The Pursuit of Power in a Political Context

Perhaps every age thinks theirs is one of penultimate change and chaos. The writing and commentary of individuals from earlier ages viewed their time as one where world-changing problems had to be decided by their leaders. Presently, the global community exists in the shadow of nuclear warfare—introduced half a century ago—and accelerating ecological change, while the notion of human thought is threatened by the artificial mind and robotic body. In these times of ambiguity, the abandonment of collective responsibility to that of a dictatorial leader is increasingly found across the globe. Who are these individuals who are charged with saving us from ourselves? Understanding the psychologies of these leaders tells us a great deal about who they are as well as who we are as their followers.

The threat of social change places greater importance on our leaders. In a context of significant deterioration of social traditions, the appeal of powerful and forceful leaders offers the chance for absolute power and dominance. To paraphrase George Orwell, the power of authoritarianism is expressed via the debasement of the norms of the populace and the reinvent these norms as one sees fit. The authoritarian leader may abandon the political norms and conventions of their society. As will be observed, these leaders frequently reconstitute the practices of government to meet their personal needs and prejudices. It may be thought that the authoritarian inherently shifts the rhetoric of governance, and the shaping of policies, and inherently modifies social norms in how the society views its government.

Conceptually, this proposition of political change can be framed in terms of the Overton window. His window indicates the range of viable political policies that can be supported by the populace. The social theorist Joseph Overton considered the range of policies that political leader can propose without appearing too extreme to gain or keep office in the present climate of public opinion. An effort to characterize the level of acceptability of the political initiative was proposed by Trevino (2006). This hierarchy seeks to identify the relative public acceptability of an initiative by the leader or aspiring leader. As has been suggested, the political leader strives to function within this context of social appropriateness. The descriptors employed by Trevino include (1) the established policy of the ruling government, (2) popular alternate policies for governance, (3) sensible or logic-driven arguments, (4) acceptable if equally unpopular policies with the general population, (5) radical arguments accepted by a minority membership of the society, and finally (6) the unthinkable/unacceptable policies that are rejected by the overwhelming number of the population.

One critique that has sought to clarify the process by which the Overton window functions has been made by Robertson (2018) who noted that the efforts of leaders are not to moderate social opinion as much as it is to conform to it. That is, the window illustrates the attitudinal parameters within which the politician seeks to shape their rhetoric and policies to gain power. Conventional political practice seeks to conform to social norms as a means of gaining power. This is instructive and informs the relationship between the political environment and the leader. In political systems governed by electoral processes, this is obvious. The leader seeks to match the presumptions of the majority of the voting populace. The authoritarian leader, however, responds to political norms via distinctively different pathways to power. In the perpetration of the coup d'etat, adhering to political norms is irrelevant as control is replaced by power. Fidel Castro's rebellion that overthrew the regime of Batista did not have to concern himself with political norms in an authoritarian-to-authoritarian transfer of power, neither did Pinochet in his violent coup of Allende in Chile nor Brezhnev when he peacefully pushed out Khrushchev as

leader of the Soviet Union. Other than force, however, is the social psychological process of effecting political change—stretching the window—which relies upon involving suppressed social norms and biases. In this process, the bid for power addresses a deeper a-political dynamic of invoking cultural norms that are either underrepresented by the political practices or suppressed situating these norms as falling between "acceptable" and "radical" to use Trevino's model.

As a descriptive tool for discussing political change, the window hypothesis does not have a clear methodology or evidence-based basis for assigning acceptable versus unacceptable policies. Most political theory concerning the Overton window argues the task of the leader is to conform to the norms of governance. This provides a useful contrast to the underlying goal of the authoritarian—that is, to function independently of established forms of governance. There have been concerns that the model inherently directs social critique to aspire to a political and sociological middle ground (Marsh, 2016; Zbigniew Szałek, 2013).

An example relevant to the issue of authoritarianism is the promulgation of hate crime laws. In the United States, a federal act to support initial data collection of hate-motivated crimes was passed in 1990. Since that time hate crimes have been recognized as a unique infraction under most state statutes by 2000. Importantly, these statutes came to be replicated internationally. This reflects a remarkable shift of an Overton window from no political engagement to one of increasing breadth and efficacy internationally. These laws are important in terms of the problems of intergroup violence that are a product of the rise of authoritarian ultranationalist movements. At the same time, the political shift in the window is pitted against the cultural resistance of law enforcement professionals in the deep southern states of the United States. This region of the country has chronically underreported hate crimes over the past 30 years (Dunbar, 2017). Similarly, the rise in public support for same-sex marriage during the past one-half century in the United States has served as a backdrop for the Marriage Equality Act of 2011.

Many theorists note that the transition of policies—e.g., the movement of initiatives within the window—has been increasingly right-wing oriented. Critical incidents and "blurring the window" of political discourse are continuous and dynamic. A recent series of social media messages by Black entertainer Kanye West endorsed white supremacist "White Lives Matter" messaging as well as West's assertion that Trump's Jewish son-in-law was a "handler" who was covertly holding the Trump administration back in terms of issues concerning peace in the Middle East (Broschowitz, 2022). West was subsequently championed by white nationalist media personality Tucker Carlson on his television program. Politically, this stereotypic speech broadens the window while also invoking deeper cultural biases of Euro-American culture. The practice of authoritarian leadership seeks to function independently of established political processes. The authoritarian leader characteristically forces change in the political norms of their society—in essence to stretch the window—moving the undesirable to the acceptable and the unthinkable, such as genocide, to the tolerable. The critical motivation of the authoritarian leader is personal power which is predominant over political conformity. This will for power seeks to dominate the political landscape if not actively reshape it. This person–environment interaction can be examined both as a form of social influence and additionally as a personal leadership style.