Review Forum

Taking the science of leadership (and followership) seriously

Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership

Introduction: Periodically, the journal will devote an entire issue's book review section to a single work when it addresses important topics with relevance for many subfields in the study of politics. Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja's Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership *is such a work.* Naturally Selected *addresses topics relevant to American politics, political psychology, political theory, comparative politics, and international relations. The following three reviews approach the work from different perspectives and demonstrate the valuable contribution to consilient knowledge made by van Vugt and Ahuja.* —Bradley A. Thayer, Book Review Editor

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

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Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership revives the study of leadership dynamics, a subfield that has remained underdeveloped for the past half-century. Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja's book arrives at an opportune moment and has the potential to accelerate the study of international politics from the perspectives of political and evolutionary psychology. Van Vugt and Ahuja are to be commended for producing such an original synthesis with both popular and academic appeal. This review outlines their central argument and underscores its importance for key areas of international politics, political theory, and political science more broadly.

The central argument

The central question of the study is straightforward: Van Vugt and Ahuja seek to explain why some people lead and why others follow. Their main argument is familiar to readers of the journal, namely, that leadership and followership are evolutionarily adaptive behaviors.

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Van Vugt and Ahuja develop Evolutionary Leadership Theory (ELT) to trace the origins of human leadership and demonstrate why we find recurring patterns of leadership, followership, and their ensuing social consequences. As they observe:

> Human leadership as we know it had to start somewhere, and it began more than two million years ago on the African savannah with the birth of the species *Homo*. Our ancestors teamed up to hunt, to fight, to live, to love—and, because tribes showing strong leadership thrived, leadership and followership came to be part of human life (p. 3).

Living in groups is complicated and fraught with social risks—whom to trust, avoid, ostracize. Yet, living in groups within a dominance hierarchy allowed humans to survive and function harmoniously, with clearly established leadership and followership roles. Leaders incur risks but are rewarded with salary, status, and sex. Followers risk less but still receive the protection and benefits of the group. Van Vugt and Ahuja provide an exceptional explication of the benefits and costs of leadership and followership. Furthermore, they explain why and when these leadership and followership behaviors evolved, what makes them effective, and how "natural" the mother-infant/leader-follower relationship is to those found in myriad political systems. In essence, they provide a "how to rule" and "how to follow" guide that is in accord with human evolution.

From their theory they draw several important hypotheses, two of which are particularly important for international politics. The first is Janus-faced. One

face is what they term: Strategies to Overcome the Powerful. These are strategies that protect and guard against overbearing leaders or those who overtly seek power. These strategies include gossip, or "spreading negative rumors about a leader—about his meanness or sex life [that] can damage his standing in the group and, as a result, chip away at his ability to do the job" (p. 114). Other techniques include public discussions to disobedience, desertion, or disposing of the bad leader through violent means.

Once a leader has gained power, a leader needs to secure that power. Strategies to Enhance Power perform this service. Often unsavory, such strategies take many forms, including nepotism, corruption, benevolent dictatorship, manipulating the hearts and minds of followers, creating an ideology to legitimize a position of power, or harsher measures such as exterminating your enemies. Much of political life, including international political life, is a battle between strategies to enhance power and strategies to overcome the powerful.

The second major argument the authors advance is the "mismatch hypothesis." Human brains evolved for tribal life and find it difficult to adapt to large, unwieldy bureaucratic structures. People want intimacy in our professional environments. Because of this mismatch between impersonal bureaucracy and interpersonal intimacy, leaders are sought who display the physical and behavioral traits valued by ancestors—healthy, tall, strong-jawed, mature but not too old, and generally male. Leaders also possess a certain personality and behavioral type as well. The mismatch hypothesis allows van Vugt and Ahuja to explain why leadership is anchored in prestige and why there is a preference for successful military leaders as rulers. A review of leaders demonstrates that van Vugt and Ahuja's explanation fits historical precedent, which gives their work explanatory value.

Thus, it is not by chance that most leaders share so many physical and behavioral characteristics. Along with identifying the principles of leadership and how leadership is advanced, van Vugt and Ahuja offer a foundation for leadership studies from which historians, political scientists, and other scholars can draw.

Application to international politics

Naturally Selected has three immediate insights for the study of international politics. First, van Vugt and Ahuja's main arguments allow scholars to draw specific implications, including that leaders of states are not average; they have qualities that set them apart from followers. This means their behaviors will be different. Explaining how the backgrounds of leaders differ from followers can have the greatest impact in the study of authoritarian or totalitarian countries where the actions of leaders are not offset by the countervailing pressures of democratic governance. These governments are more willing to take risks, including escalating crises and going to war, because of the role of the individual leader. The implications of this for deterrence theory are significant. Leaders may be largely the same, but governments are not. Some induce caution and others reflect their leader's willingness to take risks. Van Vugt and Ahuja's arguments support the importance of "tailored" deterrent strategies for authoritarian or totalitarian states like North Korea.

Second, van Vugt and Ahuja provide insights into why people are willing to join larger groups. Their arguments, which explain why people join these groups and find it very difficult to leave, are potentially useful for scholars of terrorist organizations and cults. As the terrorism literature continues to grapple with these questions, van Vugt and Ahuja's analysis may help generate insights at the individual, unit, and system level of explanation.

Third, the last decade has witnessed major attempts at state building. Van Vugt and Ahuja's work yields insights for practitioners and scholars concerning what is necessary for good, stable governance. ELT is not the sole answer, to be sure. But their arguments concerning the right balance between good leadership and followership deserve to be studied. Americans are the "democratic ape" as they claim, and so strategies to enhance power and strategies to overcome the powerful will go hand-in-hand. Thus, the challenges of state building are more daunting than many policymakers appreciate, as shown by our experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Finally, stepping back from the perspective of international politics, perhaps the most lasting contribution van Vugt and Ahuja make is to introduce a new audience to the advantages of understanding social behavior through the lens of consilience. This book advances an excellent argument to a broad audience about how understanding human evolution helps address immediate problems. Moreover, it illuminates pathways for further research on major topics for students of politics, international or otherwise.

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