

Closing Argument

The Weakness of Indispensable Leaders

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House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy clung on through fourteen ballots for the Speaker of the House of Representatives before finally winning the position on the fifteenth. Even the first failed ballot started whispers that McCarthy should step back from the contest in the interests of the Congress and the American people. If he could not lead his own Republican Conference, how could he hope to lead the House of Representatives? But McCarthy persevered, using a mixture of cajoling and concessions to win over enough votes to take the gavel. McCarthy's critics – both among Democrats and in the media – complained that he weakened his position through the concessions he made. His supporters within the Republican Party insisted that McCarthy had earned the right to be Speaker and that they had the right to elect him.¹

The silver lining in this contest is that no-one claimed that McCarthy is indispensable. On the contrary, everyone admitted that there were others who could lead the Republican Conference if necessary. They acknowledged that McCarthy is ambitious, that he long aspired to the position, that he still felt deep scars over not receiving the post in 2015, when outgoing Speaker John Boehner anointed Paul Ryan instead, and that McCarthy would go to great lengths to achieve his professional objectives. If anything, observers questioned whether McCarthy's personal ambitions were extracting too high a price from the House and the Speakership as institutions.² The implication is that someone else could do the job without being forced to make the same concessions. Put another way, McCarthy was not indispensable; the alternative might even be better. McCarthy held on to win the position, nonetheless.

This story contrasts sharply with the events that unfolded in Italy last July when Mario Draghi brought down his own government despite maintaining a majority within both chambers of the Italian Parliament. Draghi was widely regarded both inside and outside Italy as the country's indispensable political leader. The President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, had asked Draghi in February 2021 to form a coalition of national unity to lead Italy out of the pandemic and to undertake the painful reforms necessary to qualify for European Union (EU) assistance in rebuilding the country's economy. That coalition included virtually every major political party apart from the Brothers of Italy on the far right, and represented more than eighty-five percent of the seats in parliament. But when faced with a rebellion from one part of his coalition, Draghi reasoned that he would never be able to achieve the legislative objectives that he was appointed to accomplish so long as he could be held hostage by his own putative allies. Draghi had no ambition to hold onto power for its own sake. After a life of devoted public service, Draghi refused to be indispensable and so resigned, leaving Mattarella little choice but to dissolve parliament and call for early elections.

The two stories come together in terms of their impact on the resilience of political institutions, including constitutional checks and balances. Critics of Draghi worried that his discipline over the national unity coalition was excessive, that he relied too heavily on confidence votes to move legislation, and that he strengthened the power of the executive relative to the legislature. They also worried that the press too often gave Draghi a free pass.³ Those criticisms seemed heretical when Draghi was in office. Draghi was, after all, widely regarded as a national hero. But they took on new meaning when the Brothers of Italy won the subsequent elections at the lead of a right-wing coalition and Giorgia Meloni became Draghi's replacement. Meloni had been Draghi's principal

opposition, but she openly admires his disciplined method, she strives to emulate his style of governance, and she aspires to change Italy's constitutional arrangements to strengthen the executive even further to look something like the presidential system in France.⁴

Critics of McCarthy claim he is weakening control over the legislature and critics of Meloni that she is strengthening it. But those critics have to admit that both leaders face a comeuppance. If McCarthy proves unable to control the Republican Conference in the House, he will most likely be replaced as leader or they will be replaced as a majority. If Meloni pushes too hard to centralize power, she will face a similar rebellion – particularly if she tries to bring her proposed constitutional changes to the electorate for a popular referendum. But since neither of these leaders is indispensable, what matters is how good the U.S. and Italian constitutional arrangements are at self-correcting. The strength of democracy is precisely that political leaders are replaceable, particularly when they make mistakes. Indispensable leaders are a weakness.

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This weakness of indispensable leaders is on full display in those countries led by strong men sitting atop authoritarian regimes. It seems only a short time ago that these strongmen – and they are essentially all men – were heralded as a major challenge to democracy.⁵ Leaders like Vladimir Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland offered a different, illiberal model, for governance. So did Donald Trump in the United States. Within that model, these leaders are irreplaceable in many respects.⁶ For their supporters, they are uniquely talented and insightful. They have the special ability to act where others dither, to root out corruption, to stand up to the powerful, and to represent their people's best interests. Even their detractors find it hard to imagine what would happen if these leaders suddenly vanished. There would be a bitter fight for power with few rules to guide succession and a high potential for violent conflict. Hence, these strongmen become indispensable even if only as a bulwark against the chaos that their sudden departure might unleash.

Now the disadvantages of this kind of political leadership seem more obvious. Putin is embroiled in a brutal, mistaken, unnecessary conflict in Ukraine with no obvious way to get out without losing face.⁷ His only alternatives are to keep pouring conscripts onto the battlefield, to escalate the conflict even further, or to find some way to declare victory in the face of defeat. None of these options are attractive and yet neither is the possibility that some other actor will oust Putin as leader, if only because of the many ways such a coup could trigger conflict within Russia and what that new leadership would do to ensure that Putin stays out of power. Putin is trapped as President just as much as Russia is mired in Ukraine.⁸

Xi's position is clearly better than Putin's, the Chinese leader is not without challenges of his own. He has managed to consolidate his position over the party and the institutions of state, but he has had similar problems owing up to his policy mistakes.⁹ The recent reversal of the zero-Covid policy is a good illustration. That policy was successful during the early stages of the pandemic and yet it became more problematic as other countries relied on aggressive vaccination campaigns to open up their economies and societies. Xi could not relax the zero-Covid policy without a similarly aggressive vaccination strategy and yet he also could not rely on vaccinations to strengthen immunity unless he either waited for Chinese researchers to replicate the success of Western mRNA vaccines or he purchased those vaccines abroad. Neither vaccination strategy was acceptable, and yet the

continued use of lockdowns was unsustainable. Therefore, Xi decided simply to open up the society and allow the pandemic to spread through the population. His government may deny the consequences of this action, but it is clear both at home and abroad that Xi's policies have failed and yet no-one is being held to account.

For Erdoğan, the challenge lies in economic performance. As Erdoğan centralized control over the country's political institutions, he also centralized control over economic policy. This strategy derived from his earlier successes. Erdoğan won a series of electoral contests based primarily on his ability to deliver prosperity. As that ability diminished, he also faced greater political challenges both within his Justice and Development Party (AKP), from his putative allies, and from the opposition.¹⁰ Consolidating power and control over the economy was necessary to fend off both sources of threat. It was also isolating, insofar as the circle of trust shrunk dramatically as that control increased. Now Erdoğan faces slow growth and high inflation with few viable options to improve the situation. He also has little scope to imagine life outside of office. The consequences of losing power for his family and his allies are potentially significant.¹¹ So, like Putin, he is trapped as President.

The point here is not to say that the arrival of a strongman in office – and again, they are essentially all men up to this point – is a death knell for any political organization. On the contrary, voters in Brazil managed to push Bolsonaro out of office just as voters in the United States removed Donald Trump. It turns out that neither of these leaders were truly indispensable after all. Whether the same is true for Kaczyński (who holds no official title but leads through his Law and Justice (PiS) political party) or Orbán remains to be seen. Indeed, it is likely that both the Polish and Hungarian political systems will eventually correct themselves. That possibility is what the whole debate about the rule of law in Central and Eastern Europe is about.¹² If these individuals make significant policy errors, they should be held accountable – because that accountability strengthens the political system. Allowing policy mistakes to fester only makes political systems weak and fragile.

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But if democratic constitutional arrangements are resilient where indispensable leaders and strongmen are weak, it is fair to ask why it is important for democracies to have strong leaders and why strong leaders have a tendency to view themselves as indispensable in a way that might undermine the functioning of democracy or challenge fundamental democratic principles. This question emerges from a close reading of a recent essay by G. John Ikenberry on 'Why American Power Endures'.¹³ Ikenberry argues that American power endures insofar as the United States continues to inspire hope. In turn, the United States uses that power to build alliances and promote world order. 'If China and Russia seek to usher in a new world order, they will need to offer something better – an onerous task indeed.'¹⁴

What is striking in Ikenberry's essay is that he ascribes so little agency to U.S. political leaders. Woodrow Wilson defines terms or makes arguments and so do Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and George H.W. Bush, but they only describe American greatness. The real political agency that exercises power is either the United States as a 'unique kind of society' or Washington as the expression of a unique political arrangement. No more recent U.S. presidents play a role in Ikenberry's argument for the persistence of American power, even if the 'supporters of President Donald Trump' deserve mention for their 'attack on the U.S. Capitol'.¹⁵ By contrast, Xi and Putin show up on the second page as the principal challenge to American global leadership. Toward the

end of the piece, Xi returns to make himself 'dictator for life' in China while Putin has 'has placed the United States and democracies in Europe and elsewhere on the defensive' through his 'gambit' in Ukraine.¹⁶

Ikenberry's institutional or structural account of American power is not devoid of human agency. Instead, it identifies that agency in social movements both inside and outside the United States. This reflects a conventional wisdom in the social sciences that individuals have less influence on the course of history than the broader social movements within which they exist – which is understandable given that neither historical figures nor the historians who narrate their tale can free themselves from the context within which they operate.¹⁷

But Ikenberry's emphasis on structural forces and large social movements is also due to the fact that most leaders are replaceable in the sense that the most likely alternative who took up the reins of power would do things very similarly.¹⁸ Even if Kevin McCarthy had stepped back after losing the first ballot for Speaker, the most likely alternative, Steve Scalise, would have much the same trouble managing the Republican majority in the House. By the same token, there is no surprise that Giorgia Meloni, who is a professional politician with little in terms of formal higher education, would want to pick up where the ultimate technocrat Mario Draghi left off.

The problem with focusing so much on structures and social movements, however, is that there are moments where the structures of power and the interests of broad social movements work at cross purposes. Such moments demand leadership. Mahatma Ghandi, Vaclav Havel, and Nelson Mandela – three 'leaders of liberation movements' identified by Ikenberry – are important for what they did to reconcile this tension.¹⁹ By contrast, Donald Trump encouraged his followers to storm the Capitol. Many of them continued to exploit that same tension as House Members during Kevin McCarthy's bid to become Speaker – until Trump finally stepped to mediate toward the end of the conflict.²⁰

This tension between the structures of power and social movements is part and parcel of democratic life. Indeed, it is the reason democracy was created in the first place. Other forms of government are simply too rigid to adapt to a changing society. A hereditary aristocracy was uniquely ill-suited; by contrast democracy excels at ensuring a circulation of elites.²¹ Unfortunately, however, this circulation of elites is not automatic. Those who have power are reluctant to surrender it to those who do not. Robert Michels referred to this as the 'iron law of oligarchy'.²² As democratic power becomes entrenched in existing elites, fresh leadership is needed to shake things up and to initiate the reforms necessary to make democratic institutions more responsive.²³

Even more unfortunately, the way fresh leaders emerge in a democratic polity is uniquely unfiltered and prone to excess.²⁴ Part of the problem is anyone not already part of the elites will face so many obstacles gaining access to politics. The only way to overcome these obstacles is either to become part of the system or to overturn it. Working within the system is the easier choice when the system is most resilient. The more brittle and entrenched the system becomes, the more would-be elites – Moises Naim calls them 'aspiring autocrats' – are likely to favour disruption over accommodation.²⁵

Part of the problem is also that both power and legitimacy in democracy derive from the connection between leaders and followers. The notion of 'charismatic leadership' does not exist in aristocratic society; it is a distinctly liberal innovation.²⁶ And it is precisely charismatic leaders who are most inclined to regard themselves as indispensable and so try to position themselves within democratic institutions as strongmen.²⁷

Add all this together and the challenge is not that strongmen offer an alternative to democracy. The challenge is that strongmen represent the failure of democratic adjustment to the rise of new social

movements. Moreover, these would be autocrats represent two different kinds of threat. They can take over the system and then distort it to make themselves indispensable, or they can direct their followers to tear down the system altogether. Democracy cannot do away with leaders and remain responsive, and true democrats would not want to diminish the relationship between leaders and followers. Democratic leadership – in general terms – is both indispensable and potentially dangerous. So long as those leaders are willing to walk away from power, however, the system should remain resilient. It is the indispensable leader that constitutes the threat. Put another way, we should be less concerned with what McCarthy and Meloni have done to gain power than what they might do to keep it.

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Notes

¹ See Annie Karni, 'McCarthy Wins Speakership on 15th Vote after Concessions to Hard Right,' *The New York Times* (7 January 2023) <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/politics/house-speaker-vote-mccarthy.html>.

² See Luke Broadwater, 'Speaker Quest Reveals McCarthy's Tenuous Grip on an Unruly Majority,' *The New York Times* (6 January 2023) <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/politics/mccarthy-house-speaker-republicans.html>.

³ See, for example, Tomaso Motanari, *Eclissi di costituzione: il governo Draghi e la democrazia* (Milan: Chiarelettere editore srl, 2022).

⁴ Elettra Ardissino and Erik Jones, 'Italy's Election Paradox,' *Foreign Affairs* (21 September 2022) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/italys-election-paradox>.

⁵ See, for example, Gideon Rachman, *The Age of the Strongman: How the Cult of the Leader Threatens Democracy around the World* (New York: Other Press, 2022); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2020). The point about the gender of strongmen comes from Ben-Ghiat.

⁶ Here I draw heavily on both Rachman and Ben-Ghiat, but see also Moises Naim, *The Revenge of Power: How Autocrats are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022).

⁷ Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, 'Putin's Last Stand: The Promise and Peril of Russian Defeat,' *Foreign Affairs* 102:1 (January/February 2023) pp. 8-21; Michael Jonsson and Johan Norberg, 'Russia's War Against Ukraine: Military Scenarios and Outcomes,' *Survival* 64:6 (2022) pp. 91-122.

⁸ Tatiana Stanovaya, 'Can Putin's Center Hold?' *Foreign Policy* (Winter 2023) pp. 21-23

⁹ Kevin Rudd, 'The World According to Xi Jinping,' *Foreign Affairs* 101:6 (November/December 2022) pp. 8-21; George Magnus, 'The Economic Consequences of Xi Jinping,' *Survival* 64:6 (2022) pp. 57-76.

¹⁰ Burhan Sönmez, 'Erdoğan: A Normal Man,' in Vijay Prashad, ed. *Strongmen* (New York: OR Books, 2018) pp. 39-48.

¹¹ Soner Cagaptay, 'Erdogan's End Game,' *Foreign Affairs* (4 January 2022) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2022-01-04/erdogans-end-game>.

¹² Veronica Anghel, 'Together or Apart? The European Union's East-West Divide,' *Survival* 62:3 (2020) pp. 179-202.

¹³ G. John Ikenberry, 'Why American Power Endures: The U.S.-Led Order Isn't in Decline,' *Foreign Affairs* 101:6 (November/December 2022) pp. 56-73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 73.

¹⁷ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin, second edition, 2008).

¹⁸ Gautam Mukunda, *Indispensable: When Leaders Really Matter* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Ikenberry, 'Why American Power Endures,' p. 71.

²⁰ Maggie Haberman, 'After Dramatic 14th Vote, Trump Calls Holdouts Who Refused to Back McCarthy,' *The New York Times* (7 January 2022) <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/politics/trump-calls-gaetz-mccarthy.html>.

²¹ Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960).

²² Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1962).

²³ I wrote about this need for leadership in these pages more than a decade ago. See, Erik Jones, 'Elusive Power, Essential Leadership,' *Survival* 51:3 (2009) pp. 243-251.

²⁴ This is a central theme in Mukunda, *Indispensable*.

²⁵ Naim, *The Revenge of Power*, p. xii.

²⁶ David A. Bell, *Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2020) p. 9.

²⁷ Rachman, *The Age of the Strongman*, p. 10.