

Review Forum

Political humor and reverse dominance hierarchies

Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja, *Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 272 pages. ISBN 978-0061963834, Hardcover, \$25.99.

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After reading this concise, thoughtful, and well-written volume, many scholars will surely wish they had come up with the idea for this book. Readers of *POLITICS AND THE LIFE SCIENCES* and other evolutionarily oriented publications will find the fundamental premises of Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja's book, *Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership*, familiar. The manner in which van Vugt and Ahuja outline information and the insights they offer make this a pleasure to consume. Accessible to both academic and lay audiences, this book has the potential to revolutionize the moribund and disparate field of leadership studies by providing a coherent theory of leadership based upon evolutionary theory.

Organized into seven chapters, two appendices and a useful glossary, the book provides the average reader with an introduction to how evolutionary theory informs the study of leadership, as well as its necessary yet overshadowed corollary—followership. The first chapter, “The nature of leadership,” provides a comprehensive, but not overwhelming, review of ten major theories of leadership. These theories range from the classic “Great Man” theory, which holds that leaders are born to lead, to more recent theories, such as transactional versus transformational leadership, that hold sway in the public administration literature. All the while, van Vugt and Ahuja develop their “Evolutionary Leadership Theory,” connecting these

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diverse and disparate theories into a comprehensive framework.

The next three chapters explore the natural history of leaders and followers. Chapter 2 uses insights from game theory to elucidate the genetic underpinnings of behavioral and personality traits that predisposes individuals to lead or follow. Here, the authors establish the premises from which the rest of the book proceeds—humans are a social species adapted to group living and evolution favors those groups with both followers and leaders over unorganized groups. Chapter 3 explores followership in greater depth, including the benefits of being a follower in a cohesive group. It also posits specific types of followers, including “first followers” who are crucial for turning individuals into leaders. “Critical followers” are those prepared to challenge incompetent or dangerous leaders, sometimes at great risk to their own safety. Chapter 4 posits the rationale for why humans value egalitarian relations, even while striving for positions of power. Notable in this chapter are the “Strategies to Overcome the Powerful.” Here, five escalating strategies provide insights into curbing the power of leaders through gossip, public meetings, satire, disobedience, and, most drastically, assassination.

In the next two chapters, the authors explore how leadership goes wrong. Chapter 5, on corruption, examines the dark side of power and strategies leaders use to maintain and increase power. Here the authors identify seven strategies to enhance power and the “Dark Triad” of personality traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. The penultimate chapter explores what the authors label the “mismatch hypothesis.” This premise argues that followers with hard-wired preferences for leaders possessing physical traits indicating dominance such as age, gender, height, strong facial characteristics, and vocal masculinity once served humanity well in the context of “small, ancestral, egalitarian hunter gatherer groups” (p. 149). But these characteristics, which might have worked well in protecting followers from aggressors and predators on

the savannah, do not always work that well in modern society. Preferences for tall, fit, older, healthy males with a military background, masculine appearance as well as verbal and nonverbal charisma do not necessarily fit the requirements for leaders in the modern world in which creativity and specialization, with its more egalitarian demands, hold sway over the more authoritarian and relatively inflexible dominance structures in which leaders are chosen through a top-down selection process. Finally, Chapter 7 provides ten take away lessons for both followers and leaders (see Ron White's review, this issue).

Of the five strategies to overcome the powerful proposed by van Vugt and Ahuja, the most under appreciated yet potentially impactful in our media-dominated age is satire, or more broadly humor and laughter. Publicly expressed humor critiquing leaders is the most robust indicator of "reverse dominance hierarchies" where a leader's influence derives from subordinates conferring authority and where followers have the ability to revoke leadership privileges (p. 192). In other words, being able to make fun of leaders, especially with the leader's awareness, indicates freedom from fear of reprisal. As a counter example, authoritarian political systems brook no dissent, least of all in the form of satire and humor at the expense of leaders and the performance of the political system.^{1,2} Despite the potential for harsh punishment, including imprisonment and death, for telling politically charged jokes, satirical humor persists. That humor survives in these systems, albeit underground, reflects an innate disposition towards anti-authoritarianism.³

In recent years, political scientists have paid greater attention to the role satire plays in the American system, due to the influence of comedy shows such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. This research in part examines how such satire can lead to negative attitudes towards politicians and the political system.⁴ However, satire might reflect corrective measures applied to politicians and assent by viewers who recognize the flaws humor exposes.

Functionally, political humor punctuates partisan discourse while diminishing competitive rancor. A hallmark of democratic society is the public presence of humor suffusing the political system with oblique attacks on policies and persons through jokes and shared laughter. Those telling the jokes are not just observers outside the system but include insiders who

take turns being the teller and target of jokes. Being laughed at and laughing with audiences in public settings normally characterized by conflict is acceptable so long as it is mitigated by the veil of politeness humor offers. Conflict and competition is still present in the political arena, but the sublimated aggression of humor reflects an appreciation for rough and tumble play within agreed upon boundaries. Politicians taking undue umbrage at humorous attacks possess the worst of all failings in an egalitarian society—the inability to acknowledge one's own imperfections and the quality of having no sense of humor.

Humor and the indicator of its success, laughter, play an important role in egalitarian societies beyond satirical attacks upon leaders. Humor, when used by putative leaders, provides a "thin slice" indicator of the intelligence and personality they possess, as well as their norms and values. Laughter by a political audience not only indicates appreciation but can also signal support when laughter functions as a form of submissive behavior with the intent of affiliation. Laughter may be the ultimate form of followership, providing a behavioral indicator of an emergent property shared between potential leaders and followers. That laughter is nearly automatic and highly contagious testifies to in-group cohesiveness and the status of the joke teller.

Throughout *Naturally Selected*, van Vugt and Ahuja warn that leaders possessing the Dark Triad of personality traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, or psychopathy—actively seek out strategies to build and maintain power. In egalitarian societies, humor and laughter provide salient indicators of leadership capability, diagnosing those unfit for leadership through ill-suited humor or their lack of a sense of humor altogether. Thus, laughter and humor may serve as a diagnostic tool to prevent malignant leadership.

Humor offers insights into the awareness of group norms and values, and leaders who tell inappropriate jokes are deemed unfit for leadership. Preference for specific types of humor has been connected with the "Big Five" personality traits of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Furthermore, the Dark Triad are strongly and negatively related to the personality trait of Agreeableness.^{5,6} Findings from Veselka and colleagues, applying Rod Martin's humor styles, reveal that aggressive humor, in which sarcasm and put downs are used to hurt or manipulate others, is correlated with both

psychopathy and Machiavellianism.^{7,8} Self-defeating humor is less strongly related to Machiavellianism. On the other hand, narcissism is weakly related to affiliative humor, which facilitates interpersonal bonds.

Taken into context, these findings suggest that the humor enjoyed and produced by an individual might provide a useful diagnostic tool to decode the personalities of putative leaders. For instance, leaders who take pleasure in humor at the expense of others might still incite joyful laughter from followers due to the leader's dominant position and the contagiousness of the laughter.^{9,10} Such leader's may display "Dark Triad" qualities. This may be why politicians take great pains to tell self-deprecating jokes. This type of humor convinces followers that the leader values the playfulness of an egalitarian political system and does not possess undesirable personality traits. Moreover, it may give followers a powerful and enjoyable tool to aid in the selection and retention of leaders.

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