see Cohen (2010a, ch. 8).

say: "Before we can analyze the determinants of presidential leadership, it is . . . important to answer a basic question: what do we mean by the term presidential leadership?" (p. 1). But, they conclude, "a precise definition of the characteristics of presidential leadership has yet to emerge" (p. 8). In part, they arrive at this conclusion because presidential leadership is a complex concept, with several dimensions and levels.

Even the vast literature on leadership in general cannot agree on how to define *leadership*. For instance, Bass and Bass's (2008) comprehensive *Handbook of Leadership* lists 13 definitions of leadership used in the literature. Two of these are familiar to presidency scholars and political scientists: leadership as the exercise of influence and leadership as a form of persuasion, the latter most notably associated with Richard Neustadt (1960, 1991).[10] Leadership scholar Keith Grint, in reviewing the field, organizes leadership into four categories – position based, person based, results based, and process based (2010). According to Grint, there is no consensus on what leadership is, but he finds there is one crucial characteristic common to all leaders – one cannot be a leader without followers (p. 2).

THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL, MULTILEVEL NATURE OF PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

Without an agreed-upon, or even clear, definition of presidential leadership, it is useful to spend some time developing and specifying a conceptual definition for presidential leadership. *Concepts* identify the essential elements and characteristics of phenomena (Goertz 2006, p. 5) and thus provide direction for specifying hypotheses, developing operational measures, and deciding where and how to study the concept. For instance, we study presidential leadership because we assume that it is intrinsically important, but we need to be able to specify when and why it is important, not merely assert or assume its importance. To specify when, why, and under what conditions presidential leadership is important, however, we must have some sense of what it is. This is no easy task because of the multidimensional, multilevel nature of presidential leadership. Scholars of presidential leadership may use the term "leadership" in different ways, with different meanings, and studies of presidential leadership are not always as conceptually clear as they might be. This may lead to studies talking past each other and, perhaps more

10 Ahlquist and Levi (2011) offer an extensive review of the political science, economics, and management literatures on leadership. Other than Canes-Wrone (2006) and Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004), Ahlquist and Levi do not cite the voluminous literature on presidential leadership or even discuss presidential leadership as a topic. Their interest in leadership is more abstract and theoretical, dealing especially with problems of the relationship between leaders and followers, game theory explorations of that relationship, and whether leader emergence may be endogenous, for instance, when group members select their leader.

importantly, not recognizing the differences in what a particular study means by presidential leadership.

These issues in the concept of presidential leadership are not unusual for broad concepts in the social sciences. Gary Goertz (2006) provides a framework for dealing with broad concepts in the social sciences, such as democracy and leadership. There are three levels in Goertz's framework. The top, or basic level, provides the most general definition of a concept, identifying what it is and what it is not. In Goertz's formulation, there are three aspects of the basic level: a positive pole, a negative pole, and substantive content between the two poles (pp. 30–31). The positive pole tells us what the concept is, while the negative pole tells us what the concept is not. According to Goertz, the negative pole is the "negation of the positive: it has no theoretical existence" (p. 32). Once having identified the two poles, one can then specify the "gray zone" between and determine if that zone is continuous or dichotomous. For instance, with regard to leadership, it may be worthwhile to identify the positive pole with the "leader" and the negative pole with "follower." The multidimensional character of a concept appears at the second level, while the third level specifies indicators and operational measures. There may be several operational indicators for each secondary level dimension (Goertz, p. 7).

In conceptually defining *presidential leadership*, I draw on Bass and Bass's (2008) definition of leadership. As noted, in reviewing the literature on leadership, Bass and Bass identify a multitude of definitions used by leadership scholars. They partially bemoan this plethora of definitions, stating that, "Until an 'academy of leadership' establishes an accepted standard definition, we must continue to live with both broad and narrow definitions, making sure we understand which kind is used in any particular analysis" (p. 25). The "broad and narrow definitions" of leadership that Bass and Bass cite reflect Goertz's different conceptual levels. Some of the confusion and definitional contention among leadership scholars, including those who study presidential leadership, may be sorted out by applying Goertz's conceptual levels model. My aim is not to adjudicate or select the best definition of presidential leadership, but to demonstrate the multilevel and multidimensional nature of leadership – and presidential leadership – as concepts.

Despite calling the effort to define leadership "fruitless" (p. 23), Bass and Bass offer a useful, basic level definition of leadership, which like so many broad concepts is actually quite complex and multifaceted:

> "Leadership is an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and of the perceptions and expectations of the members. Leaders are agents of change, whose acts affect the people more than other people's acts affect them. Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group. Leadership can be conceived as directing the attention of other members to goals and the paths to achieve them. . . . [A]ny member of the group can exhibit some degree of leadership, and the members will vary in this regard." (p. 25)

With minor modifications, the preceding also provides us with a basic, top-level, definition of presidential leadership. We can replace "leadership" with "presidential leadership" and "leader" with "president." In place of the generic term "group," we can identify particular groups of importance to the president – for example, Congress, voters, leaders of other nations, cabinet secretaries, and bureaucrats, among others. It is also useful to point out from this definition that leadership is about the relationship between leaders and followers (e.g., group members) and that leadership has both behavioral and perceptual dimensions.

This definition suggests there are at least two dimensions of presidential leadership, the behavioral and perceptual. Let's define *behavioral presidential leadership* as the actions that presidents take to alter or change the behavior and/or opinions of others (e.g., members of Congress, voters, etc.) in the direction desired by the president. There are two elements to behavioral presidential leadership thus defined: (1) a president's actions and (2) the outcome of those actions, which is sometimes termed "presidential power" (e.g., Neustadt 1960, 1991) or "presidential influence" (e.g., Edwards 1997).

For instance, one presidential activity that has received considerable research attention is "going public" (Kernell 2007), or public rhetoric such as speeches, that presidents use to try to alter public opinion.[11] Behavioral presidential leadership of Congress has also received a lot of research attention, with attention to such presidential activities as going public, bargaining, doing favors, etc.[12] *Effective behavioral presidential leadership* exists when a president alters the behaviors and/or opinions of others. In a series of studies having major impact on how scholars understand the presidency, George Edwards argues that effective behavioral leadership is problematic for presidents (Edwards 1989, 2003, 2009a, 2012); that is, presidents are rarely able to alter the behavior or opinion of others. Presidential rhetoric often falls "on deaf ears" (2003) or has effects in Congress only "at the margins" (1989; also Bond and Fleisher 1990).[13]

11 For a review of the impact of going public on public opinion see Cohen (2010a, pp. 14–17).

12 For an extensive review of this literature see Edwards (2009a, chs. 4 & 5) and Cohen (2010a, pp. 14–17) on whether presidential going public affects success in Congress.

13 Not everyone agrees with Edwards about the limits of effective behavioral presidential leadership. Just taking the literature on the effects of going public on the issue preferences of voters, while Page and Shapiro (1984); Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987); and Wood (2009) generally concur with Edwards' position, several other studies detect presidential going public effects (Cohen and Hamman 2003, 2005; Conover and Sigelman 1982; Druckman and Holmes 2004; Rosen 1973; Sigelman 1980; Sigelman and Conover 1981; Thomas and Sigelman 1984; Wood 2007). A third set of studies takes a more nuanced approach, asking under what conditions going public will move public opinion, for instance, when popularity is high, during the presidential honeymoon, or with major speeches (Cavari 2013; Mondak 1993; Mondak et al. 2004; Rottinghaus 2010; Tedin, Rottinghaus, and Rodgers 2011).

In evaluating behavioral presidential leadership, especially of Congress, we should not confuse presidential influence with success. *Presidential success*, for instance, on congressional roll calls, occurs when the president's side wins on the roll call vote. Influence occurs when a presidential action leads to a change in the (expected) roll call vote of a member of Congress. As Bond and Fleisher (1990, p. 20) state with regard to presidential influence and success in Congress: "Although presidential influence may increase success, the presidents' policy preferences may prevail for reasons that have nothing to do with influence." (Also see Beckmann 2010). For instance, presidents may be successful when their party commands majorities in Congress because presidential co-partisans hold the same policy preferences as the president. Under such conditions, presidents do not have to *act* to *win* (be on the winning side) on a roll call.[14]

Perceptual presidential leadership, the second dimension, can be defined as when the members of a group perceive the president to be a good (effective) leader or not, in other words, that the president possesses the qualities associated with good/effective leadership. Compared to behavioral presidential leadership, there is much less research on perceptions of presidential leadership. The most relevant research to date on perceptions of presidential leadership is that on public expectations of the president (Cronin 1980; Cronin and Genovese 1998; Edwards 1983; Jenkins-Smith, Silva, and Waterman 2005; Kinder et al., 1980; Simon 2009; Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva 1999; Wayne 1982). As I review and develop more fully later, these idealized expectations for presidents are one element in understanding public perceptions of the leadership of presidents in office. They provide a backdrop against which voters assess actual presidential performance.

There are several important properties or attributes of this definition of perceptions of presidential leadership. First, the voters' perception of presidential leadership is not the same as approving of the president's job in office, although the two are related. This point will become clearer after detailing voters' perceptions of presidential leadership – that is, what they mean when they say a president is a good and/or effective leader. Second, group members other than voters, for instance, legislators, leaders of foreign nations, journalists, etc., also have perceptions of a president's leadership.[15] In this study,

14 In fact, a president can rack up a win by jumping on the bandwagon of a bill that appears destined for passage.

15 Elite perceptions of presidential leadership is closely related to Neustadt's (1960, 1991) concept of presidential reputation. To Neustadt, a president's reputation is based on views of other political elites, those with whom the president must bargain in order to achieve his ends (1991, p. 50). Neustadt differentiates reputation from prestige. *Prestige* refers to public perceptions of the president, now commonly measured as popularity or job approval, although Neustadt had a broader conception of prestige. Gleiber, Shull, and Waligoria (1998); Grossman and Kumar (1981, pp. 244–3); and Lockerbie and Borelli (1989) are, to my knowledge, the only empirical studies that attempt to measure of presidential reputation in a systematic fashion.

however, I only look at public or voter perceptions of presidential leadership. The next section builds a theory of public perceptions of presidential leadership.

A THEORY OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

A theory of public perceptions of presidential leadership must address at least three questions.

What do voters mean when they say a president is a good leader?
Where do voters' perceptions of presidential leadership come from?
What are the implications of voters' perceptions of presidential leadership for the president and the larger political system?

What Voters Mean by Presidential Leadership

First, voters do not have well-thought-out ideas about such complex concepts as leadership and presidential leadership. Thus, when we ask what voters mean when they say a president is a good leader, we are talking about voters' perceptions. Second, there is very little research that bears directly on the question of what voters mean when they use the term *presidential leadership*. Two literatures on public expectations of the president and on presidential approval provide some limited help in addressing this question. The public expectations studies are based on surveys that ask voters whether presidents should possess certain traits (Edwards 1983; Kinder et al. 1980; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2005; Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva 1999; and Wayne 1982), resulting in an idealized or prototypical image. Often, the lists of traits tend to be quite long and unfocused, in part because journalists designed these surveys.

Still there are several academically based surveys that aim to make sense of the mass of characteristics that voters' desire in a president. In an early such survey, Kinder and colleagues organize public expectations of the president into two sets: personality and performance. The personality sets contains such items as trustworthy, honest, and open-minded, while the performance set lists such items as strong leadership, solving economic problems, and not getting us into unnecessary wars. Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva (1999) employ a fourfold classification of expectations, or what they call leadership criteria–sound judgment, foreign affairs, ethical standard, and work with Congress. In all these conceptualizations, some aspects of personality and policy are cited as important expectation criteria. Further, and most pertinent to this study, Kinder et al. (1980) and Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva (1999) find that some expectations for an ideal president affect approval ratings and vote choice.