Political Leadership: Between Guardianship and Classical Democracy

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Motto:
“Truly it is no small thing to have to rule others, since in ruling ourselves so many difficulties occur. As for commanding, which seems to be so sweet: considering the imbecility of human judgement and the difficulty of choice in new and doubtful things, I am strongly of this opinion, that it is much easier and pleasanter to follow than to guide, and that it is a great rest for the mind to have only to hold to a mapped-out path and to be answerable only for oneself”. (Montaigne)

Leadership has a rather ambiguous status in democratic theory (Blondel 1987). One of the two traditions in democratic theory neglects almost completely the role of leadership in democratic government. In the classical view of democracy (as Schumpeter called it), in which democracy means the self-rule of the people, leadership is usually either ignored, or seen as a notion with some suspicious connotation. “The idea that there is something inherently undemocratic about the mere fact of leadership” has been widely shared both by believers and critics of democracy (Plamenatz 1973, 56). There is a good reason for that. Democracy defined as self-government of the people seems to exclude leadership and the government by leaders. The greater the significance of leadership, the more democracy, as rule of the people, is violated. Leadership contradicts both the self-rule of the people and the assumption of equality of citizens. Since assembly democracy, where this view has its origin, is not a feasible option of modern government, representation is to be used as a means to achieve self-government of the people. Danilo Zolo calls adaptation theory the view, which sees and justifies political representation in terms of an adjustment or up-dating of the Athenian model. “According to the ‘adaptation theory’, the institutions of political representation indirectly fulfil the same functions, which were previously exercised by direct democracy in the context of the polis” (Zolo 1992, 76). The adaptation theory of representation aims to ensure the necessary adjustment of democracy as a self-rule to the circumstance of large-scale societies. In the modern version of classical democracy it is the people, the electors, who decide the political issues and who then choose representatives to see to it that their decisions are carried out. The people choose them in order that they should give effect to their will. The adaptation theory is another manifestation of the same approach, which has been referred to by Joseph Schumpeter as the “classical theory of democracy” five

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decades earlier the following way: “the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will” (Schumpeter 1987, 250).

Plamenatz (1973, 96-97), as well as Carole Pateman (1970, 17) and David Held (1987, 178-79) criticize Schumpeter for his invention of the concept of the “classical theory of democracy” arguing that no classical author of political theory supported this doctrine. But Plamenatz admits that there is a loose image or idea of democracy, shared both by believers of it and of those who attack it. “These believers think of it as a system in which the people decide what they want done about the larger issues that face the community and choose deputies to put their decisions into effect. Where there is a democracy, according to this idea of it, there is a will of the people, and the business of the government is to carry it out.” (Plamenatz 1973, 39). Plamenatz suggests, that this idea is much better called popular than classical. It is to be found much more in political rhetoric, in speeches of radical politicians than in systematic political theory and serious academic works or in the works of the ‘classics’ (Plamenatz 1973, 39).

In my view, however, these ideals are implicit not only in popular discussion about democracy, as Plamenatz suggests, but they are widely assumed in democratic theory (cf. Femia 2001) and mainstream political science as well. The classical doctrine is not just a “straw man”. Many political scientists and democratic theorists accept the elements of this popular idea, often as a “shadow theory”, as Robert Dahl (1989, 36) called the implicit, unreflected assumptions behind democratic theories.

A contrasting view of the role of leadership in modern democracy was provided first by Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter. Both of them put leadership into the centre of the political process and into the centre of their democratic theory. They are sceptical of the view of democracy as rule by the people. Neither of them regarded democracy in this form feasible or even a desirable form of government. They were also sceptical of the view that public policy might be based on issue-preferences of rational and autonomous citizens and of the view that leaders or governments could be held accountable for their policy in specific issues. Citizens’ role is limited to the participation in the selection of rulers or leaders.

Using the notion of Max Weber, I will call this approach to the relation between leaders and citizens, which contradicts the classical doctrine, the model of leader democracy (Körösényi 2005). Below I will try to reveal some further elements of the model of leader democracy and compare them to the classical doctrine. My paper will have three major theses. In the first part I will try to show that the model of leader democracy, since it acknowledges the role of leadership gives a more adequate account of the political process and the working of the democratic political institutions (elections, representation) than the classical view. My second thesis is that the contrasting views of the political process given by the two theories are due to the different assumptions behind them. In the second part I would like to explore these diversities. While the classical view is based on more optimistic assumptions, the theory of leader democracy is more realistic and sceptical. The classical doctrine is built on assumptions, which are empirically unrealistic and logically untenable, and in which empirical and normative conditions are sometimes mixed up. In the third part I would like to refer shortly to the normative implications of the two models of democracy. My third thesis is

2 The notion of „enlightened understanding” in Dahl’s (1989) democratic theory is an example for that.
that although leader democracy is an analytical and realist model, it has important normative qualities. Some of the alleged normative qualities of the classical view, in contrast, are dubious.

The contrasting interpretations of democratic political process and institutions

**Democratic political process**

The two approaches of democracy provide contrasting pictures of the political process. In the classical doctrine, the starting point of the is the will of the people, which is usually interpreted as an explicit view of the people on major issues of public policy. This will is expressed through the issue-votes of citizens in elections, and the government must be responsive. The “*responsive rule*” must prevail, as May calls it (May 1978; Saward 1994, 14), even if citizens formally give their votes to candidates and, unlike in referendums, do not vote on individual issues. Democratic procedures must ensure a way – either through the mechanism grasped by the mandate-theory, or through delegation or through proportional representation – whereby the government will carry out public policy according to the expressed preferences of the people. The common good can be achieved through responsive public policy based on the will of the people. The decision-making process is a “bottom up” process. No room left for leaders according to this view of democracy. Office-holders, elected representatives are *delegates*, i.e. “executives” of the popular will, and not representatives in the traditional (Pitkin 1967) sense. Using the market metaphor of politics, it is a demand- or citizens-driven political-market. The classical view depicts the political process for example in the aggregative model of democracy, which ensures the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of the citizens (Dahl 1971; 1989). Democracy is equated with self-government of the people, which can be achieved through representation as an adaptation of assembly democracy to large scale society. Representation is considered as a necessary means to the end in this view of democracy (Dahl 1989, 13-33).

Unlike in the “bottom up” description of the political process presented by the classical view of democracy or the adaptation theory of representation, political process in leader democracy is generated by leaders. The popular will is an “empty space” (Cunningham 2002), policy-programs are presented by leaders and not by citizens or by the people. In democratic elections citizens do vote for candidates, i.e. for persons rather than for issues. Political leaders, who emerge from ordinary citizens, compete for power. In this struggle (Weber 1994) they mobilize followers with various means they have at their disposal, e.g. with their image, charisma, ideological appeal or issue-position. Leaders in governmental positions, as far as they can mobilize support, provide public policy rather autonomously from the citizens. Leader democracy is a representative system, where leaders rule, while citizens may participate at most in the selection of rulers. Although leaders may be responsive to certain wishes of the citizens, leader democracy does not provide a responsive government *per se*. It may produce at most a *responsible government* (Plamenatz 1973) in an optimistic, or just a *minimalist conception* of democracy (Przeworski 1999) in a more sceptical account. Democracy is perceived as a consent to leadership as well as a citizens’ role in competitive leadership selection.

The sharp contrast between the depiction of democratic political process provided by the classical view and by leader democracy is due to the different and incompatible assumptions about the major actors of democracy. Issue-vote, democracy as self-rule of the people, May’s
rule of responsive public policy, the aggregative nature of public interest as well as other elements of the classical view presume equality, autonomy, rationality and competence of citizens, while the approach of leadership challenges these assumptions. The active, instigative role and the autonomy of political leaders in the theory of leader democracy are based on assumptions like asymmetry between leaders and citizens in their competence, activity and ambition. These assumptions entail the reduced sense of responsibility of ordinary citizens in political matters, the “empty space” of the popular will, as well as the intuitive, voluntarist and particular nature of the common good.

The classical doctrine cannot give an adequate account how and why political process is set into and kept in motion. If there is a democratic government, the re-presentation of citizens will is ensured, then public policy is responsive and political process becomes re-productive and creates an equilibrium. In the rational model of Downs the political process can be set into motion only by the shifting preferences of individuals; politicians follow the change of public opinion in order to maximize-votes. At the same time, nothing motivates self-interested individuals for political action. Preferences themselves (like tastes) do not motivate to act, especially not for collective benefits (public goods) in a large-scale community, where participation is irrational (Downs 1957) and where the free-rider problem is obvious (Olson 1971). The classical doctrine does not have a theory of political action.

In leader democracy, in contrast, the rivalry of political leaders and their competition for votes set the political process into motion and keep its dynamic character. There is no “equilibrium point” or status quo, which cannot be turned upside down by the opposition leaders of the day. Social choice theory shows that every electoral majority is always created as an ad hoc coalition of minorities, therefore every occasional majority might be cut across by an other, a new majority (Stiglitz 1988, 158). And precisely this gives a chance for the opposition leaders to diverge the political process from any equilibrium. Unlike the classical doctrine, the theory of leader democracy provides a political explanation for the ongoing changes of the political process. The ceaseless rivalry of political leaders gives the political process an incessantly changing, dynamic character.

Elections: issues or candidates. Mandate or accountability theory

We have seen above that the two theories have very different views about the role of elections in the democratic process. While in the classical view citizens vote on issues, in the theory of leader democracy they vote on candidates. The former institutionalizes the rule of the people, while in the latter citizens just have some role in the selection of their rulers. The difference can be well illustrated by the contrast between the mandate and the accountability theory of representation (Manin et al 1999).

The mandate theory shares the wider assumption that the crucial criterion of democratic and representative government is the responsiveness of the public policy to citizens’ preferences.\(^3\) Taking the mandate theory in a more specific sense, government is deemed representative if it is responsive to the citizens will expressed in elections through the given mandate.\(^4\) The mandate of the politicians and/or parties who form the government is to carry out that specific

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\(^3\) This wider assumption is widely shared in empirical political science, see e.g. Page-Shapiro 1983; Brooks 1990; Jacobs-Shapiro 1994; Hobolt-Klemmensen 2005.

\(^4\) The empirical researchers try to measure that what percentage of their electoral promises are met by the following government policy, see e.g. Royed 1996; Budge-Hofferbert 1990; Budge-Hofferbert 1992; Rose 1984.
policy promised in their electoral manifesto. The function of elections in this view is the selection of policies to be accomplished by the future government and the selection of the politicians who carry out these policies. If the public policy is in accordance with the electoral mandate of the government, then the will of the people is realized. The mandate view fits well into the wider frame of the classical doctrine, since elections are seen as linkage between people’s will and public policy.

In the accountability theory of representation the role of elections is to provide an ex post evaluation of the government’s record, e.g. not the expression of citizens’ will on policy-issues to be carried out in the future, but making the rulers accountable for their policy record in the past and for the impact of the public policy. Accountability of government is ensured by consecutive elections, since in accordance with the Friedrich’s rule of anticipated reactions, elections motivate the incumbents seeking reelection to anticipate citizens’ future reactions to their public policy (Sartori 1987, 152).

The two theories of representation grew out from two distinct traditions of political thinking. While the intellectual source of the mandate theory is the classical view of democracy, the source of the accountability theory is the principle of representation (Pitkin 1967). While mandate theory assumes a more responsive public policy, which is sensitive to citizens’ preferences, accountability theory assumes a more autonomous role of the government. The former is the theory of a responsive the latter is that of a responsible government. Therefore the accountability view is in a normative sense, closer to a more optimistic version of the theory of leader democracy, where leaders can be held accountable by citizens. In a more sceptical account of elections, the possibility of ousting the incumbents does not necessarily result in their accountability as the Friedrich’s rule assumed.

The classical doctrine in general and the mandate theory in particular assume that citizens are equally well-informed and competent in public policy matters. Only competent and autonomous citizens are able to set up a preference order in each policy issue. According to a more sceptical view shared by the accountability theory and the theory of leader democracy, these conditions are not met, and for epistemological and anthropological reasons cannot be met either. The institution of democratic elections provides poor means to achieve the normative aims of the classical doctrine, like the self-rule of the people, or to realize the will of the people in specific public policy issues. Citizens, in a political sense, cannot be regarded as autonomous and competent actors; they fall far behind the political leaders in this respect. Leaders are those actors, who usually take the risk of and the political responsibility for initiating public policy decisions and making public choice.

Taking a more optimistic reading of the democratic theory of Weber and Schumpeter, citizens, at most, are able to give an ex post judgement on government’s record and can hold their rulers accountable. Therefore the function of elections according to this theory is first of all to select the rulers, i.e. the establishment of government, which is, by the way, consistent with the empirical and institutional reality. An asymmetry between leaders and followers, between politicians and citizens is maintained, which follows from the more sceptical assumptions of leader democracy. Voters decide through the consent to the leadership of particular persons rather than through autonomous initiative or choice.

**Representation**
Thirdly, the contrast between the classical doctrine and the theory of leader democracy will be highlighted through the question of representation. The theory of leader democracy can be understood as a specific version of the traditional concept of representative government. The representatives are political leaders in public office, who are authorized to govern and who are responsible to the citizens; they themselves shape the political alternatives in contingent political situations. They do not act instead of the represented. Representation has neither a “standing for” nor an “acting for” meaning; political representation is leadership (Körösényi 2005, 377). Through democratic elections, accountability is attached to representation, as we have seen above in the accountability theory.

In contrast, the classical doctrine is rooted in the concept of democracy as a self-rule of the people. In contrast to representation, the principle of identity provides its founding principle (Schmitt 1928, 150-52). Representation gains a role only as a useful institutional technique, what is an inescapable means to institutionalize and accomplish the idea of self-government of the people in modern large-scale societies. Representative bodies and institutions (e.g. an elected assembly) provide linkage between the will of the people and government policy, but they are not institutions with the autonomous political role of leadership. This channelling-role is expressed by the mandate theory of democratic election and government. Government is required to carry out public policy according to the given mandate, in an analytical as well as in a normative sense. Representation, as an autonomous and substantive activity for others (Pitkin 1967), is out of scope in this approach. It has, instead, a descriptive meaning; i.e. the re-presentation or mirroring of the will of the people, which is expressed through the issue-votes of the citizens (Pitkin 1967; Körösényi 2005).

According to Dahl’s democratic theory representation, although originally not a democratic institution, is the necessary result of the application of the principle of equality to modern political systems (Zolo 1992, 75). It is used as a means to achieve democracy as a self-rule. “Rule by the people” means, self-government what can be and should be institutionalized through representation in large-scale societies (Dahl 1989, 83, 97, 106). In this approach the assumption of the issue-vote of citizens and the mandate-view of democratic elections (Przeworski et al. 1999) ensure that representation serves the self-government of the people. However, in my view, the case is the opposite. Theoretically, the principle of equality could be preserved and institutionalized not by representation, but through lottery, or it can be substituted with institutions like the bounded mandate and the recall of the representatives, or with the regular application of referenda. Historically, the principle of equality has been applied through the extension of the franchise to a representative system, which already existed before. Representative democracy is therefore not an adjustment of democracy as a self-rule of the people to the circumstances of large-scale societies, but an egalitarian reform of the system of representative government (Manin 1997).

The sharp contrast in the depiction of democratic political process in the classical or popular view and in leader democracy is due to the different and incompatible assumptions about the major actors of democracy. Therefore, in the second part of my paper I would like to explore the differences between the underlying assumptions of the two theories of democracy,
considering firstly the equality of citizens, secondly the political competence (of the common man), thirdly the nature of the political preferences and volition, fourthly that of the responsibility, and finally the nature of the common good. We will see, that classical doctrine and leader democracy do have very different assumptions in these matters, and these differences shape the inner logic and the normative implications of these theories.

The contrasting assumptions

Equality vs. leadership

Democracy as a self-rule of the people assumes equality of citizens in various respects. The major weakness of the classical view both in descriptive and normative sense is that it assumes a symmetric relationship among citizens, therefore it excludes the very notion of leadership. Leadership, as a leader-followers relation, which is a structural element of political process, is necessarily a dynamic and asymmetric relationship. Asymmetry necessarily implies a kind of political inequality. It does not mean exclusion by birth, race, etc., but it means the acknowledgement of the reality that democratic political processes, for structural reasons, distributes political influence unequally among individuals. It may be feasible and desirable to aim at equality in a formal sense, nevertheless an asymmetry comes into being necessarily between leaders and citizens. Since the definition of leadership implies an asymmetric relationship between leaders and followers, the assumption of political inequality is an unavoidable consequence. In contrast to the classical doctrine, in leader democracy the political equality presumption is given up in both the descriptive and the normative sense.

(The epistemological argument for equality)

One of the justifications of the equality assumption is epistemological. A classical case for guardianship and against democracy is the superior knowledge of a minority. They are “qualified to govern by reason of their superior knowledge and virtue” (Dahl 1989, 52). But if the claim to superior knowledge in politics cannot be made clear the case for equality and democracy is justified, conclude both Robert Dahl and Michael Saward. This epistemological argument is an indirect or negative way of reasoning. It’s aim is to justify the equality assumption of democracy through the rejection of the thesis that guardianship could be justified by superior knowledge. But we will see, that even if guardianship cannot be justified, their conclusion concerning equality and democracy is too early.

Saward emphasizes (1994, 13) that “(t)he need to adopt the equality assumption arises from the fact that there is no secure ground upon which it can be said that one person or group has better insight in this field than any other”. Saward applies a sceptical argument, the principle of fallibilism, to challenge the view of superior knowledge in politics. In Pierce’s words, “fallibilism is the doctrine, that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were,
in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy” (cited by Saward 1994, 9). The fallibilist argument provides a refutation of superior knowledge, or of the absolute certainty of knowledge.

Saward draws a difference between “contingent knowledge” (a specialized, technical, partial knowledge), which is relevant in a certain sphere of activity and “non-contingent knowledge”, which is “general”, not confined to any subsystem of the political community. He concludes, that while contingent knowledge claims can overcome the fallibilist objection (i.e. an expert knowledge, in fact, can be superior in a specific sphere), non-contingent superior knowledge does no exist. Unlike the argument of Plato, which does not differentiate between specialized technical and general, political knowledge, Saward claims that political knowledge is qualitatively different. He argues, that “…politics in not a realm where contingent claims to specialized, superior knowledge are legitimate; rather, it is a realm in which only non-contingent claims are admissible in principle” (Saward 1994, 12). Therefore the superior knowledge claim in the realm of politics cannot escape the fallibilist critique. Having agreed that there is no superior knowledge in politics, it follows that the equality assumption is legitimate, and “individuals must be adjudged the best judges of their own interests” (Saward 1994, 13).

Saward’s reasoning is a renewal of the argument what Robert Dahl has applied in his Democracy and Its Critics (1989) earlier. Dahl also tried to justify the equality assumption of democracy in a negative way, rejecting the arguments for guardianship. However, the weakness of their argument is that a disproval of guardianship does not necessarily justify the equality assumption of democracy. There may be other (e.g. anthropological) sources of inequality than epistemé (i.e. absolute knowledge or knowledge with certainty). In my view, the equality assumption of democratic theory has to face a more sceptical challenge than guardianship, namely the challenge of leadership. Leadership does not require absolute knowledge still it is based on some kind of superior faculty or ability. Leaders do have practical knowledge (praxis), a type of knowledge you need in politics (Körösényi 2005, 372), which distinguishes them from ordinary citizens of democracy. The nature of this faculty will be depicted below.

2. Political autonomy vs. citizen’s incompetence

“Democracy – rule by the people – can be justified only on the assumption that ordinary people are, in general, qualified to govern themselves”, Dahl defines (1989, 97) another crucial assumption of democracy as a self-rule of the people. What does this mean? It requires the rational and moral capacity, the political autonomy (independence) and the competence of the citizens. It follows from the thesis of Dahl, that, if ordinary people are, in general, not qualified to govern themselves, then democracy, as a self-rule of the people cannot be justified. We will see below, that we have to accept a more sceptical assumption on the political competence of ordinary citizens therefore we can not justify democracy as rule by the people, but merely in a weaker or minimalist sense (Przeworski 1999). The equal moral capacity of human beings is a traditional moral assumption, upon which liberal democracy is based. Arguing from Aristotle’s thesis, Dahl (1989, 59) claims, that an “adequate level of moral competence is widely distributed”. Therefore, every citizen is ultimately the best judge of his own interest. The question is, what follows from this principle for the field of politics.

9 These anthropological sources of equality are not related to the socio-economic structure, but they have their roots in the human nature.
Can we conclude from this, that political competence is also widely distributed? Can we arrive to the conclusion that individuals possess political autonomy? Not at all, in my view. From the general anthropological assumption of the autonomy and rationalism of man does not necessarily follow political autonomy and competence.

Usually the political autonomy of individuals is taken for granted without any serious argument. Schumpeter challenged this conventional view with his famous infantilism argument, which aimed at demonstrating the degradation of political competence of average citizens. Schumpeter (1987, 258-261) differentiates between spheres of human action: the narrower, little field and the wider political field. The first one is the field of the daily life, where the individual citizen’s household, profession, family, neighbourhood and hobby lie. It is the area, which the individual knows well, where things are under his or her personal control. This little field consists of “…the things which are familiar to him independently of what the newspaper tells him, which he can directly influence or manage and for which he develops the kind of responsibility that is induced by a direct relation to the favourable or unfavourable effects of a course of action” (Schumpeter 1987, 259). As opposed to this, in the political field an ordinary citizen does not have direct, personal experience, does not know its rules and conventions well; he gains all his knowledge indirectly, through transmitters, and is not able to consider the long-run consequences of political actions. Therefore his sense of reality is mostly lost. His reduced sense of reality “accounts for a reduced sense of responsibility but also for the absence of effective volition”, for ignorance and lack of judgement in matters of domestic and foreign policy (Schumpeter 1987, 261). While in the little field, the ordinary citizen is capable of more or less rational and purposeful actions, in the political field it is much less so. That is the reason, why ordinary man does not have an effective volition in politics and therefore becomes sensitive to persuasion and external influences. “Thus the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests” (Schumpeter 1987, 262).

For our purpose it is even more important, what is implicit in Schumpeter’s argument. While entering the field of politics the ordinary citizen behaves like a child, a professional politician is at home in this field. What is the wider, political field for ordinary people is the narrower, little field for a political leader. Politics is the sphere of his or her everyday activity, where s/he is familiar with the rules, conventions and other realities of life. Therefore there is a wide gap between the competence of political leaders and ordinary citizens in this field. While leaders are politically competent and autonomous agents in this field, ordinary citizens are not. Though citizens can be autonomous and rational actors in their own narrower field, but they become politically heteronomous and non-rational in the political field.

Schumpeter’s infantilism argument challenges the epistemological justification of equality provided by Dahl and Saward. It follows from Schumpeter’s argument, that political leaders may have a contingent, specialized knowledge claim in their own narrower field, i.e. in the political field. Therefore, they have a superior (non-contingent) knowledge claim vis-à-vis ordinary citizens, using Saward’s term. Saward, however, made a difference between political and other type of knowledge, claiming, that the absolute or superior knowledge claim is irrelevant in the field of politics. Even if we share the view that absolute knowledge is irrelevant in the field of politics, therefore guardianship cannot be justified, Schumpeter’s infantilism argument reveals that there is a kind of “superior” knowledge, or competence, which is available only for professional politicians and not for ordinary men. Besides democracy as a self-rule of the people and guardianship there is a third type of rule. This is
leader democracy, which acknowledges and institutionalizes the role of leaders. Political leaders do not have an absolute knowledge (episteme), but do have a practical knowledge (praxis), which includes certain traits of contingent knowledge as well. Modern politics, including democratic politics, is a sphere that possesses its own “laws” or traits.

3. Volition leaders vs. preferences of citizens

The adaptation theory of the classical view assumes the existence of the people’s will, which can be defined and expressed, through some method of aggregation, from the preferences of rational and autonomous individual citizens. Leader democracy is sceptical to this view in two respects. Firstly, it challenges whether any definite collective choice could be aggregated from individual preferences at all. It shares the scepticism of classical elitism in this respect (Femia 2001, 90). Instead of people’s will, the volition of political leaders prevails in the political process. The populistic democracy or the classical doctrine explores democratic process and the governmental decision-making process as if it were a social choice problem (Dahl 1956). People’s will is to be derived from citizens’ issuepreferences in a way, in which the preference of each citizen is assigned an equal value. The well-known results of Kenneth Arrow (1951) and other authors of the Social Choice literature, however, challenge whether an unambiguous social or collective choice could be aggregated from ex ante given individual preferences at all (e.g. Arrow-paradox, voting-cycles, path-dependency). Mancur Olson (1971) reveals that individual rationalism may produce irrational social choice. The rational ignorance argument of Anthony Downs (1957) shows how ignorance and political apathy, i.e. political heteronomy comes into being from assumptions of rational and autonomous individuals. William Riker (1982; 1983) reveals that certain individuals in strategic position, manipulating the agenda-setting process or through “heresthetics” manipulating even citizens’ preferences can mould the social choice according to their own interests.

While the will of the people cannot be unambiguously defined within the rational Choice paradigm, the role of leadership can be grasped. Political leaders can be defined as those individuals who, through the manipulation of voters preferences, are able to mould the collective choices (cf. Shepsle-Bonchek 1997).

Secondly, leader democracy challenges whether individual’s preferences can be regarded as a starting point of the political process or as a basis of any sort of political will. Instead of people’s will, the volition of political leaders prevails in the political process. Due to the equality assumption, it is assumed according to the classical view that each citizen does have preferences on policy-issues. Anthony Downs and Robert Dahl assume that citizens individually and therefore collectively do have political will and precisely that will evokes the reaction of the politicians. But this assumption seems to be unrealistic. The faculties for various arts are not evenly distributed, neither the ambition to carry out these faculties. The model of leader democracy therefore assumes, that political leaders are different from ordinary citizens in this respect. While citizens often do not have any definite preferences on policy-issues, leaders do have, and usually do have stronger political preferences than ordinary man. One of the motivational sources of becoming a politician may be to have strong, definite political views. They are the persons who instigate other people to follow them in certain political or policy endeavour. As Bertrand de Jouvenel (1963) writes, precisely this instigation sets into and keeps the political process in motion.
Leaders are people of political action, but merely to have preferences is not enough for action. Strength of preferences does matter, but will is also a necessary component of action. It is precisely the effective volition, what ordinary citizens do not have in the field of politics in Schumpeter’s view. „The reduced sense of reality account not only for a reduced sense of responsibility but also for the absence of effective volition. One has one’s phrases of course, and one’s wishes and daydreams and grumbles: especially, one has one’s likes and dislikes. But ordinarily they do not amount to what we call a will – the psychic counterpart of purposeful responsible action.” (Schumpeter 1987, 261).

To summarize, leaders are autonomous actors in politics, not just followers of citizens’ wishes, or representatives of ex ante given group interests as the economic or aggregative-model of democracy assumes. They do have their own will concerning what to do, their own policy-position with which they try to mobilize followers, and precisely that is what makes them leaders. It is the political will of leaders that moves political actions, therefore the whole political process.

(Further sources of political action)

Certain human characteristics, like determined will, risk taking, etc. are more conducive to political action than others (e.g. thoughtfulness). Among the various motivational sources of becoming a political leader will of power must be taken into consideration, beside other elements like having a passionate commitment to a cause or having some vision of the national interest, as emphasized by Max Weber (1994, 353). The desire for greatness, honour and glory also can be added to this list (Balázs 2006). These sources of the volition of political action are also unevenly distributed among the citizens of a polity. This ambition for and capacity of leadership characterizes only a small minority of the citizens. Political leaders are selected from those few, who take the risks, the responsibility, and who take part in the competition or struggle for power. Citizens themselves, in democratic politics, usually get some role in the last phase of this selection process only. The selection of leaders is in this way first of all means self-selection of leaders, where the voters’ role is confined to the recognition of leaders in public office or the rejection of them. Citizens’ democratic role is limited to giving consent to the leaders in public office or cancelling it.

4. Responsibility

The liberal political theory regards individuals as autonomous and (therefore) responsible agents. Everybody is responsible for his or her own choices and actions. The meaning of this is clear in ethics, in private life and in the world of the private goods. A collective choice in a democracy, which is derived from the citizens’ preferences or wishes through an aggregative procedure, however, does not establish public or political responsibility in any respect. The classical theory abolishes political responsibility or more precisely dissolves it into the self-government of the people. Due to the identity-principle of democracy (Schmitt 1928, 150-152), the people is identical with itself, therefore cannot make itself accountable, since accountability presumes a principal-agent relationship. A further trait of collective choice or action is, especially in large communities, that it eliminates the sense of responsibility of the individuals. The relation between citizens’ vote and the impact of their choice is so ambiguous, uncertain and remote, that a voter’s decision does not imply the feeling of

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10 As Mosca writes, „the representative has himself elected by the voters” (Femia 2001, 89).
responsibility in any meaningful sense. Additionally, secret vote does not make it visible who is in fact responsible for specific decisions.

In contrast to the above, in a representative government the representative is an agent, who is responsible (for his actions) to the principal. The paradox of the adaptation theory of representation is that it also abolishes public responsibility. If democracy means complete responsiveness to citizens, political leaders (in government or in opposition) are not responsible for public policy any more. They are turned into delegates rather than into representatives. Responsiveness to the popular will abolishes both leadership and political responsibility. This way the classical doctrine of democracy excludes the problem of responsibility, as seen in the democratic theory of Dahl (1989), which neglects completely the question.

Contrary to this, in leader democracy the problem of responsibility is closely connected to the concept of leadership. Similarly to the liberal view of representative government (Mill 1991; Plamenatz 1973; Birch 1964), Weber and Schumpeter also emphasize the relative autonomy as well as the responsibility of leaders. They regard leaders and not citizens to be the subject of responsible action. Unlike citizens, leaders do have the sense of responsibility, since they can give a more thorough judgement on the potential impact of policy propositions, as Weber emphasizes in his account of the political ethos (Weber 1994, 353). Their institutional accountability and the Friedrich’s law also endorse the development of the sense of responsibility. Schumpeter underlines in his infantilism argument, that ordinary man, in contrast to leaders, has only a reduced sense of responsibility in national policy issues.

John Stuart Mill emphasized, that even the members of an assembly do not feel personal responsibility to the same degree as the members of the executive, like ministers, who have one man responsibility in their jurisdiction (Mill 1991). The problem is multiplied in the case of large-scale societies. The nature of collective, democratic decision-making fosters irresponsible collective choices (e.g. the increase of state expenditures from public debt), as Bobbio notes referring to the problem of ungovernability (Bobbio 1987, 39; cf. also Brittan 1975 and Crozier et al. 1975). It is only responsible leadership which can challenge the policy of never weakening demands for government expenditures from various interest groups.

We can conclude that taking responsibility is an essential virtue, and this virtue is an attribute of political leaders rather than that of their followers.

5. The aggregative vs. innovative nature of the common good

Traditionally the epistemological justification of guardianship claims that superior knowledge of the public interest and therefore the possibility to create the appropriate public policy is possessed by a single person or a small minority of the polity. The political knowledge is an absolute, objectively valid knowledge (epistemē). Therefore, it is in the public interest that the possessors of this knowledge rule or govern, even if it is against the public opinion of the day. The classical doctrine of democracy shares the view that for every proper polity a single common good exists, but challenges through an epistemological argument (fallibilism) the notion that anybody or any group of persons could have an

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11 The difference lies in the question that to which extent can be leaders held accountable. While the liberals are more optimistic, Weber and Schumpeter are more sceptical in this respect.
exclusive knowledge of it. Its conclusion arrives at the equal political competence of citizens, who are rational and autonomous agents. Therefore, democracy as a self-government of the people is the only form of government which corresponds to the public good.

Modern political theory has produced different variations of the classical doctrine. Each describes differently the way, how collective decisions are formed from citizens’ views or preferences. According to the utilitarian approach appropriate public policy is formed through the aggregation of citizens’ preferences, according to participative democrats it is rooted in the participation of citizens in the political process and finally, according to deliberative democrats it is revealed through the process of rational argumentation in an “ideal speech situation”.

Robert Dahl provides a synthesis of these currents of the classical view. According to him, common good is both substance and process. Dahl (1989, 306-08) defines the common good in terms of the democratic process; but the depiction of the process is different from that of Schumpeter’s pure procedural criteria. The procedural claim includes normative conditions in Dahl’s account. He states that “…an essential element in the meaning of the common good among the members of a group is what the members would choose if they possessed the fullest attainable understanding of the experience that would result from their choice and its most relevant alternatives” (Dahl 1989, 308). To put it another way, the common good is composed of democratic procedures of collective choice and of outcomes arrived at through such procedures under conditions of enlightened understanding (Cohen 1991, 224). Dahl (1989, 111-112) takes enlightened understanding, as a normative criterion of the democratic political process, as a necessary element of the common good. It ensures, firstly, that citizens must be well informed, since it is a precondition of responsible decision-making; secondly, that the impact of collective decisions is taken into consideration; and thirdly, that the harmony between individual interests and the common good will be kept. Enlightened understanding therefore provides that a person’s good gains a broader meaning than merely a self-regarding interest (Dahl 1989, 72-3); the understanding of and the responsibility for others give a human centred ground for collective decisions (Dahl 1991, 229). “Insofar as a citizens’ good or interests requires attention to a public good or general interest, then citizens ought to have the opportunity to acquire an understanding of these matters” (Dahl 1989, 112). The procedures for making decisions should furnish citizens with opportunities to understand means and ends. It shows that Dahl’s approach shares the criteria and the optimism of the developmental concept of democracy, in which democratic institutions and citizens’ participation are not just means of decision-making but do have normative functions. Firstly, the notion of “enlightened understanding” seems to transcend the conflict between individual and common interest. Secondly, it also seems to transcend the condition of contingency, which characterizes every political situation. Thirdly, it seems to neglect the lesson from the epistemological argument. In their critique of guardianship, Dahl and Saward objected to the possibility of absolute knowledge in politics and the justification of anybody’s rule based on this knowledge. However, assuming that the public good or public interest exists in any political community, the argumentation of Dahl implicitly concludes that if citizens are well-informed and competent, the common good can be potentially known and accomplished. His reasoning suggests that the common good has an objective and knowable nature. This potential is provided in Dahl’s theory through normative assumptions regarding citizens’ capabilities and democratic procedures.

The “enlightened understanding”, as a normative criterion of the democratic political process, is a clear signal that Dahl shares the classical doctrine of democracy. It also shows, that a
simple aggregation of ex ante preferences or the equal consideration of them, according to Dahl, does not necessarily produce the common good. It is “enlightened understanding” itself which ensures that rule by the people in an aggregative democracy may achieve the common good. The substantive outcome depends on the degree of “enlightenment” of citizens’ preferences. It suggests, if an appropriate level of enlightenment is achieved, the common good is available.

The theory of leader democracy challenges this proposition, claiming, that empirically it is not a realistic account of the capacity of ordinary man in the field of politics and it also disregards the nature of the political process. “Enlightened understanding”, as a normative criterion of the democratic political process and that of the common good, has an implicit empirical assumption. It attributes to citizens such a capacity that seems to be unrealistic, regarding (i) the uncertainties and contingencies in the political process; (ii) the complexity of the modern world. It also neglects (iii) Schumpeter’s infantilism argument and (iv) the paradox of individual and collective rationality. In reality, the common good, rooted always in concrete situations, (v) has a particularistic nature; (vi) it is always political, i.e. a result of decisions taken in contingent situations; (vii) it can not overcome conflicts; (viii) at most an ex post consensus can be reached on the common good.

Guardianship, self-government, leadership. The consequences of assumptions

As we have seen above, Dahl and Saward try to justify the equality assumption through objecting to the possibility of the absolute or superior knowledge-claim shared by guardianship. An additional argument of Dahl (1989) is, in this respect, that guardianship requires such a procedure for the selection of rulers, which can select individuals with superior knowledge with high certainty in order to authorize them to govern the people. Since we do not have such a procedure in the field of politics, guardianship is not simply a type of rule, which cannot be justified, but it is unfeasible at the same time. Although Dahl’s argument objects to guardianship, it cannot justify, in my view, the assumption of equality and the political autonomy of individuals.

One of the traditional arguments for guardianship is the application of the parent-child relation in the field of politics as an analogy. A child relies on parental care and protection, since (s)he is not capable of independent, autonomous and responsible action and life-conduct. Her parents or guardians know it better what is in her interest. The classical doctrine assumes that each adult citizen has equal capacity to conduct his or her life, each of them is responsible for his or her actions, therefore they are equals or they should be regarded as equals. The legal order and the whole Western civilization rely on these presumptions. In my view, it does not follow from this, that this capacity of adult citizens including their sense of judgement would be equal. It assumes only that each has a sense of judgement, therefore individuals can be held responsible and/or accountable for their deeds.

Guardianship takes for granted that there are similar differences in moral and cognitive competence among the members of a political community, to the parent-child relationship. We often need advice in our private life, but even more in public matters; we accept and follow the guidance of others. It is in the public interest, if individuals with superior, “parental” knowledge rule. However, since we are not able to say how to select the excellent guardianship cannot be better than arbitrary rule, argue its critics.
In my view, both guardianship and the classical doctrine are false. The former presupposes that politically relevant inequalities of competence and knowledge are absolute, the latter does not acknowledge that inequalities exist at all. Contrastingly, the theory of leader democracy begins with an assumption, which is in an “in between” position and which relies on a more realistic anthropological view of man (Santoro 1993). It shares such politically relevant anthropological and epistemological assumptions, which acknowledge that besides the elements of equality, there are inequalities among men regarding politically relevant information, political competence, intensity of preferences, volition, willingness of taking political responsibility, will of power and desire for glory. In addition to this, these inequalities are not distributed equally among the members of the political community, but they are cumulated in a smaller or larger extent, and serve as sources of asymmetric relationship between leaders and citizens. The theory of leader democracy assumes that there is a mixture of equality and inequality in human relationships and that the relation between leaders and followers is neither hierarchical, nor symmetrical. Mutuality as well as asymmetry characterise this relationship.

Another advantage of the theory of leader democracy vis-à-vis guardianship and the classical doctrine is that it has an institutional method for leadership selection, which is well integrated into the model of democracy. The method is empirically feasible and has some positive normative implications at the same time. The idealist model of guardianship cannot provide such a procedure. The classical doctrine also fails regarding these institutional-procedural questions, since neither of the three following methods accomplishes the promised capacities. (i) Lottery, the ancient Greek selection-method of public officials in self-government is not used any more, which means an implicit acknowledgement of the fact, that its anthropological assumptions are too optimistic and illusionary. (ii) Issue-vote is unfeasible. Firstly, it is impossible to implement as a general decision-making method of government; secondly, its pure form, the aggregative-model, cannot meet the challenge of voting-paradoxes; thirdly, it is not desirable, since it cannot solve the problems of path-dependency, manipulation of the agenda and the preferences, neither the paradox between individual and collective rationality. Referendum is used exceptionally in political practice and it can be easily turned to be a means of political manipulation (see the critics of plebiscite democracy). (iii) Mandate theory, which fits well the adaptation theory of representation, requires such preconditions, which cannot be met empirically. Political leaders (and the media, etc.) have a crucial role in setting the agenda as well as in shaping citizens’ preferences, therefore votes cannot be regarded as an expression of independent preferences or the will of the citizens.

Contrastingly, the theory of leader democracy starts from the empirical and institutional reality (voting is about candidates) and analyses its consequences. Selection of political leaders is firstly a self-appointment or self-selection, secondly a selection from competing candidates. The normative potential of leader democracy is expressed by the accountability-theory, which fits well the more optimistic reading of it. In this view, elections turn to be a method of selection (Manin 1997), or to put it another way, it establishes a selective and meritocratic polyarchy (Sartori 1987), in which the accountability of leaders establishes responsible government. The method of elections involves the acknowledgement of an asymmetry in political competences and the appropriate institution for the expression of it at the same time.

A shift from this “in between” position towards any extreme position and the substantive nature of elections will change, it will loose its essence and turn into an empty formula. The further we move from the assumption of asymmetry towards the assumption of symmetry that
is towards the assumption of equality of competence, the less the result of elections will differ from the result of lottery. Moving from the opposite direction from the assumption of asymmetry towards the assumption of extreme differences in competence and in the power of judgement, elections ultimately become a form of manipulation.

In a more pessimistic reading, if a wider gap between the competence and power of judgement of leaders and citizens is assumed, then the elements of manipulation will strengthen in political leadership. Public opinion, as Schumpeter explored, will be more and more manufactured; electoral choice will be personalized and reduced to consent to leadership.

Summary and conclusions: analytical and normative implications

The classical doctrine, associating democracy with self-government of the people, cannot give an adequate account of the political process; (i) it excludes leadership from the political process; (ii) it perceives elections as issue-votes; (iii) it considers representation as a technical means of mirroring the popular will. It relies on assumptions like equality and autonomy of citizens, which proved to be empirically false and logically untenable. These assumptions also include overestimated competence of citizens, like Dahl’s “enlightened understanding” and the aggregative approach of the common good, which is not tenable in the world of incomplete information.

As we have seen above, Arrow’s voting-paradoxes, Downs’ thesis of rational ignorance, Schumpeter’s infantilism-argument and Olson’s free-rider argument all demonstrate that social choice or collective action cannot be based on citizens’ preferences. The aggregative and deliberative theories of democracy are not only too idealistic, but untenable, if the unavoidably emerging world of incomplete information, or agenda and strategic manipulation are taken into consideration. Political situations belong necessarily to the world of incomplete information and do have contingent nature. The output and impact of political processes therefore is highly uncertain; and the ever growing complexity of the world increases the unpredictable nature of political actions (Zolo 1992; Femia 2001, 102-109). We do not (and cannot) have absolute knowledge about the common good, which has neither an objective nor an aggregative nature. Therefore we cannot have absolute knowledge about the political action necessary for the public interest. Due to these factors, arbitrary elements and volition do have a role in every political action seeking to accomplish any concept of the common good. Political leaders play crucial role in creating the rival alternatives of the public good.

The more realistic assumptions of the theory of leader democracy make possible a more adequate account of the political process (elections, representation) and that of the role of leaders in democratic politics. The political process itself is generated by the rivalry of political leaders. Leaders are initiators and persuaders, who manipulate the political process. They would like to shape rather than follow public opinion and the “will of the people”. In this way, issue-vote cannot be separated from their role, since instigation, agenda-setting and the manipulation of preferences are primary role of leaders. Leadership is an asymmetric, but mutual relationship. In democratic elections citizens vote first of all for candidates or parties; therefore democracy is feasible either as a selection of rulers or as a means of giving consent to (or retrieving from) the rule of the office-holders. Democracy works, instead of self-rule, as an egalitarian version of representative government. It does not satisfy the criteria of the mandate-theory of elections; but if asymmetry between leaders and citizens does not turn to be an extreme, the criteria of accountability-theory might be met.
All of this has important normative consequences. While some of the allegedly normative values of the classical doctrine, which usually are taken for granted, have been challenged, leader democracy has unexpected normative potential. Firstly, the theory of leader democracy gives up the assumption of political equality, since it proved to be unrealistic in a descriptive sense, and challenges the desirability of political equality at the same time. Secondly, due to incomplete information and the differences in citizens’ competence, the common good cannot be revealed through an aggregative way. Therefore, it is not in the public interest if the preferences of ignorant and indifferent citizens (would) have the same weight in collective decisions as that of the committed, competent and responsible ones. Thirdly, the selection of political leaders relies partly on self-selection or self-appointment. The emergence of leaders from among the citizens is not something that is (even in democracy) unavoidable, but bad. The role of leaders is fundamental for any collective action. Leaders themselves create alternatives of the common good. Fourthly, a public policy alternative of the common good cannot be revealed through aggregation, but it is created by the innovative role of leaders. Any vision about the common good and collective action includes components of intuition, will, vision and is accompanied by a certain sense of arbitrariness. Fifthly, leadership also has a role in reducing the complexities of politics (through agenda-setting and other means of manipulation), which makes politics more comprehensible for ordinary citizens (Bobbio 1987, Zolo 1992). Sixthly, leadership as an autonomous action includes responsibility-taking. It is an important, often neglected political virtue, which is a trait of leadership, but does not characterize followers. Finally, a political leader is a representative of the people. Representation in the theory of leader democracy, unlike in the classical doctrine of democracy, makes it possible to grasp institutionally the responsibility and accountability of governmental leaders.

References: