

Democratic Leadership as a Political Weapon: Competition Between Fictions and Practices

Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to analyze possible interpretations of democratic leadership by revealing the implicit leadership theory (ILT) of a moral, a material, and a political ideal of democracy, namely deliberative-participatory democracy, aggregative-pluralist democracy, and leader democracy. As special “filters,” ILT helps us to organize and compare conflicting premises and assumptions democratic theories hold about exemplary leadership and followership.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to reconstruct the possible meanings of ideal leadership (challenges and political knowledge) and the ideal followership (power relations, interactions, and roles) portrayed by theories, the article sets a specific template for conceptual analysis.

Findings – The author argues that there is a contest over the meaning of democratic leadership. Political leaders use leadership fictions as political weapons to mobilize possible followers, legitimize their actions, and discredit opponents. The article creates a heuristic typology providing a “plural” or non-essentialist reading of actual political situations and democratic practices.

Originality/value – The literature usually aims to find an absolute moral understanding of leadership fitted in democracy or to reconcile the idea of leadership with democracy. Extending J. Thomas Wren’s approach, this article examines competing fictions of democratic leadership by blending leadership and democracy theories.

Keywords democratic leadership, political leaders, followership, leader-follower retaliations, implicit leadership theory

Paper type Conceptual paper

“[I]t is easier to believe in leadership than to prove it”

(Meindl, 1990, p. 161)

Introduction: Fiction of Democratic Leadership

The turbulent times we live in have intensified politicians’ competition to define the fiction of “true” leadership, reflecting principles of ideal democratic politics. This contest over basic principles, values, and purposes lies at the heart of public and political leadership, which entails the risk of destabilizing trust in leaders and leadership legitimacy from time to time (Hartley, 2018). Leaders generate and channel this conflict into democratic politics while trying to justify their actions and the need for collective efforts overbidding each other. As the post-Brexit-referendum period demonstrated, political leaders made great efforts to represent exemplary leadership as “*kinder politics*” (Jeremy Corbyn), “*strong and stable leadership*” (Theresa May), or “*people’s government*” (Boris Johnson). This trust and legitimacy problem has also arisen concerning divisive, controversial, and populist politicians, like Donald Trump, as many questioned their leadership (“*Not my president*”) while others supported it. The refugee/migration crisis elicited different understandings of democratic leadership usually labelled by commentators as liberal (e.g., Angela Merkel) or illiberal (e.g., Viktor Orbán). Furthermore, this problem of democratic leadership is also well known at the local level (Torfing *et al.*, 2019). In short: the recognition of “good” leadership is not self-evident.

The provided fictions are also fragile as we have become more cynical and critical in democracy (Foa and Mounk, 2016). Moreover, we formulate contradictory (Medvic, 2013) and even unrealistic

expectations (Flinders, 2012) toward leaders, and their perceptions of leadership achievements are also biased by existing social and political ties (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Flinders, 2012). In these contingent circumstances, defining and performing democratic leadership generates fierce competition among politicians overbidding each other not solely to win an office but also to (re)create and (re)affirm their legitimacy.

Murray Edelman (1988, p. 64) was the first who underlined that “[t]he term of ‘leadership’ is itself a political weapon . . . [catalyzing] an intricate language game.” This political game implies two dynamics in modern democracies. On the one hand, as politicians come to the forefront of public attention (Garzia, 2011), they start to construct an ideal version of leadership tailored to themselves, justifying their actions and maintaining their followership. To do so, they deliberately project the appreciated qualities or at least are appeared to embody them to fit the ideal (cf. Machiavelli 1997: 63). On the other hand, leadership embodies the “practice of democracy” (cf. Wren, 2007, p. 2) by representing a symbolic, normative, and goal-oriented relationship between leaders and followers. Many authors (e.g., Barisione, 2009; Grint, 2010; Morgan, 1988; Meindl, 1990; Wren, 2007) draw our attention to the crucial role of popular consent in the leadership process. In their way, they all imply Max Weber’s (1978, p. 213) classic argument by suggesting that democratic leadership depends on citizens’ beliefs in its legitimacy. In this sense, legitimization and justification are a matter of how influential the provided vision of good leadership is.

With these dynamics in mind, democratic leadership is certainly not a specific style and mode of political action (cf. Lewin et al., 1939; Raelin, 2012) but rather a particular relationship between political leaders and their followers. This relationship is based on the fictions (Wren, 2007) that people can make decisions or their voices heard; the leaders serve the will of the people and possess the virtues required for democratic politics. This faith is the prerequisite of democratic followership (Meindl, 1990). Since followers cannot be forced to believe, voluntary followership with the real opportunity to choose between leaders’ fictions draws the line between democratic and non-democratic leadership. Democracy makes political leaders struggle to define an idealistic version of leadership and convince the potential followers, demonstrating that (1) they possess the necessary and appreciated virtues and skills; (2) they can overcome the challenges society faces; and (3) they are able and ready to involve citizens in collective efforts. To do so, political leaders appeal to and mobilize certain ideals of democratic politics. From this perspective, the question is not whether and to what extent a particular leadership practice is democratic, but how politicians construct leadership fictions along with expectations of a specific idea of democratic politics. Consequently, in contrast to the literature, we should not look for an absolute moral leadership in democracy (e.g., Ruscio, 2008; Keohane, 2010), nor should we reconcile the idea of leadership with democracy (e.g., Kane and Patapan, 2012), or vice versa (e.g., Pakulski and Körösi, 2012) but explore possible justification strategies.

This article addresses this language game among political actors. To understand the different and conflicting fictions of democratic leadership, this article explores possible interpretations by linking theories of leadership and democracy. Following J. Thomas Wren (2007), I also adapt the concept of *implicit leadership theory* (ILT) introduced by leadership scholars to describe the cognitive process of how individuals attribute the term “leader” or “leadership” to the actor and action they observed. The article uses the concept—a little bit differently—as a conceptual “filter” or fiction through which we can perceive and interpret democratic leadership. To do so, it reveals the ILT of a moral, a material, and a

political concept of democracy, namely the idea of deliberative-participatory democracy (DPD), the idea of aggregative-pluralist democracy (APD), and the idea of leader democracy (LD). In these ideals of democracy, the highly normative, the idealized transforming leadership¹ (DPD), the interest-based, pragmatist transactional leadership (APD), and the charismatic leadership (LD) focused on the political struggle and mobilizing emotions are deeply rooted. In addition to borrowing and rethinking these well-known ideals, the article highlights how they fit in and contribute to democratic politics described by the theoretical frameworks. The provided typology of democratic leadership establishes a “plural” and non-essentialist reading of democratic practices, so it aims to help students, practitioners, and spectators of leadership to overcome the false question of whether a political leader and his/her actions are “really” democratic.

The article is structured as follows. First, I introduce a moral, a materialist, and a political interpretation of democracy. Second, I specify the framework of analysis. Third, I identify and illustrate the theories’ premises and assumptions about democratic leadership to construct a typology. Finally, the conclusions discuss the theoretical and empirical implications.

A Moral, a Materialist, and a Political Interpretation of Democracy

Although democracy is often seen as the sum of the main rules of a political game, there is no consensus among researchers and citizens on the exact meaning and content of the concept (cf. Davis *et al.*, 2020; Osterberg-Kaufmann and Stadelmaier, 2020). Unsurprisingly, there are myriad manifestations of democracy; for instance: Jean-Paul Gagnon (2020) has collected 3,539 different forms of democracies. For comparison, Joseph C. Rost (1991) reviewed 221 different “leadership” definitions in 587 books and articles published between 1900 and 1990. Democracy is often considered to be “*essentially contested*” (Collier *et al.*, 2006) just like *leadership* (Grint, 2005, pp. 17–18). A concept like democracy or leadership may be filled with different, opposing normative content, generating endless and irresolvable academic/political debates. To simplify conceptual diversity, the article seeks to explore three rival fictions of democratic leadership in a moral, a material, and a political understanding of democracy that represented opposite conceptual endpoints.

One of these endpoints is deliberative-participatory democracy. This moral conception of democracy (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, p. 7) is built on the presumption that only by broadening civic participation in deliberative discourses, increasing citizens’ control over decisions, and strengthening their political autonomy can democratic politics be maintained. Deliberation as a bottom-up process aims to mediate preferences, values, and interests (Dryzek, 2002, p. 76); resolve conflicts within the community; and reach a legitimate decision, a consensus or a fair, unforced, and acceptable agreement (Dryzek, 2002; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). Deliberation implies a double transformative effect on participants. Firstly, it rationalizes and elucidates preferences. The process requires citizens to be open to change their opinions. As a result, preferences are changed and converge in the process of reflecting the common good. Secondly, participation also transforms citizens into “real political actors” by making them more rational, informed, and competent.

In contrast, aggregative and pluralist theorists (e.g., Dahl, 1961; Downs, 1957; Olson, 1971) offer a materialist reading of democratic politics describing it as a redistributive game. APD relies on a bottom-up process of mechanical preference aggregation and responsive governance. This process is induced by citizen’s indirect and conventional participation (e.g., voting), which is essential for politicians as sources of information about preferences to form a coherent programmatic offer (e.g., policy decisions and

programs). Like businessmen/businesswomen, politicians try to position themselves in the electoral competition to maximize their share of votes, so they struggle not solely for implementing the anticipated common good, which is just a “*by-product*” of political competition (Cunningham, 2002, pp. 103–104). The goal of democratic politics is not a broad consensual decision but a minimal compromise to satisfy the majority of voters.

Finally, as a political interpretation, leader democracy (*Führerdemokratie*: Schumpeter, 2006; Weber, 1978) differs from the abovementioned democratic theories since it advocates the myth of the “strong” leader (Pakulski and Körösenyi, 2012). Accordingly, democracy is only a method for citizens to voluntarily (at least in a formal sense) choose and authorize the leader who seems to be able to rule. This top-down process of democratic politics is dominated by monopolistic competition for power in which leaders seek to “manufacture” public interests (Schumpeter, 2006, p. 263) through direct manipulation and plebiscitary mobilization. Here, citizens’ competence and access to resources (information, time) are limited in contrast to politicians. Nonetheless, the political process is not unidirectional. As passive spectators, citizens can indirectly control leaders’ public appearance and judgment of political results and situations. However, leaders could manipulate the citizens’ perceptions. They still face a performance constraint: if the problems are not resolved and so the leaders’ abilities are not confirmed, then voters can withdraw their confidence from leaders and seek new ones.

The three theories describe/prescribe a specific ideal of democratic politics leaving room for different political leadership. As the literature underlined (Ruscio, 2008, pp. 4–6, see also Kane and Patapan, 2012), leadership strongly depends on what kind of democracy we want to defend and realize. The article undertakes to explore these fictions, but first, I develop a template or framework for analysis.

The Template of Analysis

In order to isolate and identify the key premises and assumptions of theories of democratic politics and leadership, I set a specific template for analysis. This strategy helps us to reveal elements of democratic leadership that may not be explicitly addressed, besides treating premises and assumptions in a traceable and comparable manner. The proposed analytical framework focuses on how democratic theories define leadership challenges and the required political knowledge (*ideal leadership*), and how they arrange power relations, interactions, and roles between leaders and followers (*ideal followership*).

The justification of ideal leadership depends heavily on what kind of challenges leaders have to face in democracy and what kind of knowledge is needed to overcome them. Since leadership is a goal-oriented collective action (cf. Rost 1991), it is pivotal to reveal leadership fictions’ goals. The *challenges* stem from the nature of democratic politics; although, leaders may also form them to focus attention and influence followers’ expectations. As benchmarks, these challenges determine and put into context which decisions, actions, and means can be considered to be morally correct and effective. Detecting and overcoming challenges need special skills and virtues, that is, *political knowledge*. Adequate political knowledge directs the leaders in choosing and applying the “right” means and determines whether a leader is perceived as competent and authentic. The analysis recalls Aristotle’s three types of knowledge (Körösenyi, 2005, pp. 371–373): universal theoretical/philosophical (*episteme*), technical/productive (*techne*), and practical knowledge (*praxis*). Some challenges primarily call for a theoretical/philosophical understanding or *episteme* (“know why”) embodying the universal truth-seeking and truth-giving behavior of scientists/philosophers. In contrast, *techne* (“know-how”) implicates purely instrumental action and helps political leaders to produce a pragmatic solution (e.g., policy program and procedures)

to a technical problem relying on the available information (e.g., citizens' preferences). In another situation, leaders are only required to make decisions and take actions effectively. This practical ability to act is called *praxis*. Naturally, each type of knowledge may be necessary for political leadership, but leaders should meet their followers' expectations by demonstrating a specific type of political knowledge.

Followership lies at the heart of democratic leadership. As Edmund S. Morgan (1988, p. 306) formulated this precisely, "the emergence of [the term] leadership signaled the beginnings not only of a new rhetoric but of a new mode of social relations and a new way of determining who should stand among the few to govern the many." Accordingly, in a democratic framework, it is inevitable to solve openly/tacitly problems such as how the power relationship between leaders and followers is settled, what are the directions of the interactions, and what roles actors are assigned in the leadership process.

Due to the normative content of leadership (Ciulla, 2018), it is crucial to settle the question of power between the leaders and the followers. Our answer depends on the values along which we justify this power relationship. If we highlight equality and collaboration, leaders must exercise their power with their followers empowering them. In the case of exercising power over others, the emphasis is on leaders' domination and influence. However, if we value the individual capacity to act, then we expect followers to authorize leaders to exercise power to do something for them. Here leaders generate their power through manipulating followers. The direction of interactions also determines followership. The idea of democratic political participation presumes that leaders and followers take action on the same level. Consequently, interactions are required to be bottom-up and horizontal. In contrast, the classical "heroic" view of leadership draws up vertical relations. This hierarchical relationship can be built in a top-down or bottom-up manner, depending on whether followers subordinate themselves emotionally to their leader or seek to assert their self-interests. At this point, a question arises: what role do people want to play in this relationship? If we expect broad civic participation, we also require more active followers, but if we see collective problems as the leaders' responsibility to solve, we reduce the followers' role. In this light, proactive, reactive, or coactive roles can be assigned to leaders and followers.

This analytical framework aims to address the central issues that leadership fictions have to reflect in democracy. These dimensions will shape and frame the analysis in the next section.

Fictions and Practices of Democratic Leadership

Leadership in deliberative-participatory democracy

Leaders have to face the major challenge in DPD, which is to create and maintain democratic politics and empower followers. This permanent challenge, which we can call "*moral foundation*," in the interpretation of democratic theorist Benjamin R. Barber (2000), requires a "founder" who is responsible for the right democratic environment and a "moral leader" who defines an appropriate direction of politics yet stays outside of it. Burns' concept of transforming leadership unites these tasks (Burns, 1978, 2003; see also Ruscio, 2008), and in doing so, it provides an adequate framework to reveal the challenge of deliberative-participatory leadership.

Transforming leadership contributes to DPD in three ways. Firstly, it provides moral guidance to initiate and facilitate democratic deliberation. Leaders should share a firm conviction and commitment to the democratic project, which we can consider as a moral enterprise (Burns, 1978, p. 20, 2003, p. 2) or duty (Ruscio, 2008, p. 24). To do so, they are required to become moral agents who can determine what is "real" democracy and democratic politics based on certain "end-values" (e.g., liberty, justice, and equality: Burns, 1978: 426) and Rawlsian "moral virtues" (e.g., civility, tolerance, reasonableness,

fairness, and mutual trust: Ruscio, 2008: 27; 109). Every citizen must demonstrate this theoretical/philosophical knowledge (episteme: Körösenyi, 2005, pp. 371–373), and leaders even more so. Moral guidance is not limited to the possession of certain knowledge or the pursuit of specific values. It also has to take further steps forward in realization of “real” democracy at all costs. It does not matter whether this revolutionary zeal or ultimate goal (see: Weber, 1946; cf. Burns, 1978, pp. 45–46) is realistic and achievable if they are morally right.

Secondly, transforming leadership ought to manage conflicts constructively via facilitating deliberation (Gastil, 1994, pp. 960–962; Kuypers, 2012). To encourage and moderate deliberation, leaders should speak and listen to their followers at the same time. Conflicts could generate integrating, creative solutions and strengthen core values (e.g., mutual understanding and trust). Paradoxically, these conflicts refresh and reinforce democratic politics by enabling the transformation and convergence of citizens’ preferences.

Thirdly, leaders should empower their followers (Burns, 2003, pp. 25–26; 182–185; Gastil, 1994, pp. 959–960). Empowerment “is what makes transforming leadership participatory and democratic” (Burns, 2003, p. 26) and is so critical from the perspective of bottom-up deliberative politics. Just like Rousseau’s wise legislator, after initiating and establishing the democratic process, leaders must step back and let their followers lead themselves. More precisely, leaders should transform their followers’ political competencies based on which they become their own leaders. Barber formulated this task strictly as follows: “[s]trong democratic leadership is leadership that leaves a citizenry more capable when the leader departs than before he arrives. It is leadership that can boast: ‘Now that he is gone, we can do this ourselves’” (2000, p. 100).

Empowerment also redefines followership and power relations, enabling citizens’ free cooperation and reducing the possibility of coercion or violence that spoils democratic politics. Transforming leaders are obliged to seek power to share it with others. Due to empowerment, differences between leaders and followers are blurred in this relationship: their interactions become bottom-up, horizontal, and leaders and followers are assigned coactive roles. As many authors (Barber, 2000; Gastil, 1994; Kuypers, 2012; Raelin, 2012) have also pointed out, democratic followership should be built on conscious followers, distributed leadership, and shared responsibility.

Leadership in aggregative-pluralist democracy

Pluralist and aggregative democrats take explicit account of leadership; although, they draw up an ambivalent role fostered and limited by democratic institutions, the plurality of collective interests, and individual preferences. Anthony Downs (1962, p. 36) highlighted that democracy could not sacrifice responsive governance for more effective and creative leadership. In other words, leadership cannot be a monopoly (Dahl, 1961, pp. 101–102).

The concept of transactional leadership (Burns, 1978; Downton, 1973) perfectly fits APD. It is also based on market-like exchanges “dominated by quick calculations of cost-benefits” (Burns, 1978, p. 258) and on “modal values” (e.g., honesty, responsibility, fairness, and honoring commitments: Burns, 1978: 426) concentrated in democratic institutions and procedures. Self-oriented leaders and followers only cooperate to maximize their profits (Downton, 1973, p. 84) and reach a mutually beneficial agreement (compromise). Stated, leaders deliver something valuable to followers in exchange for something they want: “jobs for votes or subsidies for campaign contributions” (Burns, 1978, p. 4). In this sense, transactional leadership’s main challenge is “*making politics*”: channeling effectively personal preferences into governance. Transactional leaders are pragmatic “craftspeople” or mechanics who

operate the political machinery to produce the common good from preferences beyond their direct control. Relying on conventional means, “making politics” as a technical problem requires specific technical/productive knowledge (techne: Körösenyi, 2005, pp. 371–373). However, this does not make leaders redundant: they manage and fine-tune political processes by their office seeking but incremental, task-oriented behavior. This challenge can be broken into two tasks.

Leaders’ first task is maintaining a sufficient level of citizens’ collective action revealing their preferences to generate information for governing. As Mancur Olson (1971, pp. 174–178) recognized, political leaders become the key figures. To organize collective efforts and provide political goods, they rely on selective incentives (compulsions or rewards), which students of leadership may know as hard power (Nye, 2008) or positive/negative transactions (Downton, 1973). In short, leaders motivate followers to contribute to collective efforts.

The second task for leadership is to “refresh” the common good by delivering “political products” (e.g., pledges or programs), representing individual preferences, and reaching a compromise. More precisely, leaders ought to fill the “*empty space*” of the public interest (Cunningham, 2002, pp. 64–65) by guessing citizens’ preferences in the world of limited information. These offers can also be considered as positive selective incentives. Although citizens’ preferences are given factors in the political process, leaders attempt to improve their political market position. They try to influence these preferences indirectly through persuasion (Downs, 1957, p. 87, 1962, pp. 16–17) or manipulation of structural factors (political agenda or electoral mechanisms) of preference aggregation (Riker, 1986). However, in these ways, leaders can only indirectly guide the flow of preferences.

Followership is built on a bottom-up, vertical (hierarchical) relationship, which shows a dualism (Keohane, 2015). The relationship between leaders is reciprocal, by which “leaders become hardly distinguishable from followers” (Burns, 1978, p. 258), or as Robert A. Dahl argues, “if the leaders lead, they are also led” (Dahl, 1961, p. 101). On the one hand, followers are proactive and able to control the leadership process by presenting their preferences and holding leaders accountable and responsible in elections. Moreover, they can even lead if they possess adequate political resources, means, and technical knowledge along with modal values.

On the other hand, leaders are the most influential actors in democratic politics. They have more resources, motivation, and opportunity to initiate independent action. The position allows leaders to exercise power over others (Dahl, 1957) and influence political outcomes (Dahl, 1961, p. 7; Downs, 1957, p. 87), yet the given preferences and desire for re-election, and democratic institutions make leaders follow their voters. In short, leaders are forced into a reactive role as they can only follow political events and preferences. This limitation of leadership is the key to maintaining the bottom-up nature of the political process while still preserving the leader's dominant role.

Leadership in leader democracy

Building explicitly on the necessity of highly effective charismatic (Weber, 1946, 1978) or innovative (Schumpeter, 2006) leadership², politicians in LD handle alleged or real collective problems by *overcoming uncertainties* and contingency (Körösenyi *et al.*, 2016). Hence, the purpose of democratic politics and leadership is the same: choosing and maintaining an effective government. This challenge is twofold.

Firstly, to become leaders, they must demonstrate their exceptional ability to govern (*charisma*: Weber, 1978, p. 241). Leaders need to possess something—context-dependent political virtues (*pre-eminent qualities*: Weber, 1946) or practical political knowledge (praxis: Körösenyi, 2005, pp. 371–373),

—relying on which they can judge situations, take actions, and decide prudently and cautiously. However, leadership traits cannot be precisely determined because they depend on the conditions in which the given conflict and competition take place (Weber, 1978, pp. 39–40), as well as followers’ recognition and acknowledgment (Weber, 1978, pp. 241–245) —even though these can also be manipulated. For instance, charismatic leaders can deliberately seek perceived or real collective problems and conflicts proactively that they may solve. By dramatizing political situations, they voluntarily create and manipulate events (Körösenyi *et al.*, 2016) and mobilize their followers’ emotions to strengthen the need for charisma (Weber, 1978, pp. 1111–1112) rather than simply reacting to situations. Nonetheless, this claim might easily collapse, and charismatic leadership may disappear if it fails to benefit followers or to prove exceptional abilities.

Secondly, charismatic leaders must establish a new legitimate order or political regime based on their political innovation and charismatic revelation/vision. They aim to question or even demolish the old regime and create new “obligations” for followers to monopolize political leadership (*creative destruction*: Schumpeter, 2006, p. 83; Weber, 1978, pp. 267–269; 1111–1117). In this monopolistic position, leaders are the only sources and defenders of the community’s values and do not tolerate any rivals who may question their divine right to lead.

Here, citizens’ political role and participation are secondary, but followership as “spectatorship” is crucial (Weber, 1946: 267–269). Charismatic followership satisfies inwardly (Weber, 1946: 103–104) people’s basic emotional needs for security, esteem, revenge, or devotion. To utilize these emotional tensions, leaders give meaning to their political efforts through their rhetoric. As a result, citizens authorize leaders to act and govern on their behalf. This relationship is unavoidably top-down, vertical, in which followers are reactive and strongly dependent on the leader who may gain a proactive role. However, a “one-sided” picture of the charismatic relationship would be deceptive. Recognition of charisma is (at least in a formal sense) freely given by followers (Weber, 1978, pp. 242; 267). This voluntary relationship implicates that charismatic leadership is limited because followers cannot be forced by discipline (violence) (Weber, 1978, pp. 1146–1156) to recognize and acknowledge their leaders’ charisma. Rational discipline (e.g., command) undermines the importance of leaders’ performance and eradicates their charisma. The charisma—which cannot be challenged or confirmed by citizens—tends to fade. Thus, leadership ends fatally.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide reference points to understand democratic leadership as a political weapon in leaders’ competition. Fictions of democratic leadership are destined to establish a symbolic relationship between leaders and followers. However, sometimes leaders’ and followers’ expectations do not meet each other, or in other words, leadership fiction no longer matches society’s reality. As Morgan (1988, p 13) underlined, “a fiction must bear some resemblance to fact” because it can easily collapse otherwise. Naturally, leaders can reshape their fictions or manipulate the perceptions of reality to prevent this scenario (Morgan, 1988, p 13), but at the same time, fading ideals create space for a new, more convincing fiction as populist parties and politicians’ worldwide upsurge has shown. In parallel, language games can polarize fictions, intensifying the contest among politicians to create a legitimate relationship with citizens and discredit each other’s fictions. Paradoxically, this process, which is both destructive and constructive, makes democracy flexible as it renews its legitimacy from time to time.

The fictions presented in the article show different, sometimes even conflicting criteria through which leaders and followers perceive and consider each other's actions as democratic. Drawing up possible expectations of democracy and leadership, the typology of democratic leadership (*Table 1*) as a heuristic device provides a “plural” or non-essentialist reading of actual democratic situations and practices.

[Table I]

Although this research addresses a theoretical problem, it has two practical relevancies. On the one hand, relying on this typology, we—as students, practitioners, and spectators of leadership—can avoid discrediting any relevant forms of action as we judge the inner logic and dynamics of leadership practices in their own conceptual and ideational frame. Moreover, it could help us strengthen democratic leadership by finding commonalities in competing for real-life fictions, clarifying social needs and values behind public leadership, and finding a way to restore trust in political leaders. On the other hand, conceptual uncertainty determines not only democratic politics but also the discourse of students and practitioners of leadership as it is illustrated by the constant search for “good” or “bad” leadership. Leadership fictions may also deepen our understanding of the inner dynamics of the leadership process and structure our expectations.

Understanding democratic leadership as fiction could identify three specific ways for future studies to unfurl political leaders' competition and struggle. Firstly, rhetorical analysis of leaders might also pay more attention to how leaders try to justify their actions by developing their own “democratic world” and leadership fiction. Secondly, further empirical research is needed to analyze followers' projections, expectations, and perceptions on democratic leadership (Hartley, 2018 pp. 209–210). “Democratic leadership – paraphrasing Edelman's thought (1985, p. 75) – is always defined by a specific ideational context constructed by leaders and is recognized in followers' response to individual acts and speeches.” For example, why do some followers look for charismatic leaders while others view these strong leaders with fear? Finally, empirical studies may also analyze how the political, cultural, and institutional context affects democratic leadership. After all, a particular justification strategy may work in one country but not in another. By analyzing democratic leadership fictions, we could understand what values leaders rely on, what values followers attach to, and what values are critical in a particular leadership context. These questions are central for discourse on public leadership³.

¹ The article applies Burns' original concept of transforming leadership, distinguishing it from Weberian charismatic leadership (see: Burns, 1978, pp. 243–244) and the later version of it called transformational leadership (cf. Khanin, 2007). I deliberately rely on Burns' over-idealized concept to provide leadership fiction that can meet the high moral requirements of deliberative-participatory democracy.

² To keep it simple, I use the notion of charismatic leadership referring to both the Weberian and Schumpeterian concepts of leadership.

³ See the recent special issue of *International Journal of Public Leadership* entitled “Political and public leadership: Advancing ethics and the common good” (guest edited by Karin Lasthuizen) about the latest development of this discourse.

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