

# Role and Effectiveness of Political Leaders : A Conceptual Study

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## **Abstract**

*The overarching goal of this paper is to develop a conceptual frame work that will help in the assessment of effectiveness of political leaders of India in an objective manner. This study acquires significance in the context of a democratic set up like that of India which poses varied challenges and uncertainties in the political environment for political leaders to successfully perform in their professional life. Among the leadership literature, study on political leaders is as such minimal. Moreover, what enables political leaders to establish their effectiveness which gets reflected in getting continued mandate from the electorate and ensure electoral success is hardly examined. It is suggested in this paper that, despite multifarious constraints existing within the system, uncertainties of political environment, variations in the personality types and leadership styles, political leaders can yet play five types of roles and acquire the political skills required for their effectiveness. Right mix of roles can enable political leaders acquire optimal effectiveness.*

The assumptions with which political leaders conduct themselves are sometimes challenged by unforeseen, unpredictable and uncertain events and situations. Leaders are found struggling to make sense of shifting environment<sup>1</sup>. Recent chaotic situations in the political arena, empowerment of public and stress on probity, accountability and transparency through statutory provisions such as Right to Information Act, rise of social media require the political leaders not just to rely on traditional concepts of leadership and perform routine functions but also to perform acts of creativity and innovations<sup>2</sup>. They are expected to understand importance of new ideas and concepts such as leadership vision, shaping culture and values, leadership courage and moral leadership etc<sup>3</sup>. The present study intends to help

our political leaders to explore and develop their hidden leadership potential too<sup>4</sup>. It would also help all the major stake holders connected with the political leaders such as political parties, electorate, government, members of the public and research scholars etc., to make a proper assessment of effectiveness of political leaders which is of prime necessity in different contexts.

Indian constitution mandates our political leaders to occupy highest positions in the government and take decisions for the state. They are also required to undertake different activities for development of people. Effectiveness of political leaders is thus necessary not only for their continued success in political career but also for ensuring large public benefits to accrue from their actions.

The political leaders of India are elected through an electoral process which is quite expensive and costs the state exchequer a huge amount. Hence an ineffective political leader is likely to cause huge loss to the state exchequer. The present study on effectiveness of political leaders would enable a continued professional success of the efficient ones among them. Further people get maximum benefit through the process, where effective elected political leaders ensure their development.

Leadership is unidentifiable as it has no physical manifestation. Instead, it is an abstraction. Leadership is an essentially contested concept and can be explained through other concepts, such as 'power', 'influence', 'authority' and 'control'<sup>5</sup> etc.

'Leadership' has been studied under different branches of social science disciplines such as Political Science, Social Psychology, Education, Anthropology, Sociology, and business studies through different theoretical and empirical investigation. Yet, there is no consensus in their definition. There are thousands of competing definitions of 'leadership'<sup>6</sup> which find place in the works of Blondel, 1980 and 1987; Burns, 1978; Edinger, 1975 and 1990; Gardner, 1990; Kellerman, 1984; Mughan and Patterson, 1992; Paige, 1977; Sheffer, 1993; Stern, 1993; and Tucker, 1981. Choosing a single definition would be both arbitrary and restrictive. It would be unable to capture the variations in the types and forms of leadership that have to be exercised across many different arenas simultaneously<sup>7</sup>. However, in the context of our understanding of the effectiveness of political leaders, we shall like to define Political leadership as the power exercised by one or few individuals to direct members of the nation towards actions<sup>8</sup>.

There are different types and forms of political leadership as well as many arenas in which political leadership must be exercised. Types and forms of political leadership correspond to the manner in which leaders exercise their administration and management in different fields. They include charismatic leadership, heroic leadership, revolutionary leadership, innovative leadership, transforming leadership, transactional leadership, sensual leadership, reactive leadership and managerial leadership. An individual may have to exercise a combination of these different types and forms of political leadership at a given point of time<sup>9</sup>.

Political leadership is also exercised in different arenas. There is policy leadership, party leadership, Cabinet leadership, legislative leadership, opinion leadership, bureaucratic leadership, judicial leadership, gubernatorial leadership, mayoral leadership and many more. A leader may have to exercise political leadership in any one or more of these different arenas simultaneously<sup>10</sup>.

Political leaders are able to shape the course of the decision-making process. However, they do not enjoy complete freedom to shape policy outcomes because all leaders are constrained to certain extent by the given circumstances. Hence, Robert Elgie adopts an interactionist approach to the study of political leadership<sup>11</sup> in which he analyses the actions of political leaders in terms of their interactions with the given political environment.

In the nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle who was associated with the 'Great Man' school of political leadership, argued that political leaders having innate qualities of greatness are endowed by God since birth and act as agents of social and political change. However, Carlyle's

theory had certain problems. It exaggerated the influence individuals exerted on the course of events<sup>12</sup>.

Subsequently, cultural determinants, such as Herbert Spencer have contradicted Thomas Carlyle by denying that individuals have any significant impact on the course of events. They argue that the leadership environment in which individuals operate, shape their actions, leaving them with little or no opportunity to make a personal impact on historical events<sup>13</sup>.

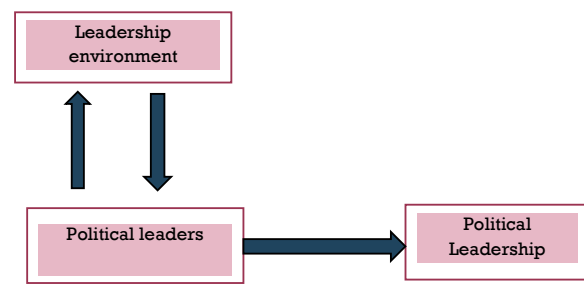
The basic problem with both the approaches is that they are reductionist. The former assumes that only the individual is important to the historical and political process. The latter assumes that the individual is unimportant and that the changes which leaders appear to bring about are really the result of the interplay of impersonal social processes<sup>14</sup>.

However, the study of political leadership is more complex than either of these reductionist approaches would suggest. According to the interactionist group of leadership theorists, in addition to personal attributes, leadership is intimately related to the fabric of the leaders, relevant societies, to social and political organizations, to established institutions, and to leaders' relations with smaller and larger groups of followers which constitute the leadership environment.<sup>15</sup> The extent to which political leaders are able to influence the decision-making process is considered to be contingent upon the interaction between the leader and the leadership environment in which the leader operates. How political leadership is exercised depends on the nature of this interaction<sup>16</sup>.

It implies that political leaders operate within an environment which will both structure

their behavior and constrain their freedom of action. At the same time, it also implies that political leaders do have the opportunity to shape the environment in which they operate, thereby giving them the potential to leave their mark upon the system. Consequently, leaders may change the course of history, but only if and to the degree that the environment permits it. This process is captured in the diagram given below<sup>17</sup>:

**FIGURE 1 The interactionist approach to political leadership**



*Source:* Adapted from Greenstein, 1992, p. 109.

Political leaders vary in terms of their personality traits, focus, the scope of their ambitions, aims, goals, leadership styles and behaviors. In terms of leadership styles among political leaders one may distinguish between, uncompromising leaders and malleable leaders<sup>18</sup>. Dennis Kavanagh has distinguished between mobilizing and expressive leaders<sup>19</sup>. The former is said to emphasize decision-making and task-performance, even at the risk of alienating colleagues whereas the later emphasizes cohesion and the maintenance of the status quo, representing and responding to diverse interests. A rather more complex typology has been devised by James David Barber. He distinguishes among political leaders who are active-positive, active-negative, passive-positive and passive-negative characters<sup>20</sup>.

Barber's approach indicates that different kinds of leaders behave in different ways and that it is possible to generalize about particular behavioral styles<sup>21</sup>. However, Peter Clarke suggests that there is not a single style of leadership that is bound to be successful in any place at any time<sup>22</sup>.

It is found that one of the main tasks of our political leaders in the present context is to respond to any short-term popular demand catering to a local need or needs of personal nature of individuals or groups. This creates a leadership environment which may either help or hinder leaders in their attempts to always take sound decisions to the satisfaction of the electorate. Primarily this is on account of the fact that the list of such demands is quite huge and many demands may not be in conformity with the existing government rules. However, the general point remains that popular demands provide the system with certain dynamism which has the potential to alter the relatively fixed forms of leadership to be found in a country<sup>23</sup>.

Under such circumstances, traditional and contemporary research show that personality cannot explain leadership, and traits of political leaders alone cannot explain their effectiveness with several uncertain factors hovering around in their environment. In this context, political skills of leaders and the manner in which such skills are acquired and exhibited by them may provide a sound explanation of their effectiveness.

Political skill is defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use this understanding to influence others to act in ways that enhances one's personal and/or organizational objectives" and is reflective of "a comprehensive pattern of social competencies with cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations<sup>24</sup>".

Political skill represents such a characteristic, and leaders who possess it combine social astuteness with the capacity to adjust and adapt their behavior to different situational demands in a way that inspires trust and support, controls and influences others' responses, and appears genuine and sincere.

Those high in political skill are not self-absorbed, because their focus is outward towards others. This permits such leaders to maintain proper perspective and balance, and also to ensure that they monitor their accountability to both themselves and to others, while imposing reasonable levels of accountability on their followers for appropriate work behavior. Such behaviors of politically skilled leaders appear to manifest themselves in two distinct categories of leader behavior: transformational (e.g., relationship building with followers) and transactional with specific reference to contingent reward behavior (e.g., clear goal specification and rewards contingent upon goal achievement<sup>25</sup>).

A growing body of research demonstrates that political skill is associated with leadership effectiveness. Goal attainment is the central issue and the basic definition of effectiveness is conceptualized as the degree of goal attainment. The concept of effectiveness is a ratio implying that two entities are required when defining and measuring it. In the instant case it is assumed that the political skills enable leaders to be more effective in executing the projects and managing the electorate, thereby getting continued electoral mandate<sup>26</sup>.

Although a growing body of research demonstrates that political skill is associated with leadership effectiveness, the field still lacks understanding about how these skills can be acquired by the leaders. Hence, in the present

study, by adopting the five-fold role models of Esther Cameron and Mike Green in their work “Making Sense of Leadership : Exploring the five key roles used by effective leaders<sup>27</sup>” we have tried to establish that a mix of roles enables the political leaders to acquire the necessary skills which in turn would help them strengthen their effectiveness in professional life irrespective of the constraints of personality factors and uncertainties of the leadership environment. The entire process being a complex one requires careful analysis based on empirical data from which conclusions can be drawn.

Esther Cameron and Mike Green have defined the roles as natural clusters of behaviors of a person which appear in his/her conversation and action<sup>28</sup>. They have explored five core roles which successful leaders’ step into in order to lead well and make things happen. These five types of roles have been termed as follows- i) the Edgy Catalyser, ii) the Visionary Motivator, iii) the Measured Connector, iv) the Tenacious Implementer and v) the Thoughtful Architect. In this work each role has been analyzed in terms of its attributes, core values, inner experiences, outer presentations, organizational aspects, situation in which the role is most useful and finally how this role might need to be adapted to particular organizational cultures<sup>29</sup>.

It is found that while some leaders prefer to use just one of the roles others use a mixture of different roles. Many can identify at least one role that seems difficult for them to adopt<sup>30</sup>.

It is revealed that some of the skills associated with leadership such as high level of domination, interpersonal skills, electrifying speaking ability, being thoroughly organized etc., may not always make a leader successful. Leading is far more than applying a set of skills in a

mechanistic manner. Leadership is much deeper and broader than that<sup>31</sup>.

Ability of a leader to step into different roles would indicate the extent to which he/she is able to be creative and spontaneous in adopting new ways of doing things by breaking the routine. It adds to the joy and excitement of life. By experimenting with different roles, leaders can start widening their sense of what roles they can master, and therefore what they can achieve. They thus have to learn to develop the right mix of role to match their personality, the organizational situation and the people around them<sup>32</sup>.

So far different aspects of leadership and specifically political leadership are studied in terms of different concepts. However, our study based on the five-fold role model reveals that the effectiveness of a political leader can be assessed in terms of his ability to play certain types of these roles. It is also established that through different roles not only different political skills can be displayed, but they can also be acquired and nurtured. Despite multifarious constraints existing within the system, uncertainties of leadership environment, variations in the personality types and leadership styles etc., political leaders yet can play such roles and acquire the skills required for their effectiveness. However, a right mix of roles can help a political leader acquire these skills properly and thereby gain optimal effectiveness. Therefore, the five-fold role model can not only help us in analyzing and conceptualizing political leadership but also help in creating an action plan for the political leaders to acquire the requisite skills necessary to achieve optimal effectiveness for their continued success in political career while extending maximum benefits to the public for their development.

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