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## Uniting Science and Society: The Role of Leadership Studies, Scientific, and Political Leaders in Combating Science Polarization

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INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF  
**LEADERSHIP STUDIES**



EPSON  
School of Leadership Studies®



## **What's Wrong (and Right) in Leadership Studies**

**Volume 3**

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## About This Journal

The *Interdisciplinary Journal of Leadership Studies*, with the University of Richmond's Jepson School of Leadership Studies, is concerned with advances in the study of leadership. We seek to inform scholars interested in the historical, present-day, and ethical implications of leadership (i.e., leadership as it was, is, and ought to be). To this end, IJLS promotes both quantitative and qualitative, theoretical research-based inquiries into the study of leadership in the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities. The journal and its authors emphasize explorations into continuities and changes not just in leadership, but also the field of leadership studies. IJLS focuses intently on interdisciplinary research into matters of leadership and comparative approaches to leadership studies.

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# INTRODUCTION

## ISSUE 3: WHAT'S WRONG (AND RIGHT) IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES?

by LAURA E. KNOUSE, Co-Editor, IJLS, University of Richmond

Although scholars throughout history have studied leaders and effective leadership practices, the scholarly project of understanding leadership from a multi-disciplinary, scholar-practitioner perspective is merely decades old. As leadership studies scholars, our project is a thorny one. Interdisciplinary work requires us to overcome barriers in our own thinking, in our communication with scholars with other perspectives, and in the division and allocation of resources and prestige in our institutions and the academy at large. Creating space for both basic scholarship and the development of evidence-based practices requires us to value both an ever more complicated and nuanced understanding of leadership and to value systematic efforts to extract general principles that can be implemented by leaders (hopefully) for the benefit of others. Finally, studying leadership often requires us to shed our pre-conceived notions of who leaders are and what leadership is—notions that are often implicit, culturally constrained, and deeply rooted in structures that exist in the present rather than those we can imagine from the past or project into the future.

Given these challenges and the relatively infinitesimal time-scale of the existence of leadership studies relative to other disciplines, there is surely much to be proud of in terms of the growth and evolution of the field. Yet, as scholars, our inclination is toward creative self-criticism rather than laurel-resting.

Therefore, for our third issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Leadership Studies*, we turn our lens inward to examine the current state of leadership studies as an academic discipline. We asked con-

tributors to consider the state of scholarship in the field—what is promising, what is lacking, and what should come next.

We reviewed a diverse and thought-provoking set of pieces, which we are pleased to present to our readers. To foreshadow, as a reader of the pieces in this issue, I observed the following themes:

- Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work won't solve all the problems of leadership studies, but the field won't progress without it.
- We must continue to interrogate the aforementioned rigid, implicit notions of what leadership is and who leaders are (and are not).
- Leadership—like all human behavior—is messy and we sometimes need to complicate and contextualize our understanding of it rather than always seeking to simplify, condense, and strip down.
- Questions of values and ethics—i.e., what is good leadership rather than simply what is effective leadership—must be infused and, in some cases, re-infused into the field of leadership studies. In other words, the why of leadership is as important as the what.

First, in “Leading Toward the Queerest Insurrection: Queer Anarchism and Leadership Studies,” Josie Holland argues for the queering of leadership studies in the sense of questioning its norms, decentring our prototypical notions of what leadership looks like and who leaders are, and perspective-taking from the margins. She analyzes queer anarchist movements with their decentralized and, at times, temporary networks of autonomous actors pursuing desired ends of utopian liberation to disrupt notions

of leadership and argue for a deeply contextualized understanding of what leadership is and what it can be.

Next, Dr. Sandra Peart reflects on the present and future of leadership studies in, “Promise and Progress: Assessing Achievements, New Directions, and Gaps in Leadership Studies.” Peart, like Holland, argues for an understanding of leadership as a relational process-in-context. In particular, she encourages us to more deeply consider the constraints that are placed (or not placed) on leaders and how those constraints contributed to their successes and failures. With respect to failures, Peart cautions that the field has largely ignored the study of ineffective leadership, which is likely to yield crucial insights for both basic and applied work. Finally, Peart argues strongly for renewed focus on what constitutes leadership for the “greatest good,” emphasizing the need for collaborative scholarship—particularly in the humanities—to achieve this.

Drs. Paul Sanders and Martin Guttman echo this theme in their piece, “Why Leadership Needs History.” They call for re-focusing the definition of “good leadership” to address the most pressing challenges of our time. To this end, they argue for re-invigorating the historical approach to leadership studies, which will enable a greater understanding of the role of both context and constraint in leadership. Sanders and Guttman also invite us to complicate our notions of what good leadership is—particularly in situations where no obvious good options exist but leaders are called to lead nonetheless. Finally, they offer thoughts on the challenges and promise of collaboration between the humanities and social sciences.

Kathryn Reda brings the perspective of the

natural sciences to bear in her piece, “The Role of Leadership Studies, Science, and Political Leaders in Combating Science Polarization.” Reda argues that leadership studies has neglected to study the role of

scientific evidence in leaders’ decision-making, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of scientists themselves as leaders in society. She argues that this topic is more urgent than ever in the current U.S. context, where political polarization has increasingly undermined the public’s trust in scientific expertise.

Reda provides recommendations for how leaders can use scientific evidence in their decision-making and how scientists can lead more effectively by tailoring their communication to different stakeholders.

Finally, Keidra D. Chaney’s piece, “Towards a Disability Justice-Informed View of Leadership,” encourages the study of disabled leadership, which complicates conventional Western notions of leaders as independent and invulnerable. Chaney argues for targeted study of disabled leaders themselves and the integration a disability justice perspective.

We hope our readers will be inspired to meet the challenges set forth by the authors of these thoughtful pieces.

~ LAURA E. KNOUSE, PHD  
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# LEADING TOWARD THE QUEEREST INSURRECTION: QUEER ANARCHISM AND LEADERSHIP STUDIES

by JOSIE HOLLAND, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE

## Introduction

### *Queer Absences in Leadership*

Given the multiplicity of leadership studies, it can be difficult to define what is absent from a large and sometimes conflicting base of theories and models, sociological and psychological studies, organizational analyses, ethical debates, and historical investigations. However, even with leadership studies' amorphous nature, queer theory is largely absent from the field. This could be chalked up to an inconsistency between the two fields' theoretical aims. Leadership and leadership studies generally aim to develop grand theories, or theories that seek to explain the function and process of an entire phenomenon across contexts

and times, in this case, leadership.<sup>1</sup> As such, leadership studies could be positioned as normative, in that it is concerned with accepted norms and best practices of leadership as a way to define and investigate it, whereas queer theory shies away from totalizing theories, due to its antinormative commitment and efforts to destabilize accepted discourses.<sup>2</sup> The lack of attention to queer theory and queer approaches in leadership studies also could be due to a general lack of prominent LGBTQ+-identified leaders.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the reason, the absence is notable. There are certainly

1 Canfield, "The Paradox of Queer Leadership," 3.

2 Canfield, "The Paradox of Queer Leadership," 8.

3 Daniel McCalley, "The Rainbow Ceiling: LGBTQIA+ Leaders Are Absent from STEM (and Elsewhere)," *Medical University of South Carolina* (blog), June 10, 2021, <https://gradstudies.musc.edu/about/blog/2021/06/the-rainbow-ceiling>.

#### ABSTRACT:

Leadership shapes our world, our narratives, and what is possible to imagine. Unfortunately, leadership studies has some trouble imagining queer leadership, or rather, queer theory and leadership studies. In order to integrate the more abstract aspects of queer theory with the largely evidence-based field of leadership studies, I draw on the texts, history, practices, and theory of queer anarchism. This article aims to highlight a gap in leadership studies as it currently stands, and through accounting for the absence of queer anarchism in leadership studies, expand what leadership looks like. To this end, I suggest the framing of 'leadership acts' (drawn from Joseph Raelin's leadership activities) to reflect the integration of the anarchist approach of *prefiguration* and the utopian impulse while maintaining space for autonomous, anonymous, or non-triumphant leadership actions. I explore the potential of using the frame of leadership acts in understanding mutual aid projects, characteristics and approaches of queer anarchist networks and other leaderless movements, radical queer insurrectionary manifestos, and autonomous anti-state and anti-consumerism queer activist projects. Finally, using the work of José Esteban Muñoz, this paper suggests that in order to truly *queer* leadership, we must first account for desire as a leading force that animates efforts toward creating a better world.

scholars studying LGBTQ+-identified leaders, their approaches to leadership, and the stigma they face, but the selection is comparatively small.<sup>4</sup> But, while LGBTQ+-identified leaders will likely be perceived differently from their peers and may use alternative tactics or approaches to negotiate their position as a leader and their marginalized gender and/or sexuality, there is no guarantee that it will look like an expression or application of queer theory.<sup>5</sup>

Despite highlighting queerness and queer theory, this article is not making an identitarian argument. Rather, as Cathy Cohen says, “I envision a politics where one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one’s political comrades. I’m talking about a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work.”<sup>6</sup> This article approaches queerness as a method of antinormative questioning and desiring, drawing on the ability of queer politics to “create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin.”<sup>7</sup> Throughout the article, queer is sometimes used as an umbrella term to cover any who are not cisnormative or heteronormative, but more precisely, it describes an intersectional, antinormative, and nonidentitarian social position. When deployed as a verb, *queering* refers to a process of destabilizing norms and assumptions that invoke the possibility of an otherwise world and way of being and relating.<sup>8</sup> Nonnormative sexualities and genders (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

nonbinary, etc.) are, of course, part of the equation of queerness, but they are by no means the end of it. Queering leadership uncovers what normative assumptions are taken for granted in leadership studies, and also aims to unsettle the categories of leader and leadership altogether.

What is at stake if we do not attend to the absence of queer theory in leadership studies? Leadership shapes our world, our narratives, and what is possible to imagine.<sup>9</sup> Having multiple theories of leadership allows us to problem-solve with various approaches, think through our obligations and relations to one another, navigate group dynamics, and practice our values. Perhaps most importantly, it allows us to see the structures of power that shape our cultures and society, as well as pathways to work within or change those structures. However, when our assumptions of what leadership looks like do not include queer people, queer practices, and queer ways of relating to each other, it perpetuates the oppression of LGBTQ+ people and limits our ability to imagine pathways to queer liberation. A lack of queer leadership perspectives could hamper the identification and addressing of specific material issues that affect queer people and could even implicitly position cisnormativity and heteronormativity as inevitable and inescapable within the realm of leadership. By accounting for queer theory, leadership studies may be able to question its assumptions of what makes for good leadership, engage with underexamined methods to challenge the status quo, open up to new queerer modes of leadership, and possibly move forward with a more nuanced understanding of leaderless movements.

4 See Canfield, “The Paradox of Queer Leadership”; Fassinger et al., “Toward an Affirmative Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Leadership Paradigm”; Gamboa et al., “Queering Public Leadership”; Muhr and Sullivan, “None so Queer as Folk”; Pryor, “Queer Activist Leadership”; De Cristofaro et al., “Perceived Leadership Effectiveness among Heterosexual and Gay Men.”

5 Muhr and Sullivan, “None so Queer as Folk”; Pryor, “Queer Activist Leadership.”

6 Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” 438.

7 Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” 438.

8 Barnett and Johnson, “Queer.”

9 Harter, *The Role of Imagination in Understanding Leadership*; Shoup and Hinrichs, *Literature and Leadership*.

## Queer Theory and Leadership Studies

Leadership studies offers valuable insights into the exchanges and relations of leaders and followers, groups and organization dynamics, as well as how the status quo is preserved and shifted.<sup>10</sup> The main body of leadership studies often relies on evidence-based social science disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and political science, alongside organizational and management studies, or more broadly, empirically based research fields.<sup>11</sup> Leadership studies also draws on humanities and humanities-adjacent disciplines, such as, but not limited to, history, anthropology, English, philosophy, and ethics; however, these approaches are underutilized.<sup>12</sup> The field of leadership studies is constantly adapting and expanding, but some detrimental theories persist despite evidence against them, which researchers S. Alexander Haslam, Mats Alvesson, and Stephen D. Reicher collect under the umbrella of “zombie leadership.”<sup>13</sup> They lay out a few premises for zombie leadership theories, including (1) the masses need top-down leadership to preserve the social order, as they are incapable of looking after themselves, (2) leaders have inherent special qualities and therefore deserve positions of power, and (3) all successes of the group can be attributed solely to single leaders, not the group members.<sup>14</sup> These premises emphasize the power of individual leaders and the *need* for leadership to produce action. While Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher’s zombie leadership discusses the most extreme forms, these premises still underpin many

discussions of leadership in popular culture, as well as within the academy. More immediately relevant for this article is the incompatibility of these premises with queer theory or anarchist philosophy, both of which emphasize the role of the collective and the need to trouble social order, not maintain it, as well as the premises’ role in dismissing “revolutionary desire for radical social change” as impractical or simply wishful thinking.<sup>15</sup> Later, this article illustrates several ways that this revolutionary desire, especially when paired with queer theory, is actually put to work both materially and ideologically in queer anarchist movements as a form of leadership.

Queer theory is a tool to trouble categories, reject and subvert the assumed or naturalized ways of being in the world, and open up or reveal spaces of play and experimentation. It deconstructs conventions of politics and makes way for new forms.<sup>16</sup> Queer theory and its applications can be generative, not just critical or deconstructive. However, it typically lives in the realm of the abstract. There is much to be gained from the abstract; after all, critical theory and philosophy are both abstract approaches. But when put in the context of a largely evidence-based/empirical field like leadership studies, it can be difficult to imagine what queer theory has to offer in practice. To help close this gap, I am specifically drawing on the texts, history, practices, and theory of queer anarchism. Queer anarchism is a subset of a larger anarchist ideology and represents the overlap between queer theory critiques and anarchist critiques.

Anarchism broadly tends toward highlighting lived experiences and material conditions, direct action, and practical interventions. Though the application of the terms *anarchist* and *anarchism* may seem nebulous throughout this article, I use the terms to loosely refer to autonomous movements that prioritize antistatism and anticapitalism in their pursuit

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, *Relational Leadership*; Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*.

<sup>11</sup> Ciulla, “The Two Cultures.” Many journals in the field (*Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Psychology of Leaders and Leadership*) locate themselves in the social sciences.

<sup>12</sup> Ciulla, “The Two Cultures”; Marturano et al., “Editorial: The Making of Leadership and the Humanities.”

<sup>13</sup> Haslam et al., “Zombie Leadership.”

<sup>14</sup> Haslam et al., “Zombie Leadership,” 1.

<sup>15</sup> Hallward, “General Wish or General Will?,” 127.

<sup>16</sup> Heckert et al., “Queer Anarchism,” 747.



of liberation and a better world, even if the group or organization may not label themselves as anarchists or postanarchists. I also draw on examples that may not strictly represent anarchism, but share values or approaches with anarchist movements. Queer anarchism, in particular, uses queerness as a method to sharpen and direct an anarchist critique toward intersectional issues. It often emphasizes the questioning of norms as an anarchist or insurrectionary practice, resisting assimilationist politics, and, of course, highlighting queer resistance responses to state power and capitalism among other power structures. To be clear, I am not making a moral argument on the value of queer anarchism in this article, but attempting to establish the merits of acknowledging queer anarchism and its approaches in a queered leadership studies context. This article aims to highlight a gap in leadership studies as it currently stands, and through accounting for the absence of queer anarchism in leadership studies, expand what we understand leadership to look like. Attending to queer desire and its activist registers of prefiguration and the utopian impulse in the context of leadership, creates openings toward new ways of conceptualizing collective action toward an otherwise world, a better world, and a more free, more equal, more just, more collaborative, more adaptable, multitudinous world.<sup>17</sup>

## Review of Existing Literature: Alternative Leadership Theories

Many scholars of critical leadership studies have moved away from heroic leadership and the narratives of Great Man Theory, where leadership is theorized as a single, talented, charismatic individual, who is the guiding force of change or stability.<sup>18</sup>

They instead gravitate toward an understanding of leadership as a process or a relation, cocreated by the leader and follower.<sup>19</sup> A few scholars in critical leadership studies have pushed at the edges, questioning if the phenomena of *leadership* actually exists, and if so, its role as a positive force; however, they are in the minority.<sup>20</sup> As it stands, leadership studies does not have a way to account for movements, collectives, and individuals who reject the very idea of a leader being necessary, but still challenge the status quo or influence others to action. Nor can it account for a queer approach to leadership that might resist legibility or question the need for a hierarchical relationship of leaders and followers even when these roles are mutable and transferable. Despite this gap, there are some critical leadership theories that are useful in understanding aspects of this dilemma. Other alternative leadership theories include *Leading Towards the Margins*, suggested by Craig Canfield in response to his analysis of queer theory-informed leadership in higher education, *autonomist leadership* suggested by Simon Western after his examination of anarchist movements such as Occupy Wall Street, and *ensemble leadership theory* developed by Grace Ann Rosile, David Boje, and Carma Claw to describe collective leadership in Indigenous contexts.

To describe his theory of *Leading Towards the Margins*, Canfield identified six approaches that characterized queer theory-inspired higher education leadership: *Understanding Structures/Systems/Norms*, *Positionality and Subjectivity*, *Oppositionality*, *Commitment to Change*, *Creativity and Idea-Driven*, and *Transparency and Collaboration*.<sup>21</sup> These approaches suggest that a reflexive, relational leadership style is a common

<sup>17</sup> Ashon Crawley, "Otherwise, Ferguson," *Interfictions Online* (blog), October 24, 2014, <http://interfictions.com/otherwise-fergusonashon-crawley/>.

<sup>18</sup> Peters, "Who Leads, Who Follows?"

<sup>19</sup> Brower et al., "A Model of Relational Leadership"; Clarke, *Relational Leadership*; Uhl-Bien, "Relational Leadership Theory."

<sup>20</sup> Eacott, "Beyond 'Leadership'"; Evans, "Is Leadership a Myth?"; Schostak, "Leaders, Leadership and Democracy—Are They Compatible?"

<sup>21</sup> Canfield, "The Paradox of Queer Leadership," iv.

characteristic of queer theory-inspired leadership. While the study raises new questions on the relationship of queer theory and leadership, it does not attempt to *queer* leadership and sticks to a traditional leadership analysis. Additionally, *Leading Towards the Margins* is a somewhat narrow theory that seeks to understand the paradox of queer leadership in higher education. It restricts itself to academic contexts, at one point suggesting that “it would be impractical to imagine researching queer leadership outside of the context of higher education, as identifying queer leaders outside of the academy would be extremely difficult.”<sup>22</sup> This description makes it challenging to apply this theory to an activist context, such as queer anarchist movements and collectives.

On the other hand, autonomist leadership functions almost entirely in activist contexts. Western defines it as “the non-hierarchical, informal and distributed forms of leadership found in emancipatory social movements, and, in particular, in networked social movements.”<sup>23</sup> Autonomist leadership is useful for accounting for movements made up of autonomous actors, and names out the principles of spontaneity, autonomy, mutualism, networks, and affect to differentiate it from other forms of leadership.<sup>24</sup> These qualities are certainly transferable to queer anarchist movements. He also points to the importance of digital networks for the function of radical participatory movements. However, Western negatively asserts that leaderless movements are a “utopian fantasy.”<sup>25</sup> He follows this with the claim that identifying as a leaderless movement is based on a misunderstanding of leadership; instead, he insists on the presence of leaders in these movements, regardless of stated leaderlessness. Western does, however, acknowledge a potential framing of

leadership without followers, referencing Howard Ehrlich. This autonomist leadership theory frames autonomous movements according to conventional standards of successful leadership and does not account for the anarchist principle of the unity of means and ends when pursuing autonomous action, also known as prefiguration.

Finally, ensemble leadership theory (ELT) is premised on values of collectivity, dynamism, and decentered heterarchy.<sup>26</sup> This theory gets the closest to a horizontal, decentered, and consensus-based leadership model seen in queer anarchist organizing. This can be seen in how it defines the term “heterarchy” as “the shape-shifting ability of the community to morph into hierarchy or into flatter more egalitarian models. Ensemble [leadership theory] does this not by moving around the blocks on the organization chart, but rather, by not being composed of blocks in the first place.”<sup>27</sup> Rejecting the blocks in the first place is reminiscent of a queer approach, however, an anarchist position might disregard the need for any hierarchy model in the first place, even a fluid and temporary one. ELT emphasizes the importance of storytelling in leadership, especially as it influences how we make sense of the world. It suits an analysis of social justice work models, as well as the Indigenous communities it is inspired from. However, ELT is also known for goals of harmony and balance, and prioritizing the perspective of a unified collective. This makes it difficult to apply to networked groups of autonomous individuals, such as anarchist movements, who often have a very loose collective identity.

Some combination of all of these theories may allow us to examine queer anarchist networks and movements, but there are a few aspects that these theories do not account for.<sup>28</sup> Namely, queer

22 Canfield, “The Paradox of Queer Leadership,” 10.

23 Western, “Autonomist Leadership,” 673.

24 Western, “Autonomist Leadership.”

25 Western, “Autonomist Leadership,” 675.

26 Rosile et al., “Ensemble Leadership Theory.”

27 Rosile et al., “Ensemble Leadership Theory,” 311.

28 These theories also do not sufficiently account for revolution-

anarchist movements are collectives, not formal organizations. More than semantics, this differentiation cuts to the core principle of queer anarchism: power with, rather than power over. There are many definitions of leadership, but it is generally understood to be a process of, or ability to, influence others.<sup>29</sup> In other words, power over others. But when a group of autonomous individuals come together over a common cause, none of them have power over the others, but rather power with the others. To put this more concretely, a collective might be imagined as two or more individuals walking together to a similar destination. There is no *leader* who defines the path or the end point, but while they are both oriented toward a similar cause, they walk in sync. Each could depart from the path or rejoin the other at any time. They are not traditionally *organized*, by either hierarchical or flattened models; they are simply walking together. When there is a critical mass of people walking alongside one another toward similar destinations, you get an autonomous collective with the capacity to effect change, but which cannot be reduced to leaders and followers or organizations and structures.

## Queer/Anarchy

Anarchy and queerness have a unique alignment in their goals of destabilizing norms and structures. Scott Branson defines anarchism in a manner that reads quite similarly to some definitions of queering and queer theory: “In a simple way, my ar-

any praxis, where theory is put to action, and action to theory. Queer anarchist groups are both consuming and producing queer anarchist theory in their movements rooted in their actual experiences. However, this distinction is a tendency of most feminist, queer, or insurrectionist movements, not characteristic of queer anarchist groups in particular.

29 Kotter, “Leadership: What Is It?”

## Anarchy and queerness have a unique alignment in their goals of destabilizing norms and structures.

gument for anarchism is a process of denaturalizing the aspects that structure our lives in ways that seem unquestionable, and reframing ways of relating to the people in our lives and the world that surrounds us from the point of view of care and freedom.”<sup>30</sup> This approach of highlighting similarities between anarchist theory and queer theory is taken a step further in *Queer Ultraviolence*, where the author writes, “Insurrectionary theory tells us that an insurrectionary process is based on attack and experimentation to open up the way to society’s undoing. Queer theory tells us that queering is a verb, a process which eternally

problematizes and undoes normative roles. I locate Bash Back! at the intersection of these processes and understand them to be the same.”<sup>31</sup> The assertion that insurrectionary processes, often used in anarchist movements, and queering are the same reveals an important aspect of queer anarchist politics: the idea that destabilizing and undermining

norms is insurrectionary, with the potential to open new ways of living. This sentiment is reinforced by the words of Gustave Landauer. He says, “The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e. by people relating to one another differently.”<sup>32</sup> What is queering but a manner with which to create new social relationships?

Other characteristics of anarchism, particularly queer anarchism include emphases on direct action, prefiguration, reciprocity, and transient, adaptable, and rhizomatic approaches. Intersectionality is also a defining trait of queer anarchist movements; Bash Back!, The Mary Nardini Gang, and Queeruption are just a few groups and movements that describe

30 Branson, *Practical Anarchism*, 1.

31 Eanelli, “Bash Back! Is Dead; Bash Back Forever! Concluding Notes,” 210.

32 Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings*, 1.

themselves as antistate and anticapital, as well as any mix of antifascism, anticop, antiracism, antiableism, antichurch, anti-settler colonialism, antiprofit, anti-prison-industrial-complex, antinormative, and antiassimilation in their manifestos, to name just a few intersectional stances.<sup>33</sup>

Jamie Hecker, Deric Shannon, and Abbey Willis describe queer anarchist methods in their article “Queer Anarchism” as “creative direct action, cultural productions, radical pedagogy, social research, cultural studies, subtle interventions into dominant patterns, cultivating self-awareness, carving out queer autonomous spaces, and various forms of playful subversion. Queering also functions to keep anarchism from becoming that which it aims to replace.”<sup>34</sup> This suggests that queer anarchism is drawn from theoretical engagement alongside direct action and even includes subtle interventions. In other words, queer anarchism is a critically informed and lived praxis. Queer anarchism is not restricted to violent actions, demonstrating and protesting against oppressive structures, participating in black blocs, or destroying property, though these do contribute to the myriad of queer anarchist tactics. It could include “subtle interventions” like walking someone home, caring for friends when the health care system leaves them behind, promoting sexual health and consent, and protecting queer kids from homophobes and transphobes. Queer anarchism, like many forms of anarchism, has a creative, generative element. Queer anarchist movements take their issue to be queer life.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, there is a deep investment in practical, immediate, and experimental solutions to provide care for one another, such as mutual aid, outside

the boundaries of capitalism and the state. Robert Day describes his thoughts on Gustave Landauer’s philosophy when he sees “twenty-something-year-old male[s] dressed in combat fatigues strutting away from a protest with blood streaming from his head and swearing at the cops,” as “all well and good, but who’s going to do the dishes, drywall your bedroom, take out the recycling, cook your meals, clean the house, look after the kids and elders, and change your bandages?”<sup>36</sup> This too is anarchism, and perhaps, this too is leadership.

## New Tools for Queering Leadership

Thinking of leadership as a process such as in relational leadership theories or as a collection of actions that enable organizing and change can be helpful in identifying where leadership may be present even in leaderless movements. Joseph Raelin suggests that “conceiving of leadership as a practice allows anyone to participate in leadership as he or she engages in agentic activity. Practice becomes the engine of collaborative agency.”<sup>37</sup> He also frames leadership as “a consequence of collaborative meaning-making in practice.”<sup>38</sup> Raelin describes leadership activities that function without being tied to formalized leadership roles, such as scanning (identifying resources, sensemaking), signaling (mobilizing actors), weaving (webbing connections, documenting), and stabilizing (feedback, evaluating effectiveness, revising). He also identifies leadership support activities such as inviting (making sure everyone has the opportunity to contribute, regardless of previous contributions), unleashing (encouraging participation without repercussions), and reflecting (processing past, present, and future experiences to meet mutual needs).<sup>39</sup>

33 Pink and Black Attack 4, “Identity, Politics, and Anti-Politics”; The Mary Nardini Gang, *Be Gay Do Crime*; Reclaim Pride Brighton, “Reclaim Your Queer Fucking Life!”; McCready, “Queeruptions, Queer of Color Analysis, Radical Action and Education Reform.”

34 Heckert et al., “Queer Anarchism,” 750.

35 Baroque and Eanelli, *Queer Ultraviolence*; The Mary Nardini Gang, *Be Gay Do Crime*.

36 Day, “Preface: Landauer Today,” 11.

37 Raelin, “Imagine There Are No Leaders,” 141.

38 Raelin, “Imagine There Are No Leaders,” 134.

39 Raelin, “Imagine There Are No Leaders.”



Further, Raelin defines leadership as “explicit efforts to build and maintain the community, which at times may require accommodation to nurture relations or confrontation to bring out disagreements,” adding that “at other times, leadership may appear as a choice of inaction rather than action.”<sup>40</sup> This framework of leadership as a “consequence of collaborative meaning-making” and a collection of activities distinct from defined roles is useful when thinking through queer anarchist activities such as Queeruptions, Bash Back! demonstrations, and mutual aid networks.<sup>41</sup> I will slightly adjust the terminology of *leadership activities* to *leadership acts* for this article, but the activities described above all fit leadership acts as well.

Using a formation of leadership acts divorces leadership from leader, while maintaining the role of autonomous individuals/entities even when the individuals in question may be anonymous or refuse the label of leader. This framing includes both large and small actions, so long as the intention or outcome is to influence others toward action themselves, maintain a community, or bring about a vision for a better world, ideally under some similar set of values or goals. Leadership acts include the more practical aspects of queer anarchism that perhaps would be missed or ignored when only assessing formalized organizations in a typical leadership context. By practical, I mean to invoke the everyday anarchist acts of mutual aid, accountability, consent and consensus, and disidentifying with power structures. Leadership acts can, of course, still include mass demonstrations or laying out long-term action plans, but it is not limited to activities with definitive, measurable outcomes. Practical leadership acts might also include those everyday or ephemeral moments that do not result in a progressive, triumphant response, but influence others and create new ways of being in the world all the same.

## *Prefigurative Leadership and Mutual Aid*

Put another way, leadership acts rely on prefiguration. Prefiguration refers to the belief and approach that the means *are* the ends, in and of themselves.<sup>42</sup> Leadership studies addresses both processes and outcomes, but what would it mean to examine the processes and outcomes as equally integral to the paradigm of leadership, or rather, one and the same? When the means and the ends, or the process and the outcome, are mutually constitutive and each aspect is measured with equal value, it allows each action to be viewed as its own act, not solely in the service of a larger goal. Even actions that may seem personal or insignificant can perform leadership when done with the intention of creating a better world for others. Mutual aid networks and actions are a good example of this type of leadership act. Paying one another’s bail after being arrested for protesting and waiting to greet each other on release, using and donating to food pantries, volunteering and using free health care clinics or sexually transmitted infection testing, or participating in childcare collectives could all be prefigurative leadership acts. Framing mutual aid as leadership acts relies on the idea that “all aspects of our lives—where and how we live and work, eat, entertain ourselves, get around, and get by are sites of injustice and political resistance.”<sup>43</sup> This sentiment may sound more familiar when communicated through the second-wave feminist slogan “the personal is political.” When all aspects of our lives are political, the decision to approach these areas intentionally and imagine solutions outside of the system’s approved methods can be acts of leadership, thereby setting up outposts for new ways of being that invite others to join, develop solidarity, and address imme-

40 Raelin, “Imagine There Are No Leaders,” 141.

41 Raelin, “Imagine There Are No Leaders,” 134.

42 Kinna, “Utopianism and Prefiguration,” 199.

43 Spade, *Mutual Aid*, 27.

diate material change.

Returning to Landauer's assertion that the state is a social relationship that can be destroyed by relating differently, mutual aid projects are one such process through which those different relations are built. Dean Spade describes the three elements of mutual aid projects as (1) meeting survival needs and building understanding about why those needs are not met, (2) mobilizing people and expressing solidarity, and (3) participatory, collective problem-solving.<sup>44</sup> Each of these aspects scaffolds an approach of relating differently, outside the structure of the state, and when taken together, generate leadership acts that address both ideological and material injustices.

## *Doing Leadership in a Utopian Register*

Prefigurative leadership acts are performative—they don't just happen, they *do* something.<sup>45</sup> Specifically, they *do* leadership. Scott Branson best describes this perspective on prefiguration as the principle that "our actions create the world we want right now, and we don't have to wait for the revolution to start another, better world."<sup>46</sup> *Be Gay Do Crime* includes a similar sentiment, promoting practicing worldmaking "because we actually affect the web of power—experientially and reciprocally—by way of our engagement."<sup>47</sup> Worldmaking and prefiguration are animated by a utopian impulse—a unified critique of existing conditions and the desire for and action toward a better world. When these actions inspire others, change the material conditions, or build

community, this utopian impulse can reflect prefigurative leadership. Ruth Kinna summarizes the implications of prefiguration in anarchist politics: "The political implications are that everyday behaviors are central to anarchist practice and that the choices individuals make in the conduct of their lives provide a primary locus for anarchist actions."<sup>48</sup> Prefiguration means that anarchism both informs and is constituted by daily life; prefigurative leadership acts also reflect this relationship between everyday behavior and leadership. Reclaim Pride Brighton describes the varied mutual aid actions and demonstrations they participate in and organize as Queer Unity. Queer Unity includes actions like sharing food, bandages, and hormones, defending one another, giving out sanitary products, clothes, and pronoun badges, throwing bricks at cop cars, and counterdemonstrating against trans-exclusionary radical feminists. They say "Queer Unity is the endless possibilities that fill our stomachs and awake us from sleep. In a world where we are liberated from normalcy and its chains, it's everything our autonomy guides us towards. In the meantime, it's acting as if we are already liberated, and embracing the conflict with those who deny us this."<sup>49</sup> The goals of Queer Unity are also made manifest in its practice. They add that "Pride is the manifestation of Queer Unity: the actions we take as part of our own liberation struggle."<sup>50</sup> Much like the utopian impulse, Pride is the prefigurative element of Queer Unity; it is the intention through which each action is animated. It is not merely a momentary feeling or an afternoon of celebration. It is a persistent commitment toward liberation, and so Pride becomes a leadership action.

## *Reflexive Networks*

The manifesto-like statements of "creating the

44 Spade, *Mutual Aid*, 9, 12, 16.

45 Performative in the context of performative language (a word or phrase that performs the action they describe by being said, for example, "I promise" or "I apologize"), not in the context of performative activism, which connotes being just for show or without substance.

46 Branson, *Practical Anarchism*, 30.

47 The Mary Nardini Gang, *Be Gay Do Crime*, 29.

48 Kinna, "Utopianism and Prefiguration," 200.

49 Reclaim Pride Brighton, "Reclaim Your Queer Fucking Life!"

50 Reclaim Pride Brighton, "Reclaim Your Queer Fucking Life!"

world we want” or “effecting the web of power” are not just calls to action or an optimistic attachment to the possibility of change through small actions or way-of-life politics.<sup>51</sup> They have practical implications for how anarchist activism is approached and organized. Prefiguration is reflected in how anarchist collectives operate in accordance to their values. Many anarchist movements, networks, actions, and tendencies are nonhierarchical, rhizomatic, and replicable.

The queer anarchist movement is primarily made up of networks, loosely associated rhizomatic groups and movements, that practice solidarity and engage in collective actions while maintaining their specific focuses and efforts. This is partially practical, in that networked, autonomous, community-based responses can respond to problems in context-specific ways, according to the needs of those most affected. A rhizomatic approach means that anyone can engage in meaningful leadership action—“in a decentered system, each node is a potential center.”<sup>52</sup> Liberatory action can take place across spaces and times, in accordance to the needs and desires of those involved, making rhizomatic approaches supremely adaptable. Instead of centralizing or standardizing approaches to form a *larger* organization, a rhizomatic approach to scaling up allows for a *multiplicity* of approaches at the same time in accordance to the conditions that it is responding to while maintaining common goals and values. Dean Spade suggests that “scaling up our mutual aid means building more and more mutual aid groups, copying each other’s best practices, and adapting them to work for particular neighborhoods, subcultures, and enclaves.”<sup>53</sup> In this case, sharing best practices is a collaborative leadership act that promotes a culture of care and encourages replicability of mutual aid efforts. The expressions of queer anarchist movements and projects can look very

different across networks, but the mycelial approach means that they can interface, exchange information, or link up with other networks like those of queer liberation movements, social anarchism, or Black liberation movements, to name a few. This approach reflects an autonomous method of organizing, one that also recognizes the need for solidarity, mutual collectivity, and care.

In addition to being autonomous and networked, queer anarchist projects and movements are also antiauthoritarian, so many use a horizontal organizing approach, unifying their political ends and means. A common expression of this horizontal approach is the affinity group. Branson describes, “As opposed to parties and hierarchies of leadership and committees, the affinity group brings together like-minded people for a collaborative project, whether a form of direct action or community work.”<sup>54</sup> Reclaim Pride Brighton’s description of their autonomous, anonymous affinity group for “radical pride actions” emphasizes this nonhierarchical approach: “We have no official leader, we invited no official organisations and have no affiliations. We’re Brighton locals from all over the country, who have formed this community of love and resistance out of the necessities of our existence.”<sup>55</sup> Reclaim Pride Brighton is a group that takes queer life as its issue, which is specifically reflected in the structure of the group being local and anonymous, protecting its members, and responding to their specific needs.

Comparatively, Gavin Brown describes the organizing approach of Queeruption London, saying, “These activists draw a commitment to non-hierarchical and participatory methods of organising. The group has no executive or officeholders; decisions are reached by consensus whenever possible, and

51 Branson, *Practical Anarchism*; The Mary Nardini Gang, *Be Gay Do Crime*.

52 Rosile et al., “Ensemble Leadership Theory,” 311.

53 Spade, *Mutual Aid*, 40.

54 Branson, *Practical Anarchism*, 28.

55 @reclaimpridebrighton, “🏳️🌈🏳️ (@reclaimpridebrighton)” [Instagram], accessed September 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reclaimpridebrighton/>; Reclaim Pride Brighton, “Reclaim Your Queer Fucking Life!”

work gets done (or not) depending solely on the energy, enthusiasm, and creativity of the people active in the group at the time.”<sup>56</sup> He also mentions that there was still a core group of activists with the most experience who were most vocal during meetings, but adds that “the group is aware of these dangers and takes steps to minimize them by rotating tasks at meetings, encouraging new members to share the responsibility for tasks so that they acquire new skills, and periodically taking time to reflect collectively on what inadvertent power dynamics are at work with the group,” highlighting the reflexivity necessary for nonhierarchical organizing.<sup>57</sup> This reflection is primarily carried out by having agreed-upon intentional methods to combat the effects and formation of power structures.

In contrast, Bash Back! goes so far as to reject the term *organization* entirely, stating: “First and foremost, Bash Back! is not an organization. Bash Back! is a non-hierarchical group of autonomous individuals under the guise of a common purpose. The only thing that really ties us together are the Points of Unity, which is to say there is no membership, no dues, no agenda, and no 501(c)(3) status.”<sup>58</sup> The Points of Unity are a statement of values and objectives that include fighting for liberation, rejecting capitalism, imperialism, and state power, opposing oppression, and respecting a diversity of tactics.<sup>59</sup> Bash Back! makes the values of the group explicit, and in doing so, allows for any person or group to claim affinity and “bash back,” or to leave the group if their values are no longer aligned. Although there were caucus meetings during Bash Back! convergences, there were no other formalized processes to reflect on possible power imbalances within this agreement of unity. Primarily, attempts to assess power imbalances or realign

actions with values within the group were through communiques, which any member or collective could issue anonymously if they so chose.<sup>60</sup> This dispersed mode of affinity serves to diversify the perspectives and actions of Bash Back! and promote autonomous action.

Despite the stated goals of the groups, hierarchies may still be created informally or implicitly, but establishing nonhierarchical decision making as a priority, and consistently interrogating the group’s processes, reflects a commitment to prefiguring types of decisions and social relations that create more equal societies. Organizing horizontally without entrenching formal hierarchies, and prioritizing consensus-based decision making, actually brings us closer to a future where a culture of nondomination is possible. Initiating and maintaining these processes that preserve autonomy and consensus are prefigurative leadership acts that contribute to the maintenance of community and create new worlds and new ways of relating.

### *Temporary Infrastructure, Momentary Collectives*

There is one final aspect of queer anarchist organizing that reflects a unique approach to the values of the movement. Neither queer theory nor anarchism can afford to be a static ideology, and risk becoming that which it seeks to deconstruct or undo. This limitation is in part addressed by the adaptable rhizomatic nature of network efforts, the responsive and horizontal group organization, and the prioritization of autonomy in all engagements.

However, these measures are not enough. Sometimes, things just have to end. Generally,

<sup>56</sup> Brown, “Mutinous Eruptions,” 2687.

<sup>57</sup> Brown, “Mutinous Eruptions,” 2689.

<sup>58</sup> “A Response to the Anarcho-Liberal Takeover of Bash Back!,” 61.

<sup>59</sup> Baroque and Eanelli, *Queer Ultraviolence*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Baroque and Eanelli, *Queer Ultraviolence*, 35, 61, 68, 107, 136. These communiques covered everything from plans and summaries of collective actions, manifestos, people of color calling out white liberal tendencies in the group, stances on political actions such as the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” etc.



assessments of successful leadership tend to value growth, stability, or longevity when evaluating the long-term success of a group or project. And while queer anarchism may value sustainability in providing aid and continuing the fight for queer liberation, it does not value stability or longevity. Temporariness is a tool that can be deployed in creating functioning queer autonomous zones, as B. Vanelslander highlights in their article “Long Live Temporariness: Two Queer Examples of Autonomous Spaces.” Temporariness can reduce the extent to which power structures shape the project, and in the case of repeated instances, the temporary aspect allows for adaptability and response to previous issues.<sup>61</sup> At times, temporariness is not just a tool or technique, but an end in itself. Bash Back! writes to this position: “To speak of the death of an organization generally connotes a negative event, but this relies on the assumption that organizational permanence is a good thing. Moving past this assumption, the question becomes: have we accomplished our goals with this organization, this means, this tool?”<sup>62</sup> They continue, “When our projects reach the end of their usefulness, letting them go is no cause for concern.”<sup>63</sup> Declaring the demise of Bash Back! was a prefigurative leadership act: in refusing to remain past its time, the death of Bash Back! created space for more, new, and queerer forms of activism and relations. This might be viewed as a failure of leadership under some theories, and there is certainly a potential analysis that takes into account each of the decisions that lead to the dissolution of the network. But, as Jack Halberstam says, “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”<sup>64</sup> Failure

has something to offer us beyond a warning, and can be an opening to new forms. Bash Back! achieved its objectives of opening queer spaces in anarchist spheres and applying insurrectionary strategies to queer struggles, and created queer anarchist networks that would continue past its death. In refusing to remain beyond this point, they rejected the impetus to scale up in a traditional sense, and instead prioritized archiving the Bash Back! project, its practices and approaches, and its timeline of events for future queer anarchist groups to replicate and adapt. In exchange, new groups can spring into the spaces Bash Back! left behind.

## *Prefigurative Queer Activism*

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz references a stickering campaign that used an integrated and intersectional approach to critique state censorship and homophobia. He mentions the group’s anonymity and refusal to adopt a collective identity, alongside their decision to prioritize stickers over other forms of outreach due to the cheaper cost and ability to reach a different audience of primarily younger and poorer people. He then describes, “The stickers function as performing objects inasmuch as they solicit a response from spectators.... The response is sometimes an outpouring of state ideology, yet at other times the responses are glimpses of an actually existing queer future in the present.”<sup>65</sup> The stickering campaign reflects a prefigurative activist approach that unifies the means and the ends of imagining and enacting intersectional queer publics. In stickering, these activists were, in fact, making their world queerer as well as publicizing and resisting state power. This is an excellent example of the types of activist activities that the framing of leadership acts can highlight, especially given the anonymous, dispersed, and

61 Vanelslander, “Long Live Temporariness.”

62 Pink and Black Attack 6, “Reflections on the Demise of Bash Back!,” 162.

63 Pink and Black Attack 6, “Reflections on the Demise of Bash Back!,” 162.

64 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

65 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 61.

nonorganizational nature of the campaign. The stickering campaign is perhaps the clearest manifestation of a collective walking in sync to similar destinations, referenced earlier in the article. The dispersed, anonymous, and multiplicitous actions, though clearly of a unified intent, refused to coalesce into an *organization*, and yet, the group was able to coordinate action that affected a response from the public.

Similarly, Queeruption (a compound of *queer* and *eruption*) events can be understood as a collection of leadership acts that simultaneously demand and enact queer community across the world outside of consumerism. Queeruption was an annual queer anarchist festival that took place in cities across the world from 1998 to 2017, often held in squats or decentralized reclaimed locations. Queeruption events were described as experimentations in building autonomous queer spaces, “activist spaces where participants exchange information, network, and organize in order to make change and challenge mainstream society,” and a “DIY (Do-It-Yourself) festival with general meetings, workshops, (sex) parties and performances [where] one or more political actions are organized outside the squat.”<sup>66</sup> These events are explicitly prefigurative, with one scholar-participant expressing that “the Queeruptors recognize the importance of consistency between their political ends and the means by which they attempt to achieve them” and the News From Nowhere Collective’s assertion that “the process of working collectively towards an alternative society can itself strengthen both that alternative vision and the means of achieving it.”<sup>67</sup> These events were by no means perfect expressions of collective alternative societies, and at times they did indeed reflect unintended

power imbalances, exclusions, and expressions of privilege. However, the more important aspect of Queeruptions in terms of leadership acts are the experimental processes through which they attempted to deal with these issues. Gavin Brown and B. Vanelslander describe some of the processes of Queeruption Barcelona/Karcelona, Queeruption Amsterdam, and Queeruption London in detail in their respective articles, and firsthand organizing materials can also be accessed in the Queer Zine Archive Project. Broadly, these accounts describe consensus-based decision making and extensive debate of guidelines including around sexual negotiation and sexual health, an intolerance to violence, and establishing common understanding for the use of the term queer. The original documents emphasize the need for participants to take part in the daily tasks of keeping an autonomous community functional. This is described in the Queeruption Barcelona zine: “DJing, performing, dressing up, dancing, flirting, fucking, talking, laughing, and meeting new people.... Wash your own dish, clean a toilet once this week, chop a carrot!! CONTRIBUTE!!! DON’T JUST CONSUME!!!”<sup>68</sup> Both the scholarly analyses and the primary source zines demonstrate a frequent assessment of the current practices that could reinforce existing hegemonies or exclusions, for example, what language meetings were held in.

Any single action described in this process does not necessarily constitute a leadership act, but when in the context of prefiguration and in the service of creating a queer autonomous space, any of these activities, conversations, and reflections lead toward a queerer, more collaborative, and autonomous world and are acts of leadership. No action is inherently a leadership act, not even traditional leadership activities such as organizational goal setting or holding a sign at a protest, though they may still be

<sup>66</sup> Lee, “Queeruption & the Value of Documenting Hard Conversations,” *Zine of the Gay The Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP)* (blog), June 28, 2024, <https://gittings.qzap.org/2024/06/>; Brown, “Mutinous Eruptions,” 2688; McCready, “Queeruptions, Queer of Color Analysis, Radical Action and Education Reform,” 370; Vanelslander, “Long Live Temporariness,” 5.  
<sup>67</sup> Brown, “Mutinous Eruptions,” 2688.

<sup>68</sup> Brown, “Mutinous Eruptions”; Lee, “Queeruption & the Value of Documenting Hard Conversations.”

expressions of leadership. But any action *could* be a leadership act when it is supported by prefiguration, community commitment, and the intention of bringing into existence a better world.

### *“For and Toward Futurity”*

Desire, specifically a desire for change to the social order and a desire for a new world, is a driving force of radical action—and should be accounted for in leadership studies.<sup>69</sup> For Ernst Bloch, hope is the field from which utopia grows: “So this hope is not taken *only as emotion*, as the opposite of fear ... but *more essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind*.... The imagination and the thoughts of future intention described in this way are utopian, this again not in a narrow sense of the word which only defines what is bad (emotively reckless picturing, playful form of an abstract kind), but rather in fact in the newly tenable sense of the forward dream, of anticipation in general.”<sup>70</sup> From this description, we can read Bloch’s educated hope, hope as a “directing act of a cognitive kind,” also as a structuring desire for an otherwise future, but just as importantly,

69 There are scholars who have investigated desire in the context of desiring leaders, desiring leadership, or desiring to be led. Examples of this include romance leadership theory initially explored by Meindl and Ehrlich in 1987 but expanded by more recent scholars, assessment of physiological arousal in leader–follower interactions, or (homo)erotic leader–follower relationships as a manner to interpret the most prominent desire-based leadership theory—charisma-based leadership theories (Hammond et al., “The Romance of Leadership”; Harding et al., “Leadership and Charisma”; Hoogeboom et al., “Physiological Arousal Variability Accompanying Relations-Oriented Behaviors of Effective Leaders”). However, in this article, I use desire is a structuring mode, rather than an individual experience.

70 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 12.

an *action*. Michael Abensour coined the framing of utopia as an “education of desire” in the context of literary utopian studies, asserting that representations of utopia do not assign a goal but rather an opening “to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire otherwise,” and holds that the political manifestations of this utopian desire do not produce models but utopian simulacrum that encourage variation.<sup>71</sup> José Esteban Muñoz draws directly on Bloch, and indirectly Abensour, when he describes queerness as “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that

allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present,” a phrase that I will return to momentarily, and “essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”<sup>72</sup> Hope, and its relation, desire, is both a mode and an action that structures and is structured by utopia and potentiality. For each of these theorists, utopia, or rather utopian impulses, are entwined with desire *and* con-

text-specific action or concrete possibility. Moreover, attending to prefiguration consolidates this genealogy of hope, desire, queerness, and utopia into an unabashedly political project, one where radical imagination and radical actions are mutually constitutive, the ends and the means. Leadership acts incorporate this prefigurative desire in their very formation, unifying the political actions, insurrectionary or otherwise, and the imagined otherwise futures across spectacular and quotidian registers.

We create future societies by living, organizing, and relating to each other in revolutionary ways, right here, right now. The performative nature

71 Abensour, “William Morris: The Politics of Romance,” 145–46; Mazzocchi, “Beyond the Education of Desire.”

72 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

**Desire, specifically a desire for change to the social order and a desire for a new world, is a driving force of radical action—and should be accounted for in leadership studies**

of prefiguration is resonant with Muñoz's framing of utopia as a "doing for and toward futurity."<sup>73</sup> Muñoz ties utopia to queerness, describing queerness as "that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing," and adds that "queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."<sup>74</sup> Anarchists often use a similar framing of their rejection of the current social order to animate their demands for a new, more free, more equal world. Muñoz describes a line from the Third World Gay Revolution's manifesto, "we want a new society," as doing utopia, and frames the manifesto broadly "as a call to a doing in and for the future."<sup>75</sup> Similarly, I suggest that the lines from "Towards the Queerest Insurrection" in *Be Gay Do Crime* and *Queer Ultraviolence*, "If we desire a world without restraint, we must tear this one to the ground. We must live beyond measure and love and desire in ways most devastating. We must come to understand the feeling of social war. We can learn to be a threat, we can become the queerest of insurrections," are also doing utopia in and for the future, a future that is created at the very instance of its demand and animates all actions toward this horizon.<sup>76</sup> It is not only a demand for a new world, one without restraint, it is also an invitation. It is an invitation to join the *we*, to recognize the need for insurrection and to pursue it in a manner of living, not just in theory. To embrace negation and desire as the same action. Muñoz frames queerness as "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the

present";<sup>77</sup> this queerness is reflected in the demands for a world without restraint. The desire itself is an attack on a social order that prevents imagining otherwise, an attack that cracks the shell of the old world through which a new world can seep in. The desire itself is an act of leadership, issuing a call for refusal of the suffocating oppression of the here and now, and a demand for "new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds."<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

Queering leadership means paying attention to desire as a leading force. Leadership studies would benefit from recognizing this desire for the demand and the provocation that it is, and its role in animating leadership acts across scale. Desire, for a better world, for an end to oppression, for survival in a system that wishes for you the opposite, for joy in that same system that denies it, desire for insurrection, motivates action. Igniting this desire in others, inciting action and revolt, and practicing care *in between* revolutions are all leadership acts. Prefiguration is the manifestation of this desire for a better world—imagining and enacting values and goals bring them into existence. When desire, and its applications of prefiguration and the utopian impulse, guides leadership, it opens pathways to imagine queer liberation, engage with leaderless movements, and account for the minute ways we lead each other to a better world every day.

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<sup>73</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 26.

<sup>74</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 19, 26.

<sup>76</sup> The Mary Nardini Gang, "Toward the Queerest Insurrection," 2018, 66; The Mary Nardini Gang, "Toward the Queerest Insurrection," 2013, 41.

<sup>77</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

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# IJLS COMMENTARIES

## About “IJLS Commentaries”

by KRISTIN M.S. BEZIO, Co-Editor, IJLS, University of Richmond

In the issue, we have included a section entitled “IJLS Commentaries,” a section devoted to a more casual—yet thoughtful—consideration of leadership and leadership phenomena in the world.

Because this issue is focused on *What’s Wrong (and Right) in Leadership Studies*, we found that a lot of our submissions are focused on where we should go or what needs to change about leadership studies as a field. As such, many of the pieces are a little less formal than we typically see in IJLS—so our “Commentaries” section is a bit fuller.

First, we have Sandra Peart—Dean of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies—talking about new directions and gaps in the pursuit of leadership studies as an academic discipline. Then, we have Paul Sanders and Martin Gutman talking about the need for leadership studies to more fully incorporate history and historical inquiry into the study and teaching of leadership. And then, from Kathryn Reda, we have a call to integrate leadership with the scientific community to do a better job of leading with scientific inquiry at the core of our policies and processes.

As several of our “Commentaries” authors note, leadership studies has been around for approximately sixty years—more than an entire academic career, certainly, but less than a lifetime and certainly very short in the scheme of some of the disciplines that make up Leadership Studies. As a scholar of Shakespeare

whose field has existed for nearly four centuries, I often find myself frustrated with the relative youth of leadership studies and the growing pains that surface as a result.

Scholars of leadership studies are often aware of their relative newness on the academic scene, and those of us who attend disciplinary conferences frequently find ourselves answering the question “What is leadership studies?” This is particularly true in some of the traditional humanities: literature, history, philosophy, Classics, religion, and so on.

Yet those of us who operate in both the traditional humanities and social sciences *and* leadership studies see in the future limitless avenues for collaboration and cross-disciplinary scholarship, and it is in these potential partnerships that we see an exciting future for both the disciplines and leadership studies.

We hope that these pieces help our readers to reflect on other new avenues and possibilities for leadership and leadership studies.



# Promise and Progress: Assessing Achievements, New Directions, and Gaps in Leadership Studies

by Sandra J. Peart, Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond

## Abstract:

Leadership is a relational process characterized by persuasion and context, but leadership studies programs sometimes fail to address what we mean by “good” leadership or the “greatest good.” We rarely ask students to study bad leadership or to examine the constraints—or lack of constraints—on leaders. We do our students a disservice if we fail to ask them first to investigate these thorny questions using historical, literary, and philosophical texts.

Almost fifty years have passed since James McGreggor Burns published his important book titled, quite simply, *Leadership*. Burns surveyed different types of leadership, from “charismatic” to “transactional” and “transformational,” as well as varying contexts for leadership, including “opinion,” “group,” “party,” and “political.” In his chapter “Towards a General Theory of Leadership,” Burns defined leadership as “the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers” (Burns 1978, 425). Clearly much is packed into that definition; scholars have focused on reciprocity, process, context, motives and values, and competition and conflict. It is timely to take stock of our achievements and assess promising new directions and remaining gaps for leadership studies programs.

The early days of leadership studies must have

been heady. My former colleague Gill Hickman, professor of leadership studies emerita, has remarked on the energy, creativity, and shared enthusiasm in the Jepson School of Leadership Studies’ early days, when the faculty designed a leadership studies curriculum for students where none had previously existed. Scholars from disciplines as seemingly disparate as social psychology and business ethics joined the effort to develop a unified theory of leadership (Goethals and Sorenson 2007). Intense study yielded the conclusion that, as Burns noted, leadership is contextual. Thus, theories and models of leadership must take context into account: a single theory was, accordingly, a pipe dream. To understand leadership, teachers and researchers came to emphasize that we must first recognize it is embedded in a complex world.

Notwithstanding, significant progress occurred, and many of Burns’s key insights have been confirmed, deepened, and measured. Leadership programs, such as that at the Jepson School, correctly emphasize that leadership is relational, occurring between leaders and followers, and is a process, characterized by rules and contextual nuance, communication, and negotiation. These conclusions countered earlier narratives, including those of the famous nineteenth-century historian Thomas Carlyle. As was common at the time and throughout much of the twentieth century, Carlyle focused on leaders, rather than leadership, and held that leaders are born to lead, having inherited both the status and the capaci-

ty to do so. He wrote that “Great Men” “were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world” (Carlyle 1841, 1–2). Carlyle’s position is notable in large measure because he opined that all leadership capabilities are (only) inherited, a theory that has since been widely discredited.<sup>1</sup>

Careful bibliographic and citation research by Vogel et al. (2020) on recent scholarship in leadership development reveals the dominance, especially early on, of research into Burns’s characterizations of “charismatic, transformational, and authentic leadership.” The authors single out the “longitudinal, empirical research testing the original, dominant theory papers on the development of authentic leadership,” research on “unrepresented, demographically diverse leaders,” and research on “detrimental aspects of [leadership development] as promising topics for future cultivation.”<sup>2</sup> At the International Leadership Association’s Future Forward Leadership Summit in August 2024, Rebecca Reichard presented the results of an examination of 46,000 refereed journal articles with leader in their titles and traced clusters of research topics in leadership studies, including transformational leadership, leader traits, ethical leadership, complexity and process theories, and gender and leadership, over the past sixty years.<sup>3</sup>

1 Carlyle opined that other characteristics, including the propensity to work (or be slothful), save, practice religion (as opposed to superstition), and make rational choices, were also inherited. He drew wide-ranging conclusions about how to treat so-called inferior decision makers, proposing the enslavement of persons in Jamaica whose work effort he believed was less than sufficient. See Peart and Levy (2005) for a full account.

2 The study is filled with fascinating historiographical insights.

3 Rebecca Reichard, plenary presentation, ILA Future Forward Leadership Summit, August 2024. Antonakis and Day (2017) provide an additional overview of the main research clusters in the social science approach to leadership. I address the question

Thus, even a brief survey of the field reveals significant achievements that benefit our students in leadership studies programs. We have, for instance, learned much about the difficulties and stereotypes facing women and members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups who hold positions of leadership. In “Managing to Clear the Air: Stereotype Threat, Women, and Leadership,” Hoyt and Murphy (2016) examine the impact of stereotype threats on women in leadership. Their findings suggest the programs and interventions that improve the “extent to which women see themselves as having, or being able to develop, leadership abilities” may “inoculate women from stereotype threat.”<sup>4</sup> Using experimental methods to treat the effect of gender composition of teams and tasks, Chen and Houser ask, “When are women willing to lead?” They find that women in mixed-gender groups are more likely to suffer from gender stereotypes than women in single-gender groups and that women’s “willingness to lead” is “significantly increase[d]” by “public feedback about a capable woman’s performance” (Chen and Houser 2019). The study offers promise if we seek to increase the number of women and people of color (if it extends to other underrepresented groups) who take on leadership roles. These are surely results to explore with our leadership studies students!

A second promising area for leadership studies programs fleshes out contextual factors that influence leaders and followers. Experimental methods yield insights into the role of leaders in situations where people face mixed, self-regarding, and other-regarding incentives. Subjects in public goods experiments, for instance, face individual and group incentives, and their earnings are ultimately determined by the set of decisions made by the entire group. The presence of a leader in such contexts and the set of levers a potential leader is allowed to manipulate ex-

of the humanities in this scholarship later in this article.

4 See also Eagly and Carli (2007) and Day et al. (2014).

perimentally enable researchers to isolate the effects of contextual elements. As such, public goods experiments are well suited for exploring Burns's "context" of competition and cooperation and for isolating factors such as how a leader was chosen and what (and how) they communicate to the group. They also provide myriad opportunities to teach about leadership in the classroom, and many successful courses in leadership studies now routinely offer such experiential opportunities. Additional "contextual factors in leader emergence and effectiveness," along with "obstacles and opportunities for women leaders," have been examined using evolutionary perspectives (Van Vugt and von Rueden 2020). In terms of relatively new methods for measuring such effects and inferring causality, field experiments promise to yield new and replicable results to complement empirical and survey studies (see Sieweke and Santoni 2019); these, too, provide a rich set of teaching opportunities.

With so much promising interdisciplinary research in leadership studies, one might wonder whether any gaps exist in leadership studies programs. In my remaining space, I briefly explore several caveats and a significant gap. First, teaching related to leadership often focuses on "social justice," with insufficient attention to the meaning of this term or its relationship to leadership. As a result of this inattentiveness, students may come away from leadership programs with the desire to "do good," but lacking the requisite knowledge, reflective capacity, or experience to know what the "common good" means and whether and how to advance it.

This suggests that our programs need better questions, and the texts and deep historical and philosophical knowledge to help our students an-

swer them. Just as artificial intelligence performs best when we prompt it with sound questions, our students who aspire to positions of leadership and good followership may also need more foundational research questions. What do we mean by "good" leadership and the "greatest good"? What if we fail to agree on the common good—does a leader impose their sense of "good" on the group, or are there mechanisms in place to restrain power and authority and ensure leaders do not impose their views on others? What rules constrain leaders, and how do we ensure

they are robust enough to withstand efforts to overstep?<sup>5</sup>

This brings me to a gap in our approach to leadership studies. While I make no claims to having exhaustively surveyed the literature for areas where we might devote additional research, I suggest there are two, sometimes overlapping, gaps in our leadership studies programs. First, as Kellerman (2004) has argued, leadership programs and scholarship neglect the topic of

"bad leadership."<sup>6</sup> We rarely ask our students to study deeply bad exemplars, and we also too rarely ask them to study what went wrong, to examine carefully the constraints—or lack of—on bad leaders and the contexts that allowed, facilitated, or even encouraged the implementation of nasty decisions.

I am reminded in this context of a discussion of an institutional change in shared governance at a university. As proposed, the new arrangement would enable a group of faculty members to impose harm on a small group of faculty members. When this was made clear to a member of the small faculty group, they remarked, "We'll have to make sure we choose

<sup>5</sup> Behind these questions, of course, is my concern with the neglected notion of "bad" leadership, to which I turn directly later in the article.

<sup>6</sup> For an exception, see Price (2006).

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good leaders for the large group.” Their colleagues, by contrast, remarked that we should also ensure that the decision-making arrangement did not allow for leaders in the larger group to impose harm on the smaller group. This is precisely Kellerman’s point: it is not enough simply to hope for good leaders. Our students need to study and understand why and how leaders impose harm. In a follow-up to her 2004 work, Kellerman (2024, 1) reiterates the problem: “Given that bad leaders, and their bad followers, are part of everyday life,—in companies and countries, and in cultures of every sort—the question is why leadership experts continue to relegate them.”

Just as glaring, this brief overview reflects a key area of neglect: the humanists. While some leadership studies programs, such as that at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, equally emphasize the humanities and the social sciences, many instead emphasize a social science approach.<sup>7</sup> As noted above, our students’ understanding of leadership suffers from a cavalier presumption that leaders and followers know what is common and what is good. We do our students a disservice if we convey to them that leaders simply steer their organization or group toward the achievement of a shared, rather than a contested, goal, without first investigating thorny philosophical questions in historical or literary contexts.

This, of course, is not a new point but is rather older than the Greek philosophers.<sup>8</sup> Leadership is fundamentally about facilitating the achievement of common aims, but if we approach the subject with-

out first reflecting deeply on questions of the good life lived alongside others who only partly share our individual dreams and aspirations, we will surely fail to understand the very human process of leadership involving imagination, creativity, perception, and more—all of which enter into leading and following in ways that scholars in the humanities may fruitfully explore.<sup>9</sup> There is indeed much room for imaginative, creative, and detailed study by humanists into, among other related topics, the nature of the common good; the roles of leaders and followers who are both good and evil; the prevalence of power and authority in the past and present; and the acts of discussion, creativity, and imagination that generate agreement or disagreement over norms and beliefs.

My hope is that, along with other similarly situated journals in leadership studies, the Interdisciplinary Journal of Leadership Studies, whose co-editors, Julian Hayter, Kristin Bezio, and Laura E. Knouse represent disciplinary breadth across the humanities, will encourage and publish excellent scholarship on leadership by humanists and social scientists and that humanists and social scientists will increasingly collaborate. We have much to learn from each other, and our students will be the beneficiaries.

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7 This is a point about relative neglect: important contributions do of course exist. See, for instance, Cronin and Genovese (2012). For an overview of how the curriculum at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies invokes the humanities and social sciences in roughly equal measure, and why, see Peart (2014).

8 Wilson et al. (2022) argue that leadership development programs are insufficiently attentive to historical or institutional context: “This paper, written in the form of a play, addresses this lack of scholarly evaluation of the 360-degree instrument’s part in [leadership development programs].” To fill the void, the authors return “to the philosophical roots” of leadership development in the hope of “creating visionary leaders” rather than “unquestioning rule-followers.”

9 As Ciulla (2019, 442) writes, “Leadership too is a creation of our imaginations—forged from human relationships that encompass the hopes, fears, dreams, passions, wants, and needs of our individual and collective experiences.”



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# Why Leadership Needs History

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## Abstract:

What contribution can a leadership focus make to arbitrating the catch-22s and wicked problems of the ongoing polycrisis? Not much, if you were to turn for advice to mainstream leadership studies (LS), a field of enquiry that continues to see itself, above all, as a tool for optimizing corporate performance and effectiveness. One way in which LS can escape its current tunnel vision and lack of relevancy is to return to its own roots and rehabilitate the historical approach. Historical LS can add value in several areas: it has the ability to deliver insightful case studies that provide useful analogies, which improves the description problem in LS; it can contribute to the empirical verification of leadership theory, which offers a response to the replication problem in LS and promotes the development of more robust models of leadership; it is an antidote to the crisis in LS, as it nurtures a culture of long-term and sustainable thinking, and serves as a corrective to short-termism and narrowing of vision; it contributes to the cultivation of new essential skills; and it adds a measure of sophistication to the framing and discussion of contextuality and complexity in LS. The piece ends with a description of the obstacles that exist to bringing history into LS, due to differences in scientific culture.

Hollywood movies may not be paragons of realism, but they have always provided a reliable gauge for understanding the *zeitgeist*. One genre that has seen a distinct comeback over the past twenty years is *dystopian, apocalyptic, and postapocalyptic* projections into the future. These are a mirror for the new world (dis)order, which is consubstantial with VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity).<sup>1</sup> In it, crisis no longer invites itself in neat, manageable succession, but descends in simultaneous multiples that have an overwhelming effect. This “polycrisis” connects to “catch-22s” and intractably complex or “wicked” problems, which can develop into “perfect storms.” Wicked problems are resistant to linear solutions and present leaders with a very particular dilemma: leaving them untouched is not an option, as this leads to self-paralysis, but when you start handling them, they can take you on a degenerative race to the bottom. You’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t.

<sup>1</sup> While literature on the current VUCA context is extensive, a good overview is Taskan et al., “Clarifying the Conceptual Map of VUCA.”

These mechanics are evident in the seemingly never-ending succession of crises of the past few years—witness the rise in populism, the COVID-19 pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East, the strain on tried-and-trusted institutional arrangements for global security, or the resistance to a resolute anti-climate change stance. One paradox of this disruption is that while humans seem quick to pick up the signals of change, their ability to translate this realization into relevant action is more limited. As anyone who has led through change knows, organizational and institutional inertia is a factor to be reckoned with. Change leaders, John Kotter and a host of other scholars have demonstrated, must not only foster and harness the resources for taking a new direction; they must also have the wherewithal to tackle resistance to change, or else risk paralysis (or worse).<sup>2</sup>

This phenomenon is no doubt what the military historian Sönke Neitzel had in mind when he expressed his concerns about the direction taken

<sup>2</sup> Kotter, *Leading Change*.

by Germany (and the European Union) after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In an interview that aired on German national TV in early February 2024, he noted how European decision makers and public opinion acknowledged that the event constituted a historical turning point and thereby changed irrevocably the post-1989 calculus. At the same time, however, the institutional framework was still set to this *status quo ante*, and this prevented spirited counteraction, with potentially disastrous consequences. As Neitzel found, the institutional blockades were particularly strong with regard to reverting course from three decades of "peace dividend" and rebuilding military capability to a level consistent with credible deterrence.<sup>3</sup> Eight months later, in another interview on the same TV channel, Neitzel admitted that things were now "moving," albeit not fast enough. In the face of a battle-hardened Russian military that, according to the German Federal Intelligence Agency (as well as other credible sources), would be ready for war with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization by the beginning of the next decade, the *Bundeswehr* (German military) did not have the capability to defend the country, at least not for the next few years.<sup>4</sup>

Leadership is a vital prerequisite for arbitrating these kinds of understanding-versus-acting gaps, for managing, containing, and mitigating the pitfalls of the VUCA world. However, if we turn for guidance to leadership studies (LS) as it is taught and researched in mainstream business schools, we will discover a field of enquiry that is experiencing considerable trouble in untying itself from the idea that it is, above all, a tool for optimizing corporate performance and effectiveness.

This narrow framing of the field is borne out by evidence: in an article published in 2019, the

leadership scholar Dennis Tourish gave voice to his frustration over how a search for articles on the, as he writes, "existential" topic of climate change in two top-ranking leadership journals yielded zero results.

<sup>5</sup> For Tourish, this was a clear sign of something he has argued repeatedly—the failure of LS to engage with meaningful real-world problems.<sup>6</sup> What he also found was that the situation in LS mirrored the situation in management studies: having searched the ultraprestigious *Academy of Management Journal* for articles on the same "existential" topic, Tourish discovered a mere five papers—a state of affairs he characterized as "astonishing, bizarre, and disgraceful."<sup>7</sup> While a return to the task—to check whether the field is now more able to engage with salient issues (rather than "nano-sized" increments to existent knowledge that cater to absurdity)<sup>8</sup>—is beyond the confines of this piece, the present authors surmise that the sluggishness of LS may have something to do with the field's partaking in b-school "theory fetishism."<sup>9</sup>

The current narrow framing of mainstream LS is not a fatality. There is also no reason why the theoretical and methodological agenda in mainstream LS should continue to be dominated by statistics, the various branches of psychology, and quants-based social science, and why there should not, indeed, be

<sup>5</sup> Tourish, "Making a Difference," 364. The two journals were the *Leadership Quarterly* (Elsevier) and *Leadership* (SAGE). The *Leadership Quarterly* was the only leadership journal ranked grade four in the 2018 edition of the authoritative *Academic Journal Guide* (Chartered Association of Business Schools); *Leadership* was ranked grade two (both journals maintained their positions in the 2021 and 2024 editions of the guide).

<sup>6</sup> Tourish, "Making a Difference," 368; Tourish, *Management Studies in Crisis*; Tourish, "The Triumph of Nonsense in Management Studies"; Tourish, "On Crisis, Genuine Imposters, and Complacency in Management Studies."

<sup>7</sup> Tourish, "On Crisis, Genuine Imposters, and Complacency," 248. In a 2015 conference keynote, Tourish and David Collinson related a similar outcome in their search for articles on the global financial and economic crisis of 2007–08: they found one *Academy of Management* journal that had published one such article. Other top-tier management journals they investigated had featured none. Collinson and Tourish, "Critical Leadership Studies."

<sup>8</sup> Tourish, *Management Studies in Crisis*, 133–60.

<sup>9</sup> Tourish, *Management Studies in Crisis*, 139ff.

<sup>3</sup> Neitzel, "Eure Fragen an Sönke Neitzel, Professor für Militärgeschichte."

<sup>4</sup> Neitzel, "Wir können nur hoffen, dass die Bundeswehr nie kämpfen muss."

space for new approaches, especially those based on engagement with the humanities. One concrete way in which LS can open up to such an agenda is to return to its own roots and rehabilitate the historical approach. Such a reintroduction of history into LS is only consequential, considering that the foundation for modern leadership studies was laid by James MacGregor Burns, a historian and presidential biographer, whose 1978 book *Leadership* “built on observations from history, not on social science studies.”<sup>10</sup>

The insistence on mainstream LS should not be interpreted as a denial of the fact that the US higher education environment has always retained pockets of heterodoxy that cultivate LS beyond the traditional “concepts.” On the other hand, there can be no equivocating that the situation outside these pockets is very different. In European b-schools, to name one salient example, the humanities and history lead a wallflower existence. The few exceptions that do exist, such as the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland, only confirm the rule. In any case, the authors are not aware of any European b-schools that have made serious inroads into establishing historical LS as a substantial and durable going concern (with all the repercussions on leadership education and leadership research that this entails).

How much “mileage” is there in taking a historical approach to leadership? In keeping with the limits of this contribution, we can provide a sketch. One first pit stop is that history can serve as a reservoir and purveyor of valuable case study material.<sup>11</sup> This allows drawing useful analogies and thereby improves the “description problem” in LS.<sup>12</sup> Although this potential is not fully exploited in the mainstream b-school, where most of the leadership education occurs, this statement is obvious and

noncontroversial. But it is not where the story ends: an arguably even more important scientific windfall of historical LS is its ability to provide verification of leadership constructs<sup>13</sup> and thereby give a response to the replication problem in LS.<sup>14</sup> By subjecting “hard science” theory to empirical tests—through the means of historical source criticism—historical LS can help separate “good” from “bad” theory and promote the development of more robust models of leadership.<sup>15</sup>

On a more general level, historical LS acts as an antidote to the crisis in management education and management studies, as noted by many authors, such as Tourish and Martin Parker.<sup>16</sup> The cultivation of historical perspective functions as a corrective to the narrowing of vision and short-termism that is endemic in management schools; instead it nurtures a culture of long-term and sustainable thinking.

But how can it do such a thing? Answering this question requires addressing a misconception: contrary to what is often argued, our ability to master our immediate future is not determined by how well we zoom in on present short-term needs, but on gaining a sense of perspective. History harmonizes with the precept that objective analysis is a function of taking a step back from the “sound and fury” (or “noise”) of the immediate present. Instead of fragmentary views that focus on details that appear important now, but fade into insignificance in hindsight, it is interested in attaining a holistic and systemic bird’s-eye view. This passage of time (or historical distance), in conjunction with the growing availability of more and better sources, sharpens the viewpoint. It also ties in with the radical spirit of the humanities, which can never be leveraged one-to-one for immediate utility, but which drip value in homeopathic doses, over longer periods of time.

In this sense, historical LS resonates

10 Ciulla, “The Two Cultures,” 440; Burns, *Leadership*.

11 Ciulla, “The Two Cultures,” 440.

12 Collinson and Tourish, “Critical Leadership Studies.”

13 Ciulla, “The Two Cultures,” 440.

14 Tourish, *Management Studies in Crisis*, 91ff.

15 One example of this is Ciulla, “Searching for Mandela.”

16 Parker, *Shut Down the Business School*.



with the ongoing integration initiatives between management and humanities, i.e., efforts to replace the superseded LERCAT teaching paradigm with a new set of soft skills (or modes of thought) derived from the humanities or “liberal arts” (as they are called in the United States).<sup>17</sup> The most important of these initiatives is, no doubt, the report published by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 2011.<sup>18</sup> This features three new “modes of thought” (or dispositions): “multiple framing,” which refers to the need to juggle “fundamentally different, sometimes mutually incompatible” points of view; “reflective exploration of meaning” (the traditional heart of liberal education), which solicits the “self-reflective aspects of learning” and involves the “exploration of meaning, value, and commitment”; and “practical reasoning,” the “capacity to draw on knowledge and intellectual skills” that enable meaningful engagement with the world. The latter corresponds to what is sometimes called “professional judgment” and designates the need to be able “to go beyond reflection to deliberate and decide on the best course of action within a particular situation.”<sup>19</sup> While history as a scientific discipline shows affinities with all three of these, its contribution is likely to be highest with regard to practical reasoning: in a day and age where the problem is no longer the availability of data and sources, but rather the capacity to analyze and interpret this overabundance, knowing where to start on data/source verification is an essential skill.

The other major contribution of historical LS is the sophistication it can bring to bear on the framing and discussion of contextuality and complexity.

Although context is a natural fixture of mainstream leadership theory, agency primes in most current leadership theories.<sup>20</sup> This lack of contextual nuance stands at the antipodes of “good” historiography (including historical biography), where context/structure and agency should receive equal weight. Indeed, what stands out in many of the most rigorous biographical studies of the past two decades—whether it be Ian Kershaw’s *Hitler*, Jonathan Steinberg’s *Bismarck*, or Stephen Kotkin’s *Stalin*—is the sheer attention paid to structures in constraining and shaping the actions of these leaders.<sup>21</sup> History then makes a good case for studying leadership through the prism of this leadership-in-context.<sup>22</sup>

Second, historical LS provides an excellent vantage point from which to reflect on complexity (this closes the circle with the evocation of wicked problems at the beginning of this piece). One of the most prolific authors in this area is Keith Grint, whose work on complexity leadership often uses historical material and historical perspectives. It confirms, among other things, that the only way in which one can engage with “wicked” problems in a constructive manner is through “clumsy” trial and error. Leaders would also do good to clearly distinguish between—and not confuse—complicated and complex problems: while the former can be “tamed,” through tried-and-tested “elegant” solutions that are already available, the latter react to attempts to defuse them with an escalation in their toxicity.<sup>23</sup> In his book on Operation Overlord (D-Day), Grint connects these insights to the observation that wicked problems and their clumsy “solutions” are the domain of leadership, whereas complicated problems and their

17 LERCAT is the acronym for logical empiricism (LE) as “an account of the relationship between knowledge and the world; rational choice (RC) ... as an account of how people exercise knowledge in practice; and agency theory (AT) ... as an account of how people in organizations relate to each other.” See Statler and Guillet de Monthoux, “Humanities and Arts in Management Education.”

18 Colby et al., *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education*.

19 Colby et al., *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education*, 60.

20 Sanders, “Leader-in-Context and Historical Leadership Research.”

21 Kershaw, *Hitler*; Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928*; Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941*; Steinberg, *Bismarck*.

22 Sanders, “Leader-in-Context and Historical Leadership Research.”

23 Grint, *Leadership*.

genuine solutions are the domain of management.<sup>24</sup> Grint also adds a third mode, command (which people often confuse with leadership). This relates to the ability of individuals and organizations to take initiative and continue to function in emergencies or crises, where there is no possibility for the kind of deliberation and time commitment that would be required for approaching complex and complicated problems. Grint's thinking about complex problems, often grounded in history, resonates not only with other scholarly work on the Action Fallacy or Prozac Leadership, but also with collective rather than personalist, agentic, or semiagentic decision making. It encourages leadership scholars to keep a watchful eye on attempts to feed us leadership legends that derive from the romance of leadership, regardless of whether those concerned are historical or still-living leaders.

In this brief overview we have delved into the benefits that engagement with history can provide to LS. But the approach also has its limits, and this requires clarity in terms of what it can and cannot deliver. For one thing, history cannot be “transplanted” one-to-one, on the referential terms of a quants-based LS that has such a clear preference for experimental and statistical methods. A redefinition or rebalancing of the relationship between historically-driven and social science-driven LS is necessary (which connects to the nature of interdisciplinary work in general).

The probably most profound misunderstanding concerns the different types of results that can be obtained through the two branches of science. As the historian Wilhelm Dilthey found, the knowledge generated by the humanities is geared toward “understanding” (*Verstehen*), whereas the knowledge produced by the natural sciences is geared toward “explaining” (*Erklären*).<sup>25</sup> Connected to this,

the humanities do not partake in the quest of the quants-based sciences for unequivocal positives; the results they obtain are “broader and fuzzier” (i.e., less specific than those obtained through natural science methods). This quest for positives can explain why, as Joanne B. Ciulla writes in an article published in 2019, when social scientists use the humanities, they often do so “badly.” For one thing, their literalist approach ignores standards for using, treating, and interpreting sources in the humanities and history.<sup>26</sup> Instead of treating the information contained in texts written by prominent scholars or historians as the beginning rather than the end of a continuing discussion, they treat it as they would treat data obtained through natural science methods—as canonical, unassailable, and immutable fact. The process resonates with a template approach, where history is treated as a data pool from which linear (leadership) lessons are extracted. But this improvised *ad hoc* handling of a discipline that requires more care is inadequate. Before history can go anywhere in mainstream LS, its proper handling needs to be taught to budding researchers, as it is taught in history faculties. On the other side of the spectrum, other social scientists who sometimes dismiss historical work for its overly “descriptive” (and insufficiently theoretical) nature are also subject to a misapprehension: they are unfamiliar with the historical method and the nature of the scientific work that happens before historians produce text.

This brings us to a final point—the status of theory in these two branches of science. While theorization is the be-all and end-all in mainstream LS (as in all quantitative science), “theory” has a very different meaning in the humanities. Skepticism with regard to the idea of immutable scientific laws as applied to human societies and their development runs particularly deep in history, where the onus is

24 Grint, *Leadership, Management and Command*.

25 Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften. V. Band*, 144, quoted in Ju-

Imi, “Nun sag, wie hast du’s mit den Geisteswissenschaften?”

26 Ciulla, “The Two Cultures,” 435.

on understanding specifics; and even where history turns to generalities, these remain applicable within a specific and unique context, with no ambition to attain the status of scientific laws. Scientific deliverables are also different: historians are absorbed by problems of epistemology and methodology, by the discovery of new sources, and by new ways of getting the data to talk. While some may argue that the subjectivity of historical analysis limits its generalizability, it is precisely this nuanced understanding that can enrich LS by providing deeper insights into leadership phenomena.

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# The Role of Leadership Studies, Scientific Leaders, and Political Leaders in Combating Science Polarization

by Kathryn E. Reda, University of Oxford

## Abstract:

This commentary discusses the recent political polarization of scientific research and how this polarization threatens the neutrality of science in American society. It contends further that leadership studies, along with scientific studies, have become a contentious battleground themselves, particularly on topics like climate change, energy policy, and the COVID-19 pandemic. This is exacerbated by mass media misinformation and declining public trust. Science polarization poses a significant challenge for leadership as it erodes informed decision making, making it crucial for leaders to bridge rather than deepen ideological divides. Leadership studies as a discipline has a responsibility to explore the causes of science polarization and identify actionable steps on how leaders can address this growing issue. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a valuable case study, highlighting how communication in times of crisis can either mitigate or exacerbate science polarization. By assessing what leaders did well and where they faltered, leadership studies can ensure leaders in the future will be better prepared to navigate science-related challenges. Leaders also have a responsibility to address scientific polarization. Scientific leaders must rethink how they communicate with the public and convey the complexities of intrascientific uncertainty. Meanwhile, political leaders need to foster bipartisan respect for scientific consensus by eliminating the use of divisive political rhetoric and promoting common identity politics when discussing science-related issues. Ultimately, leaders and leadership studies must foster collaboration between policy makers and scientists.

## Introduction

The field of leadership studies has remained notably quiet on matters of science in decision making and how leaders can engage with and communicate science-related issues effectively. Scientific institutions have long played a central role in humanity. While scientists often strive to be objective and unbiased, in recent years, deeply politicized rhetoric—namely over matters such as epidemiology, climate change, and energy—has made the scientific search for objective truth more difficult. This left-right political divide between pro- and antiscience stances was only further exacerbated by the pandemic. Recent evidence suggests that the intense state of polarization seen in America today causes political

affiliation to influence individuals' scientific beliefs on both "political" topics like climate change, energy, and COVID-19, as well as "nonpolitical" topics such as GMOs, vaccines, HIV, evolution, and stem cells.<sup>1</sup> The mass media and declining levels of trust in leaders have exacerbated the political divide on science, also known as science polarization. As a result, the ability of the scientific community to effectively communicate and implement solutions is severely compromised.

Scientific polarization is a specific problem for leadership because it undermines the foundation on which informed decision making and public trust are built. When science is politicized, the neutrality of the scientific method is called into question, making it difficult for leaders to guide their communities to-

<sup>1</sup> Reda, *Polarized Politics and Science in America*.



ward common goals based on hypotheses, research, and theories. Leaders are central to both the problem of scientific polarization and its solutions. Effective leadership can bridge divides and encourage a culture that respects evidence-based decision making. On the contrary, poor leadership can widen divides, undermine the integrity of institutions, including science, and encourage a culture that dismisses empirical evidence in favor of ideology. Therefore, considering leadership is essential when discussing these problems and their solutions.

Leadership studies might help us understand and address scientific polarization. Particularly, leadership studies must evaluate how scientific communication can be improved to build trust in science and unite people with diverse views. Leadership studies might also identify strategies to deal with intrascience uncertainty in times of crisis, decouple politics and science, and support science policy. Looking at science polarization in a recent time of crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, can identify gaps in leadership studies and provide valuable insights for future leadership approaches.

Leaders in both the scientific and governmental sectors hold positions of influence and authority, which inherently makes it their responsibility to address this issue. Scientific leaders must recognize that their role extends beyond conducting research; they are also responsible for the state of public trust in science. When scientific communication is mishandled or lacks transparency, it can exacerbate public skepticism and deepen divides. Thus, leaders in this sector must rethink how they communicate their findings to the general public and address intrascientific uncertainty transparently. By fostering open, accessible, and honest dialogues, they can demystify scientific processes and make science more relatable and trustworthy. Scientific leaders must also prioritize building stronger relations with policy makers. Meanwhile,

governmental leaders must come together to change political rhetoric around science. By addressing these areas, both political and scientific leaders can mitigate the effects of scientific polarization and promote a society that values evidence-based decision making.

## Science as an Impartial Institution

Institutions that strive toward impartiality should remain free from political influence to ensure they can operate fairly and effectively. When institutions like courts, regulatory bodies, or scientific organizations are influenced by politics, their decisions and actions may be influenced by institutions looking to control research, serving particular political agendas rather than the public good. This undermines their credibility and erodes public trust.

Science, which ideally strives toward impartiality,<sup>2</sup> has recently experienced erosion in its perceived neutrality. This shift began in the 1970s with the advent of regulatory science to support environmental policy.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, most people still viewed science as impartial, at least until recently. As recently as 2009, a Pew Research study found that nearly two-thirds of Americans saw scientists as neither particularly liberal nor conservative.<sup>4</sup> However, when science underpins controversial policies, it becomes vulnerable to political attacks. At the turn of the last century, conservatives began funding think tanks like the “Climate Change Counter Movement” and aligned with anti-climate change

2 Mooney, *The Republican War on Science*; Reem Nadeem, “Americans’ Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines,” *Pew Research Center Science & Society* (blog), February 15, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2022/02/15/americans-trust-in-scientists-other-groups-declines/>.

3 Jasanoff, *The Fifth Branch*.

4 Stacy Rosenberg, “Section 4: Scientists, Politics and Religion,” *Pew Research Center—U.S. Politics & Policy* (blog), July 9, 2009, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2009/07/09/section-4-scientists-politics-and-religion/>.

and antiscience rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, Democrats incorporated “backing” science into their platform, further entrenching partisan divides.

Interestingly, scientific literacy is roughly equal between Democrats and Republicans,<sup>6</sup> suggesting that political polarization, rather than a lack of understanding, drives these divides.

The deterioration of impartial institutions should be a significant concern because they are vital for presenting unbiased facts to the public and political leaders. The scientific community’s role is to publish findings that should be respected across the political spectrum and used by politicians to guide decisions and policy. Politicians, unless they are qualified scientists, should not undermine or critique scientific findings. However, today’s political landscape sees Democrats strongly supporting science while Republicans often make statements that undermine scientific findings related to renewable energy, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

This polarization makes it challenging for scientists to implement their discoveries into meaningful solutions. For science to regain its impartial status, the legitimacy of scientific findings are to be debated and contested among adequately trained scientists, not in political arenas.

Leaders play a crucial role in restoring and maintaining impartial institutions. Just as a referee must remain impartial to ensure fair play in a basketball game, political leaders must respect the independence of science, keeping it free from political bias. Similarly, scientific leaders have a duty to keep politics out of the lab while also shielding science from political exploitation.

Together these leaders must foster

environments where scientific discourse is guided by expertise and evidence rather than partisan interests. By doing so, leaders can help ensure that science remains a trusted source of knowledge, enabling informed policy decisions that benefit society as a whole.

## Politically Polarized Scientific Topics

Climate change, the use and acquisition of energy resources, and the COVID-19 pandemic are the areas currently subjected to the most scientific polarization. While much of the previous research has focused on climate change and energy, the recent COVID-19 pandemic provides a valuable opportunity to gather new data and deepen our understanding of the mechanisms behind scientific polarization. The pandemic, with its global impact and rapid dissemination of scientific information, allows us to observe in real time how different groups respond to emerging scientific consensus and how misinformation spreads. This new information can help us develop more effective strategies for communicating science and mitigating polarization in the future.

### *Climate Change and Energy*

The literature on climate change is extensive, and this overview highlights key points. Historically, Democrats have supported proenvironment policies, while Republicans have often minimized the threat of climate change through both rhetoric and policy. The political divide over climate change and energy is complex. It can in part be attributed to ideological differences, with conservatives traditionally favoring limited government intervention,<sup>7</sup> while progressives

5 Brulle, “Institutionalizing Delay.”

6 Sara Atske, “What Americans Know about Science,” *Pew Research Center Science & Society* (blog), March 28, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2019/03/28/what-americans-know-about-science/>.

7 It’s important to note that while the Republican Party has traditionally favored limited government intervention, it is currently undergoing a significant shift, increasingly supporting policies that restrict individual freedoms. The party is now aligning itself with policies that limit a woman’s right to make decisions about

advocate for collective action to address the crisis. Economic interests, particularly in fossil fuel-dependent regions,<sup>8</sup> and cultural identity further deepen the divide,<sup>9</sup> with rural areas often opposing green climate policies.<sup>10</sup> Conservative media that serves these regions therefore cater content to support these views by focusing on short-term concerns over long-term environmental sustainability.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, Democratic and Republican administrations have taken drastically different approaches to the issue of climate change and energy. During the Obama administration, the Clean Power Plan was implemented, resulting in a twentyfold increase in solar energy generation and significant reductions in carbon emissions.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, the Trump administration rolled back climate regulations, clean water rules, and pollution standards, and withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Treaty.<sup>13</sup>

This contrast in policy approaches is also reflected in the partisan divide on environmental issues. According to Pew Research, 84 percent of Democrats believe human activity causes climate change, compared to less than half (43 percent) of Republicans.<sup>14</sup> Trust in climate scientists also varies dramatically, with 70 percent of liberal Democrats expressing high trust in their information, compared

her own body, dictate choices in marital partners, regulate bathroom usage, and control access to certain books.

8 Puyo et al., "Key Challenges Faced by Fossil Fuel Exporters during the Energy Transition."

9 Patterson, "Culture and Identity in Climate Policy."

10 Bonnie and Diamond, *Understanding Rural Attitudes toward the Environment and Conservation in America*.

11 Laura Benshoff, "Renewable Energy Is Maligned by Misinformation. It's a Distraction, Experts Say," *NPR*, August 26, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/24/1110850169/misinformation-renewable-energy-gop-climate>; US Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Air and Radiation, "Local Renewable Energy Benefits and Resources."

12 The White House, "Climate Change and President Obama's Plan to Combat It."

13 Stacy Feldman and Marianne Lavelle, "Donald Trump's Record on Climate Change," *Inside Climate News* (blog), January 2, 2020, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/02012020/trump-climate-policy-record-rollback-fossil-energy-history-can-didate-profile/>.

14 Dunlap et al., "The Political Divide on Climate Change."

to only 15 percent of conservative Republicans.<sup>15</sup> Views on government measures to combat climate change also diverge sharply between the parties. For instance, 76 percent of liberal Democrats believe power plant emission restrictions can make a significant impact, whereas only 29 percent of conservative Republicans agree, a difference of 47 percentage points.<sup>16</sup> When it comes to energy resources, Democrats are more likely to support the expansion of solar panel and wind turbine farms, while Republicans tend to favor coal mining, fracking, offshore drilling, and nuclear power plants.<sup>17</sup>

This deep polarization has hindered America's ability to address climate change with the urgency seen in other nations, leaving the country struggling to implement effective and unified climate policies. Leaders and leadership studies should be deeply concerned about this; the inability to form a cohesive response to critical issues like climate change reflects a broader failure in governance<sup>18</sup> and social cohesion.<sup>19</sup> When leadership is unable to bridge divides and guide society toward collective action, it not only undermines the effectiveness of policy but also erodes public trust in institutions.<sup>20</sup> Addressing this polarization is essential for leaders to mobilize the nation and effectively tackle the complex challenges beyond environmental issues that threaten national and global safety and well-being.

15 Cary Funk, "Key Findings about Americans' Confidence in Science and Their Views on Scientists' Role in Society," *Pew Research Center* (blog), February 12, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/12/key-findings-about-americans-confidence-in-science-and-their-views-on-scientists-role-in-society/>.

16 Funk, "Key Findings about Americans' Confidence in Science and Their Views on Scientists' Role in Society."

17 Alec Tyson and Brian Kennedy, "1. Views on Energy Development in the U.S.," *Pew Research Center* (blog), June 27, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2024/06/27/views-on-energy-development-in-the-u-s/>.

18 Basseches et al., "Climate Policy Conflict in the U.S. States."

19 Tamasiga et al., "Amplifying Climate Resilience."

20 Mannan and Noreen, "The Impact of Political Polarization on Governance."

## The COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, polarization significantly impacted the nation's unity in responding to the crisis. The Trump administration downplayed the dangers of the virus and did not take its risks seriously. The Republican Party, following this lead, often dismissed scientific recommendations, including mask mandates and social distancing protocols. In contrast, Democrats aggressively enforced guidelines based on scientific recommendations.<sup>21</sup> This stark difference in approach created a top-down effect on partisan beliefs and attitudes toward the pandemic and science itself, deepening the divide between the parties.

This polarization was also driven by the bottom-up forces. Pandemic policies, such as stay-at-home orders, directly challenged conservative values of individual freedom and minimal government intervention.<sup>22</sup> This made conservatives naturally less likely to comply and more likely to resist protocols like mask-wearing, vaccination, and social distancing, even though it was a conservative government making the initial recommendations. These two factors—top-down leadership and bottom-up cultural values—exacerbated the situation, making an already challenging crisis even worse.

Polarization causes party followers to overlook evaluating the facts themselves and instead align their beliefs with their party, affecting attitudes, actions, and threat perception during the pandemic. Liberals perceived higher risk and trusted medical professionals more while placing less trust in politicians compared to conservatives.<sup>23</sup> Political polarization also significantly affects health

protective behaviors; liberals are more likely to wear face masks, wash their hands frequently, and follow social distancing protocols than conservatives.<sup>24</sup> The literature consistently shows that conservatives are less concerned about the pandemic and less likely to support policies to reduce transmission than liberals.<sup>25</sup> A Pew Research poll found that 78 percent of Democrats considered the virus a major threat to the health of the US population, compared to only 52 percent of Republicans.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the United States, which accounts for 4 percent of the world's population, has accounted for about a fourth of the world's COVID-19 deaths. This exemplifies how scientific polarization leaves Americans divided and hinders the scientific leaders' ability to transform their findings into solutions.

The political polarization of science during the COVID-19 pandemic underscores a critical area of study for leadership disciplines. The pandemic revealed how political ideologies could dramatically influence public perception of scientific guidance. Leadership studies must examine how these divisions emerged and how political narratives can distort or undermine scientific consensus. By understanding the mechanisms behind this polarization, leadership scholars can develop strategies to promote better communication<sup>27</sup> and trust<sup>28</sup> between scientific institutions and the public, especially in times of crisis.<sup>29</sup>

In practice, leaders must be aware of how

24 Young et al., "The Politics of Mask-Wearing."

25 Conway et al., "Why Are Conservatives Less Concerned about the Coronavirus (COVID-19) than Liberals?"; Ronald Brownstein, "Red and Blue America Aren't Experiencing the Same Pandemic," *The Atlantic*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/03/how-republicans-and-democrats-think-about-coronavirus/608395/>.

26 Sara Atske, "Public Views of the Coronavirus's Impact on the U.S.," *Pew Research Center* (blog), March 26, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/03/26/public-views-of-the-coronaviruss-impact-on-the-u-s/>.

27 Mohamed Nour and Kisa, "Political Leaders' Communication Strategies during COVID-19 in Highly Infected Countries."

28 Naqvi and Saikia, "Lessons Learned on Building Trust during a Global Pandemic."

29 Beilstein et al., "Leadership in a Time of Crisis."

21 Gollwitzer et al., "Partisan Differences in Physical Distancing Are Linked to Health Outcomes during the COVID-19 Pandemic."

22 Jost, *A Theory of System Justification*.

23 Kerr et al., "Political Polarization on COVID-19 Pandemic Response in the United States."



political polarization can impact the effectiveness of their decisions, particularly when those decisions are grounded in scientific evidence. Leaders can navigate polarized environments by fostering trust through transparency and authenticity.<sup>30</sup> Additionally they have a responsibility to truthfully ensure constituents that public health messages are not linked to political agendas. This requires clear communication that balances respecting diverse viewpoints while also upholding evidence-based policies.

## Causes Exacerbating Science Polarization

Political ideologies are not the only factors that influence how individuals process and form beliefs about scientific information.<sup>31</sup> While many factors exacerbate scientific polarization, mass media misinformation and low levels of trust in science are among the most damaging. Media consumption patterns significantly impact individuals' susceptibility to partisan or ideological influence.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, studies show that individuals with high trust in science are more likely to accept scientific findings.<sup>33</sup>

### *Mass Media Misinformation*

Mass media has played a significant role in American division and amplified polarization in our nation. Today, citizens have access to swaths of news outlets; this high-choice environment has exacerbated polarization by activating party identities and nur-

turing negative opposing party feelings.<sup>34</sup> In pursuit of better approval ratings, media and news sources target certain audiences by telling their listeners what they want to hear. As a result, news channels like Fox and MSNBC have become polarized echo chambers. This lack of balanced content increases affective polarization by increasing negative perceptions and decreasing trust in the other party.<sup>35</sup>

Social media platforms, like X, formerly known as Twitter, and Facebook, have similar effects on polarization as news outlets. These platforms contain algorithms that can identify political preferences and present information catered to each individual and their political alignment. Essentially, this enables the user to hear what they want to hear and not necessarily what is "true." Brookings released a report in 2021 based on a review of over fifty social science studies describing how social media has intensified political polarization in America. Although platforms like Facebook, X, and YouTube are not the direct cause of polarization, they cannot fully evade responsibility for this phenomenon because the use of these platforms has been shown to intensify divisiveness.<sup>36</sup> This exposure to content individuals "want" to hear has been shown to prime their partisan identities and increase their negative evaluations of the opposing party.<sup>37</sup> This rise in misinformation has given ammunition to science deniers and those looking to meet certain political agendas alike. In effect, the work of many scientific institutions has been undermined, and their goals to help others are impeded.

Mass media is central to how leaders communicate, build trust, and influence public opinion; thus, the intersection of leadership and

30 Erickson, "Communication in a Crisis and the Importance of Authenticity and Transparency."

31 Ecker et al., "The Psychological Drivers of Misinformation Belief and Its Resistance to Correction."

32 Amy Mitchell, "Political Polarization & Media Habits," *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project* (blog), October 21, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>.

33 Drummond and Fischhoff, "Individuals with Greater Science Literacy and Education Have More Polarized Beliefs on Controversial Science Topics."

34 Lelkes et al., "The Hostile Audience."

35 Levendusky, "Partisan Media Exposure and Attitudes toward the Opposition."

36 *Fueling the Fire*.

37 Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States."

mass media is an important relationship that warrants further exploration, both in terms of science and beyond. Leadership studies plays a key role in understanding how mass media misinformation amplifies polarization and what leaders can do to address this issue. Understanding the dynamics of media-driven polarization allows leadership scholars to explore how misinformation shapes collective beliefs and behaviors,<sup>38</sup> particularly in crises<sup>39</sup> or politically charged environments.<sup>40</sup> By studying how leaders can effectively counteract misinformation and bridge divides, leadership studies can contribute to strategies that promote more informed and cohesive communities. While media can deepen political divides, it can also bridge them.<sup>41</sup> Recognizing the power of media in shaping perceptions helps leaders develop approaches to engage with diverse audiences in a way that transcends partisan biases and encourages constructive dialogue.

For leaders, addressing the challenges posed by media misinformation is essential to maintaining credibility and guiding their organizations or constituencies. This requires a deep understanding of the media landscape and strong communication skills. Leaders must be vigilant in identifying and countering false narratives that not only undermine their initiatives but more broadly erode public trust. Additionally, they must not produce or propagate misinformation themselves. By considering the impact of media-driven polarization, leaders can better navigate the complexities of modern communication, ensuring that their messages do not deepen divides and contribute to a more informed

and unified public discourse.

## Trust

Trust is arguably the backbone of a functioning democracy. Trust mediates critical relationships among neighbors, coworkers, and the federal government. Trust is also an essential component of leadership. Social trust refers to the trust of people in general and acts as the social glue that binds people together.<sup>42</sup> Political trust refers to trust in political leaders and institutions. Without trust, social cohesion and collective action become compromised.

The Pew Research Center found that two-thirds of Americans have little to no trust in the federal government. Looking at this decline in trust over time, in 2001 (the beginning of the Bush presidency, immediately following the September 11 terrorist attacks), 60 percent of citizens said they could trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time.”<sup>43</sup> As of April 2024, it was at 22 percent.<sup>44</sup> This distrust in authority can also be seen in other types of leaders with most individuals believing that many leaders are purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or exaggerated statements. This statistic is 61 percent for business leaders, 63 percent for governmental leaders, and 64 percent for journalists and the media.<sup>45</sup> Repairing this trust is critical to unifying our divided nation and meeting the challenges the future will bring. Studies have shown that perceived polarization directly undermines Americans’ trust in each other and results in lower political trust.<sup>46</sup> This lack of trust fails to promote

38 Ecker et al., “The Psychological Drivers of Misinformation Belief and Its Resistance to Correction.”

39 Caceres et al., “The Impact of Misinformation on the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

40 Gupta et al., “Fake News Believability.”

41 Kat Deaven, “How Newsrooms Can Help Unite a Divided America,” *Center for Media Engagement: The University of Texas at Austin* (blog), February 7, 2019, <https://mediaengagement.org/blogs/making-strangers-less-strange-how-newsrooms-can-help-unite-a-divided-america/>.

42 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

43 Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2024,” *Pew Research Center—U.S. Politics & Policy* (blog), June 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>.

44 Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government.”

45 Edelman Trust Institute, *2024 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report*, 88.

46 Enders and Armaly, “The Differential Effects of Actual and

civil engagement, cooperation, social harmony, and democratic systems.<sup>47</sup>

Trust in scientists has also been on the decline. This trend has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>48</sup> As of 2021, only 29 percent of US adults have a great deal of confidence in scientists, compared to 39 percent in 2020.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, this trend has partisan influence. Gauchat found that trust in science has been declining since 1974 and found that conservatives especially have become increasingly distrustful.<sup>50</sup> As of December 2021, 43 percent of Democrats have a great deal of confidence, compared to only 13 percent of Republicans.<sup>51</sup> As of 2024, in the United States, 67 percent of people feel that science has become politicized,<sup>52</sup> indicating a growing concern that scientific findings are being manipulated to serve specific agendas. This trend is deeply concerning because scientific inquiry is essential to informed policy making and leadership during health and environmental crises.<sup>53</sup> If science is no longer recognized as an impartial and trustworthy authority, science's critical role in policy making and, even more importantly, the progression of society is threatened.<sup>54</sup>

In the wake of the pandemic, it appears that trust in scientists is rebounding despite trust in governmental leaders remaining low. A 2024 study found 74 percent of people trust scientists to tell them the truth about innovations and technology compared to 45 percent of people trusting governmental leaders to do the same.<sup>55</sup> Additionally 77 percent of people

trust scientists to do the right thing. However, there is still plenty of room to expand trust in science and scientific leaders. Only 42 percent of individuals agree that scientists know how to communicate effectively with people like them.<sup>56</sup> This highlights a critical gap: while scientists are trusted more than other leaders, their ability to convey complex information in an accessible and relatable manner is often questioned.

This discrepancy underscores the importance of effective communication of scientific discoveries. The most groundbreaking innovations—whether in vaccines, artificial intelligence, or green energy—can only achieve their full potential when clearly communicated to and trusted by the public. Without proper understanding and trust, revolutionary advancements may fail to be adopted or utilized to their fullest extent, limiting their potential impact on society. People are less likely to trust things that they do not understand. Studies show that only 1 percent of respondents with high scientific knowledge say that science has a mostly negative impact on society, compared to 9 percent of respondents with low scientific knowledge.<sup>57</sup> This shows how critical it is for scientific leaders to ensure that key findings are delivered in a manner that is digestible to individuals with low scientific knowledge. Effective science communication is essential to building trust, bridging the gap between invention and implementation, and ensuring that the benefits of scientific progress are appreciated by all.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic: What Leadership Studies Can Learn about Science Polarization and the Importance of Communication

*Global Report*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> Edelman Trust Institute, *2024 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report*, 88.

<sup>57</sup> Funk, "Key Findings about Americans' Confidence in Science and Their Views on Scientists' Role in Society."

Perceived Polarization"; Lee, "Social Trust in Polarized Times."

<sup>47</sup> Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust*.

<sup>48</sup> Edelman Trust Institute, *2021 Edelman Trust Barometer*.

<sup>49</sup> Nadeem, "Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines."

<sup>50</sup> Gauchat, "Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere."

<sup>51</sup> Nadeem, "Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines."

<sup>52</sup> Nadeem, "Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines."

<sup>53</sup> Lasswell, "The Policy Orientation."

<sup>54</sup> Rekker, "The Nature and Origins of Political Polarization over Science."

<sup>55</sup> Edelman Trust Institute, *2024 Edelman Trust Barometer*

Leadership studies as a discipline is dedicated to examining how leadership functions across various contexts, particularly during crises, and how it can evolve to better meet the challenges of the future. Leadership studies scholars must work to identify areas where leaders can improve and determine actionable steps to enhance their effectiveness. Times of crisis are defining moments for leaders. Thus, evaluating the missteps and triumphs during these tumultuous periods is incredibly valuable for preparing leaders to navigate future crises. By considering the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>58</sup> leaders can better prepare for future crises, ensuring that science remains a trusted institution and a tool for decision making rather than a battleground for political disputes. Effective communication is essential because it bridges the gap between scientific expertise and public understanding, shaping how policies are implemented and whether they gain public trust. This requires examining what makes scientific communication effective, how to manage intrascientific uncertainty, and the role of political rhetoric in coupling partisanship with science, and identifying communication gaps between scientists and policy makers.

### *Improving Scientific Communication*

Recently, experts have found that scientific jargon often obfuscates scientists' conclusions and intentions. Many scientific and medical leaders used scientific jargon during the pandemic to explain vaccine clinical trial results, discussing concepts like messenger RNA, neutralizing antibodies, T-cells, and immunogenicity when interviewed. These are concepts that are difficult for individuals without a scientific background to grasp. Health officials and experts "speak in the language of academia, without recognizing how it confuses people."<sup>59</sup> Although

efforts were made to simplify the new technology, it became clear that scientific communication leaders need to become far more effective in bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and public understanding.

In failing to bridge the divide between scientific knowledge and public understanding, scientists have unintentionally allowed nonexperts to explain their findings. During the pandemic, the responsibility often fell to news outlets, many of which are politically biased, to simplify these findings and explain the significance of the clinical trial results in more accessible terms. As a result, much of America remained hesitant after the initial wave of vaccinations. People were skeptical about how a vaccine could be developed so quickly when others took years or decades. They feared the development was rushed and that the vaccine might have long-term health implications. Others cited a lack of understanding of how vaccines work when discussing their hesitancy.<sup>60</sup>

These misunderstandings about vaccinations highlight critical areas of study within leadership studies: understanding how leadership in scientific communication has evolved, where it has fallen short, and how it should function in the future. Leadership studies should aim to focus on examining the dynamics of how scientific leaders communicate during crises, the impact of these communications on public perception of scientific findings, and the broader implications for trust in science.

Leadership studies should also analyze how scientific communication has been conducted, identifying both successes and failures, which offer insights into how leadership can be more effective. This involves not just examining the communication

er Shots," *New York Times*, February 7, 2022, <https://www.ny-times.com/2022/02/07/briefing/boosters-us-covid-omicron.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

<sup>60</sup> Other less scientific reasonings for not getting the vaccines, such as fear of microchips, were more conspiratorial in nature.

<sup>58</sup> Beilstein et al., "Leadership in a Time of Crisis."

<sup>59</sup> David Leonhardt, "Why Americans Are Slow to Get Boost-



strategies themselves but also understanding the social and cultural contexts in which these strategies operate. By doing so, the field can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of leadership in scientific communication, especially in times of crisis, and provide a foundation for developing more effective approaches that enhance public trust in science and minimize science polarization.

### *Addressing Intrascientific Uncertainty*

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered a critical case study of how scientific leaders communicate uncertain, evolving evidence to the public. During the pandemic, the open discussion of even small levels of uncertainty had serious implications for public health in two ways. First, the need for high levels of certainty in findings among scientists slowed the implementation of public health measures. Second, the publicization of these uncertainties undermined public trust in scientific findings and affected public health behaviors. Together, these factors contributed to the spread of the virus.

No issue exemplified these breakdowns in communication like the issue of mask-wearing during the pandemic. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, debate among experts over the use of face masks to prevent the virus's spread seemed endless. Initially, these debates took place because experts were uncertain about the virus's mode of transmission. Some scientists argued that airborne transmission was a major mode, while others urged caution, emphasizing the need for more rigorous studies to confirm these findings. In a letter to the World Health Organization (WHO), a group of scientists contended that the virus could be spread through tiny particles that linger in the air for extended periods, urging the WHO to recognize the importance of airborne

transmission in the spread of COVID-19.<sup>61</sup> Conversely, other scientists warned against drawing premature conclusions from limited evidence and argued for more controlled studies to substantiate these claims.<sup>62</sup> Thus, some experts advocated for masks as an effective preventive measure, while others were cautious, citing a lack of conclusive evidence.

Leadership studies must work to understand the balance between confidence in the accuracy of scientific findings and decisiveness in times of crisis. If scientists were to ignore emerging data simply because there is a small chance it might be wrong, progress would never be made. Progress in science necessitates moving forward with the best available evidence, even when that evidence is not yet definitive. Leadership in scientific and public health contexts involves making informed decisions based on the best available evidence. Ignoring preliminary findings due to uncertainty results in stagnation and can impede critical advancements, especially during urgent situations like a global pandemic. For example, despite concerns about things like COVID-19 vaccines, the risk of not getting vaccinated is too significant for both individuals and society. Leonhardt compares this situation to if “a group of engineers surrounded firefighters outside a burning building and started questioning whether they were using the most powerful hoses on the market.”<sup>63</sup> In this case, practically any hose is better than no hose at all. Acting on an adequate solution is usually better than wasting time searching for the perfect one and doing nothing in the meantime. The risk of inaction is simply too great. Leadership studies must focus on understanding how leaders balance the need for immediate action with the inherent uncertainties of scientific research, ensuring that progress is made without unnecessary delays.

61 Morawska and Cao, “Airborne Transmission of SARS-CoV-2.”

62 Klompas et al., “Airborne Transmission of SARS-CoV-2.”

63 Leonhardt, “Why Americans Are Slow to Get Booster Shots.”

Additionally, the discussion of intrascientific uncertainty in nonscientific spaces has given rise to an erosion of people's trust in public health recommendations. Health authorities' initial conflicting guidance on mask usage confused citizens. The WHO initially advised against widespread mask use, recommending them only for those who were sick or caring for the sick. As more evidence emerged about masks' effectiveness in preventing COVID-19 spread, however, the WHO revised its guidance, recommending masks in certain situations.<sup>64</sup> Although this was in part due to supply shortages and the need to preserve the low supply for high-risk individuals, the reasoning behind these suggestions was not made entirely clear or transparent for many Americans. This led to uncertainty about mask effectiveness, having serious public health implications. In the pandemic's early stages, many people were hesitant to wear masks or received conflicting advice about when to wear them, likely contributing to the virus's rapid spread in some areas.<sup>65</sup> In hindsight, the way scientific findings were communicated was replete with problems; the evidence supporting mask usage was compelling, even if not conclusive.

Leadership studies must examine how leaders can better communicate evolving evidence and how such communication affects public behavior during crises. During the pandemic, the scientific community did very little to explain the scientific method more generally. Indeed, as scientists and epidemiologists communicated with the public about the pandemic, and their understanding of it, leaders might have explained to the public how and why scientific hypotheses and conclusions changed as we came to know more about COVID-19. While some level of uncertainty is normal, and constant

debate was/is essential to scientific understanding, it can leave citizens confused about how to interpret scientific findings and "figure out the right moves."<sup>66</sup> Nonscientists can struggle to grasp complex scientific concepts and the inherent uncertainty in research.<sup>67</sup> Studies have shown that the average citizen has misconceptions about the nature and certainty of scientific findings.<sup>68</sup> The pandemic illustrates how openly discussing scientific uncertainty can do more harm than good—particularly to large groups of people that may not fully grasp the importance of the scientific method. Thus communication strategies must also be nuanced to reflect the delicateness of the situation. This is by no means to say that scientists should not discuss the validity of findings. They do, however, need to be more mindful of the forums in which these discussions take place and intentional about how they communicate uncertainty in nonscientific spaces. Leadership studies must evaluate how different scientific communication strategies affect how citizens respond to emerging evidence and scientific uncertainty in crisis. While transparency is vital, it is also essential to provide clear, actionable guidance based on the best available evidence. By doing so, scientists can help mitigate the negative impacts of uncertainty on public health and ensure that their communications promote informed decision making and public trust. By analyzing these communication strategies, leadership studies can provide valuable insights about how to effectively guide decision making during future crises.

64 World Health Organization, "Advice on the Use of Masks in the Context of COVID-19."

65 Chu et al., "Physical Distancing, Face Masks, and Eye Protection to Prevent Person-to-Person Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19."

66 Marc Fisher, "'Follow the Science': As the Third Year of the Pandemic Begins, a Simple Slogan Becomes a Political Weapon," *Washington Post*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/02/11/follow-science-year-3-pandemic-begins-simple-slogan-becomes-political-weapon/>.

67 Sinatra and Hofer, "Public Understanding of Science."

68 Lederman, "Students' and Teachers' Conceptions of the Nature of Science."

## *Understanding How Political Rhetoric Has Coupled Partisanship and Science*

Although partisanship and science is age-old, this relationship was exacerbated during the pandemic in part due to the rhetoric used by both conservative and liberal political leaders. Ideally, science and politics should be decoupled to improve scientific integrity, but given that Washington funds a significant portion of the scientific community and uses scientific findings to inform policy, the two are and will always be inextricably linked. However, this does not mean that science has to be coupled with partisanship. Analyzing rhetoric used by political leaders during the pandemic can provide valuable lessons on the importance of a leader's communication in crisis and the role of rhetoric in shaping the public's response to scientific recommendations. Leadership studies must work to understand how rhetoric during the pandemic has coupled partisanship and science.

Rhetoric is an important aspect of leadership studies because it explains how leaders use language to influence outcomes. Political rhetoric refers to the language and style used by politicians to persuade, manipulate, or appeal to a particular audience.<sup>69</sup> It plays a central role in the summoning of polarization of issues because it can shape public opinion and divide people along ideological lines. Political leaders often use polarizing language to appeal to their base and mobilize support for their policies.<sup>70</sup> They may use emotionally charged language, such as demonizing their opponents or using fear tactics, to rally their supporters. This kind of rhetoric can create an "us versus them" mentality that can lead to a polarization.<sup>71</sup> If leaders use extreme or polarizing

language, the media may focus more on the conflict rather than the substance of the issue. This can lead to a further polarization of public opinion as people are exposed to different interpretations of the same issue.<sup>72</sup> Political rhetoric can also affect the behavior of citizens. If leaders use language that promotes hostility or aggression, it can lead to increased tension and even violence.<sup>73</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how rhetoric can shape public response to science, with political leaders using language that either aligned with or contradicted scientific guidance.

Although rhetoric was used throughout the pandemic in attempts to unify the nation, there were many instances where politicians, particularly Republicans, used decisive rhetoric. Use of such inflammatory rhetoric stirred followers' emotions. For example, in response to Virginia's stay-at-home order, President Trump tweeted, "LIBERATE VIRGINIA, and save your great 2nd Amendment. It is under siege!"<sup>74</sup> This kind of rhetoric not only fueled division and resistance to public health measures but also undermined efforts to promote a unified, science-based approach to managing the crisis. In May 2021, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia compared COVID-19 safety measures, such as mask mandates and vaccinations, to Nazi-era practices. She stated, "You know, we can look back at a time in history where people were told to wear a gold star, and they were definitely treated like second-class citizens, so much so that they were put in trains and taken to gas chambers in Nazi Germany."<sup>75</sup> This

72 Druckman et al., "How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation."

73 Daniel L. Byman, "How Hateful Rhetoric Connects to Real-World Violence," *Brookings* (blog), April 9, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/09/how-hateful-rhetoric-connects-to-real-world-violence/>.

74 Kerr et al., "Political Polarization on COVID-19 Pandemic Response in the United States."

75 Ryan Nobles, "Marjorie Taylor Greene Compares House Mask Mandates to the Holocaust," *CNN*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/21/politics/marjorie-taylor-greene-mask-mandates-holocaust/index.html>.

69 Tileagă, "Political Rhetoric."

70 Druckman et al., "How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation."

71 Fernbach and Van Boven, "False Polarization."

comparison trivialized the atrocities of the Holocaust while simultaneously evoking fear and undermining scientific evidence on the effectiveness of masks and vaccines.

In contrast, Democrats tended to use unifying rhetoric and enforced guidelines based on scientific recommendations.<sup>76</sup> While facing backlash about the economic and social implications of rigid and prolonged lockdowns, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer stated, “The enemy here is a virus. The enemy is not one another. And this enemy is relentless. It doesn’t care if you’re a Republican or a Democrat. Young or old. Rich or poor.”<sup>77</sup> This approach aimed to transcend partisan divides, emphasizing collective responsibility and the need for unity in confronting the shared threat of the pandemic. Biden also repeatedly emphasized the importance of coming together as a nation to combat the virus. In September 2021 he stated, “Look, we’re the United States of America. There’s nothing—not a single thing—we’re unable to do if we do it together. So let’s stay together.”<sup>78</sup>

Effective leaders use rhetoric to foster unity and a shared sense of purpose, especially during times of crisis, to inspire collective action and resilience. It is not always as simple as saying the right things. Despite many leaders’ use of unifying rhetoric, the nation remained divided.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, it is important for leadership studies to examine how leaders can more effectively bridge societal divides through both action and rhetoric to bring about lasting and meaningful change.

Scholars of leadership studies must work to understand how this stark difference in rhetoric affected partisan beliefs and attitudes toward

science. Leadership studies can analyze the rhetorical strategies used by political leaders to communicate scientific information about COVID-19, exploring how these strategies influence public behavior. This includes examining the use of language that either supported or undermined scientific authority.

Leadership studies can also investigate the role of misinformation, like when President Trump suggested injecting disinfectant as a treatment for the virus,<sup>80</sup> on public trust in science. This incident highlights the impact that statements from influential leaders can have on public perception, often amplifying confusion and mistrust. Understanding how political rhetoric contributed to the spread of this misinformation can also help leaders counteract the spread of false narratives in the future.

### *Identifying Communication Gaps between Policy Makers and Scientists*

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed communication gaps between scientists and policy makers, which often hindered the effective translation of scientific knowledge into public policy. However, leadership studies has the tools to build trust, enhance communication channels, and deal with the differing timelines of these two groups.

Before the pandemic, both researchers and policy makers acknowledged that a communication gap existed between scientists and policy makers. A series of interviews between these two groups found a lack of dedicated time as the major barrier to closing this policy gap.<sup>81</sup> Two-way mistrust between scientific researchers and policy makers was identified as another major hurdle in strengthening the

76 Gollwitzer et al., “Partisan Differences in Physical Distancing Are Linked to Health Outcomes during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

77 “Governor Whitmer Delivers Prepared Remarks Prepared Remarks on Law Enforcement Operation.”

78 The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on Fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

79 Fan et al., “A Tale of Two Pandemics.”

80 “Coronavirus: Outcry after Trump Suggests Injecting Disinfectant as Treatment,” *BBC News*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52407177>.

81 Gollust et al., “Mutual Distrust.”



relationship between these two groups.<sup>82</sup> This lack of dedicated time for science policy and distrust between these two groups meant that from the early days of the pandemic, leaders in research and policy were ill-positioned to work together to deal with the issue at hand. Leadership studies can investigate strategies to build trust between these two groups. For example, policy makers could demonstrate a commitment to science policy making and provide adequate funding for scientific research and education. Meanwhile, scientific researchers must demonstrate commitment to science policy by taking time out of their busy schedules to engage with policy makers.

Throughout the pandemic, scientists frequently emphasized the importance of data-driven decision making based on growing evidence about the virus, its transmission, and effective public health interventions. However, achieving this can be challenging when communication channels between policy makers and scientific leaders are insufficient. A recent workshop organized by the International Society of Environmental Epidemiology emphasized the importance of enhancing communication channels and involving policy makers early in the scientific process to ensure that science-driven policies are well-equipped to address future challenges.<sup>83</sup> Leadership studies has an interdisciplinary understanding of leadership in both spaces that can be used to bridge the gap between scientific expertise and policy action.

The differing timelines of these two groups further contributed to the communication gap between scientific and policy leaders during the pandemic. While scientific research requires careful, peer-reviewed study, policy makers need immediate answers to make quick decisions that impact public health and the economy. Thus, the urgency and uncertainty of the situation led to challenges in how scientific findings were communicated to

policy makers who were under immense pressure to act swiftly and decisively. Establishing a more “comprehensive and inclusive knowledge exchange process” between scientists and policy makers would enhance the production of research that is more relevant to policy makers’ needs while also strengthening their ability to incorporate new scientific evidence into decision making in a timely manner.<sup>84</sup> Leadership studies must consider how best to deal with these fundamentally different timelines to enable agile policy responses to complex scientific challenges.

## Leaders and Science Polarization: Rethinking Scientific Communication

In the United States, the implications of scientific polarization have been made evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet there is still much for leaders to do to address these issues. To tackle this problem, leaders in two critical areas must act. First, scientific leaders need to rethink the communication of their findings to the public and explain intrascientific uncertainty transparently. Second, political parties must unite to restore trust in political institutions by changing their rhetoric around science. Scientific and political leaders must strengthen scientific policy together.

Public perception of science is impacted by scientific communication, misunderstandings about intrascientific uncertainty, and the policy choices of governmental leaders. To regain the trust of the public and reduce scientific polarization in the future, scientific leaders need to ensure that findings are being presented in a more accessible and understandable way. Leaders need to minimize jargon and develop

<sup>82</sup> Gollust et al., “Mutual Distrust.”

<sup>83</sup> Khomsi et al., “Bridging Research-Policy Gaps.”

<sup>84</sup> Bednarek et al., “Boundary Spanning at the Science-Policy Interface.”

effective “translators” of science—individuals with an interdisciplinary understanding of both science and communication. Moreover, the discussion of intrascientific uncertainty, a cornerstone of scientific critique, can confuse citizens about the nature and certainty of scientific findings. The limitations of science must be acknowledged, but this must be done thoughtfully. Scientific leaders must rethink how they discuss the uncertainty of scientific findings with the public, ensuring that these discussions do not undermine confidence in the scientific process and helping the public better appreciate the provisional yet robust nature of scientific conclusions.

### *Scientific Leaders Must Improve Communication with the Public*

People are less likely to trust what they do not understand. This can lead to issues of epistemic trust in science because most people do not have the necessary training to comprehend complex scientific topics.<sup>85</sup> To increase trust in science, it is essential to present scientific findings in a way that is accessible and digestible.<sup>86</sup> The majority of the population lacks a background in the sciences and can feel “lost” when exposed to scientific information. Even scientists often struggle to understand material outside their disciplines. If people do not understand how something works, such as a vaccine, how can scientists expect them to trust it? In the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer report, one of the key recommendations to build trust between scientists and the public is to explain their research and engage in dialogue with the public.<sup>87</sup>

Scientists are not generally communication specialists, and communication specialists are

rarely scientists. Therefore, there is a great need for individuals with an interdisciplinary understanding of both science and communication or journalism. This role is currently filled by public scientists like Carl Sagan, Hank Green, Bill Nye, and Neil deGrasse Tyson, but there are not nearly enough of these “types” of leaders. Additionally, many public scientists primarily focus their outreach on school-aged adolescents, leaving a significant gap in ongoing scientific education for adults, particularly in relation to real-life, current issues. Leaders must prioritize the development of more effective science translators, especially those that reach a more mature age group.

Producing such translators falls on and requires the collaboration of leaders in scientific and communication/journalism communities. One way to address this is by incorporating communication and scientific policy classes as requirements in undergraduate science degrees. This would not only equip young scientists with skills to effectively convey scientific information but also inspire them to pursue careers in a range of fields they may not have otherwise considered such as science communication, advocacy, and public policy. In effect, this would create a new generation of leaders who can bridge the gap between science and society.

These professionals must possess a deep knowledge of scientific principles, combined with the ability to distill this information into narratives that resonate with audiences of various degrees of scientific knowledge. Thus, they should be able to translate scientific jargon and engage audiences with storytelling. It is key that these individuals can navigate the polarized media landscape; this role involves engaging with media outlets—many of which are politically polarized—and consistently delivering factually accurate information, even when faced with resistance from individuals who may experience cognitive dissonance because the facts

<sup>85</sup> Sinatra and Hofer, “Public Understanding of Science.”

<sup>86</sup> This pushback against scientific jargon will also address the misbeliefs surrounding American anti-intellectualism.

<sup>87</sup> Edelman Trust Institute, *2024 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report*, 88.

presented challenge their existing beliefs. Therefore, a skilled scientific communication leader must be proactive in combating misinformation and fostering trust in science. Together these skills enable science communication leaders to advocate for informed decision making on critical issues.

A more modern approach to improving science communication is by harnessing the power of nontraditional leaders on social media platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, and podcasters. The emergence of science influencers, such as @coolchemistryguy, @biologistimogene, and @astro\_alexandra have the potential to revolutionize the way scientific knowledge is shared and consumed by making it more engaging, accessible, and relatable to a broader audience. Science podcasts are also becoming increasingly popular, but many, like “Mindscope” and “Big Biology,” are geared toward scientists. Nonetheless, podcasts like “The Science of Everything” and “Huberman Lab” are more digestible to the general public. Both podcasters and influencers are leaders in this space working to bridge the gap between complex scientific concepts and everyday understanding. Nonetheless, these leaders have a responsibility to continue expanding their outreach to individuals of all ages and levels of scientific knowledge. Additionally, these scientific leaders have a responsibility to recognize and mentor individuals within the scientific community who possess the unique skill set and aptitude for science communication and public engagement. As a result, public engagement with important scientific findings would increase work to bridge the gap between science and the broader public.

By the same token, we also need more scientific supporters. The Edelman Trust Institute suggests harnessing “peer voices as advocates” of science.<sup>88</sup> This could come in the form of celebrities

who use their platforms to disseminate important scientific information, like the importance of mask-wearing and vaccinations during the pandemic, using their platforms and fan base. However, it is crucial that these individuals refrain from drawing their own scientific conclusions, as they are not trained scientists, and instead focus on accurately conveying the findings and recommendations of reputable sources. The responsibility of forming these relationships rests on the shoulders of scientific leaders because they have the expertise needed to ensure an accurate narrative is being disseminated and that complex concepts are not being simplified in a way that compromises their accuracy. By engaging trusted public figures, scientific leaders can continue to bridge the gap between scientific communities and the public, making complex ideas more accessible and fostering greater trust in scientific findings.

### *Scientific Leaders Must Contextualize Intrascientific Uncertainty*

Today, we live in a world where endless information is at our fingertips. While this has numerous benefits, it also presents new challenges that society must learn to tackle. Intrascientific criticism, where scientists critique the work of their peers, is a cornerstone of the scientific community. This process is essential for holding scientists accountable and uncovering weaknesses in research. Therefore, scientists must welcome criticism of their work. Although these discussions are a crucial part of scientific inquiry, how they are conducted can damage public trust in and understanding of science. Therefore, scientific leaders need to reevaluate how this discourse is publicized and communicated to the public, while also making the public more comfortable with the sentiment of scientific uncertainty.

Social media has profoundly influenced

<sup>88</sup> Edelman Trust Institute, 2024 *Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report*, 88.

how people think about and understand science. Today, however, these conversations often unfold on platforms like X, blogs, and news outlets, causing confusion and raising concerns for bystanders. When nonscientists hear about these uncertainties, it can lead to aversions toward new technologies, even if these technologies address more significant threats than the risks they pose. This shift can also lead to self-proclaimed “citizen scientists” spreading false or pseudoscientific information further undermining public trust in science. To mitigate this issue, scientific leaders must emphasize the importance of scientists striving for clarity, accuracy, and civility in public discussions. Additionally, scientists must carefully consider whether the platform they use for discourse is truly the most appropriate, or if engaging in a conversation via email, Zoom, or face to face might yield more productive and meaningful outcomes.

Scientific communication leaders must communicate the inherent uncertainty of scientific findings in a way that does not undermine the credibility of the science or diminish its significance in informing decisions. By explaining that scientific knowledge is always subject to revision and improvement, they can help build a more nuanced understanding of science. This approach fosters an appreciation for the provisional nature of scientific findings and underscores the importance of ongoing inquiry and skepticism. Communicating these nuances of the scientific process enables society to benefit from a realistic and balanced view of science, recognizing both its power and its limitations when it comes to informed decision making.

By the same token, scientific leaders need to help citizens become more comfortable with the concept of uncertainty by increasing their exposure to intrascientific uncertainty and interaction with scientists. Scientists are trained to acknowledge and account for uncertainty in their research, often

communicating their findings with varying degrees of confidence to reflect this uncertainty. This narrative is seldom shared outside the scientific community, contributing to the public’s fear of uncertainty. Often paralyzed by anxiety when realizing something has the potential to go wrong, citizens may go to extreme measures to avoid that risk. This partly explains the hesitancy some have shown toward getting vaccinated.<sup>89</sup>

Increasing engagement between scientific researchers and the public is a tool to improve the public’s understanding of intrascientific uncertainty. By learning about the methods and processes scientists use to gather and interpret evidence, citizens can develop a better grasp of how scientific research works and its limitations. Additionally, explaining the rigorous process of peer review will help the public better understand the integrity of most work published by major journals. Roundtable discussions between scientists and laypeople could be used to foster a deeper understanding and curiosity about science. These discussions could be filmed and uploaded to YouTube to make them more accessible. Such grassroots movements can help build trust in the scientific community and help citizens appreciate the value of scientific research even in the face of uncertainty. By bridging this gap, scientific leaders can cultivate a more informed and trusting relationship between science and society.

## A Call for Political Leaders to Aid the Restoration of Science as an Impartial Institution

While several actions in the political sphere could help restore the impartiality of science, such

<sup>89</sup> Ironically, people often overlook the risks associated with everyday activities. Yet, Americans still drive to work, order medium-rare burgers, and invest in cryptocurrencies—none of these actions have guaranteed outcomes and are, statistically speaking, riskier than getting vaccinated.



as regulating media algorithms and strengthening impartial scientific institutions like the National Institutes of Health and National Science Foundation, changing the rhetoric around science is arguably the most crucial. What our leaders say matters because their rhetoric greatly influences public belief. Political leaders should be mindful of their language and strive to promote civility and unity rather than division and polarization.

The weaponization of science by political leaders must end for science to regain its status as an unbiased institution. To achieve this, both parties must move away from using scientific rhetoric as a tool for division and instead embrace it as a means to unite the nation. By doing so, they can not only address science polarization but also create a more cohesive and understanding society.

### *Eliminating False or Exaggerated Claims and Divisive Political Rhetoric when Discussing Science*

Both the Democratic and Republican parties use false or exaggerated claims and inappropriate rhetoric when discussing science to further their agendas and policies. Generally, but not always, Democratic members overinflate the implications of scientific findings, while Republican members make counter-science proclamations. The chart on the facing page contains five statements from Democratic politicians and five from Republican politicians on scientific issues, illustrating the misrepresentation of scientific information to meet political agendas and misuse of rhetoric.

This distortion of the truth and misuse of rhetoric not only obfuscates public understanding of science but also deepens political polarization around critical issues making it difficult to implement solutions. To address this, leaders from both

sides must commit to responsible and accurate communication. Democratic leaders must present balanced scientific findings, avoiding hyperbole, which leads to unrealistic expectations or fear. Republican leaders, meanwhile, must refrain from dismissing or politicizing well-established science.

### *Promoting Common Identity Politics When Discussing Science*

Consensus matters. Just as rhetoric has been used to push people apart over science, it can also be used to bring people together. To decouple science and partisanship, political leaders must first acknowledge that science provides evidence-based information to guide decision making. They must also recognize that scientific findings are often complex and nuanced; although they may not always align with their political agendas, they must respect scientific consensus.

Political party leaders on both sides can then work to shift the discussion around science from common enemy politics to common human identity politics. Common enemy politics effectively enlarge and motivate a group against a commonly perceived “bad guy.” In contrast, common human identity politics appeal to shared love, moral values, and our common humanity.<sup>90</sup> Political leaders can facilitate this shift by emphasizing shared values, experiences, and aspirations that unite people across different groups.<sup>91</sup> It is also crucial for leaders to use rhetoric that promotes empathy and compassion, encouraging people to put themselves in others’ shoes and view the world from different perspectives. By avoiding language that demonizes or dehumanizes particular groups, leaders can help people see beyond their differences and focus on common goals. This approach can build bridges between the Republicans

<sup>90</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*.

<sup>91</sup> The White House, “Remarks of President Joe Biden—State of the Union Address as Prepared for Delivery.”

Democratic Politician Statements	Republican Politician Statements
In 2014, President Barack Obama claimed that climate change was responsible for increasing the severity of wildfires in the western United States. While climate change is a contributing factor to wildfires, experts argued that other factors, such as land management practices, were also significant factors. <sup>i</sup>	In 2012, Todd Akin, a former Republican representative from Missouri, sparked controversy when he claimed that victims of “legitimate rape” rarely become pregnant because “the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.” <sup>ii</sup>
In 2019, Representative Alexandria Ocasio- Cortez of New York claimed that the world would end in twelve years if climate change was not addressed, which was criticized for exaggerating the urgency of the issue. <sup>iii</sup>	In 2014, Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who was then running for president, stated that he didn’t believe that human activity is causing climate change, saying that “I do not believe that human activity is causing these dramatic changes to our climate the way these scientists are portraying it.” <sup>iv</sup>
In 2020, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo claimed that the COVID-19 virus was “never going to be a pandemic” because “we have the best healthcare system on the planet.” This statement was criticized for underestimating the seriousness of the virus and the potential for it to spread rapidly. <sup>v</sup>	In 2018, Congressman Mo Brooks of Alabama suggested that sea level rise might be caused by rocks and sediment falling into the ocean, rather than by human activity. Brooks said, “Every time you have that soil or rock or whatever it is that is deposited into the seas, that forces the sea levels to rise because now you have less space in those oceans because the bottom is moving up.” <sup>vi</sup>
In 2021, President Joe Biden claimed that the COVID-19 vaccines were “100% effective” in preventing hospitalization and death, even though real-world studies have shown that the vaccines are highly effective, but not completely so. <sup>vii</sup>	In 2020, President Donald Trump suggested that disinfectants could be injected into the body to treat COVID-19, prompting widespread criticism from medical experts who warned that injecting disinfectants could be dangerous or even deadly. <sup>viii</sup>
In September 2023, Gavin Newsome, the governor of California, claimed that America is “energy independent” under the Biden administration. Although America is now a net energy exporter, many experts agree that the nation is no longer “energy independent” due to its high reliance on international crude oil. <sup>ix</sup>	In August 2024, Dave McCormick, who is running for a Senate seat in Pennsylvania, posted to X that “Bob Casey and Kamala Harris want to BAN fracking.” <sup>x</sup> However, Senator Bob Casey of Pennsylvania has never called for a fracking ban. Although Harris has previously said she would support such a ban, during her recent campaign cycle she has made it clear that she no longer would support such legislation.

i. “Obama Attributes Wildfires to Climate Change,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 23, 2014, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-obama-attributes-wildfires-to-climate-change-2014jul22-story.html>.

ii. John Eligon and Michael Schwartz, “Senate Candidate Provokes Ire with ‘Legitimate Rape’ Comment,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/20/us/politics/todd-akin-provokes-ire-with-legitimate-rape-comment.html>.

iii. John Bowden, “Ocasio-Cortez: ‘World Will End in 12 Years’ If Climate Change Not Addressed,” *The Hill*, January 22, 2019, <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/426353-ocasio-cortez-the-world-will-end-in-12-years-if-we-dont-address/>.

iv. Teresa Welsh, “Marco Rubio Denies Human Impact on Climate Change, Internet Erupts,” *US News and World Report*, May 13, 2014, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2014/05/13/marco-rubio-denies-human-impact-on-climate-change-internet-erupts>.

v. J. David Goodman, “How Delays and Unheeded Warnings Hindered New York’s Virus Fight,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-response-delays.html>.

vi. Don Lincoln, “Do Falling Rocks Cause Sea Level Rise? Science Weighs In,” *CNN*, May 20, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/20/opinions/erosion-sea-level-rise-scientific-analysis-lincoln/index.html>.

vii. Hope Yen, “APFACT CHECK: Biden Goes Too Far in Assurances on Vaccines,” *AP NEWS*, July 22, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-business-health-government-and-politics-coronavirus-pandemic-46a270ce0f681caa7e4143e2ae9a0211>.

ix. Katie Rogers, Christine Hauser, Alan Yuhas, and Maggie Haberman, “Trump’s Suggestion that Disinfectants Could Be Used to Treat Coronavirus Prompts Aggressive Pushback,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/24/us/politics/trump-inject-disinfectant-bleach-coronavirus.html>.

x. Louis Jacobson, “Fact-Checking Gavin Newsom on Energy Independence,” *PolitiFact*, September 28, 2023, <https://www.politifact.com/fact-checks/2023/sep/28/gavin-newsom/fact-checking-what-gavin-newsom-told-sean-hannity/>.

xi. Caleb McCullough, “Dave McCormick Wrong to Say Casey Wants to Ban Fracking,” *PolitiFact*, August 16, 2024, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2024/aug/16/dave-mccormick/pennsylvania-sen-bob-casey-has-never-called-for-ba/>.

and Democrats.

## Scientific and Political Leaders Must Strengthen Science Policy

To ensure that science effectively informs public policy, engagement between scientific and political leaders in the policy space is crucial. This requires creating a collaborative environment that enables continuous dialogue between scientific leaders and leaders in the policy-making space. Thus it is essential to train scientists about science policy and hold policy makers responsible for engaging with such trained professionals. Increasing communication and collaboration between these two groups of leaders would ensure that scientific insights are consistently integrated into policy creation.

As experts in their fields, scientific leaders have an obligation to inform governmental leaders of the implications their findings have on policy. After peer review and extensive internal critiquing, “it can be easy to think that science can speak for itself.”<sup>92</sup> However, dialogue between policy makers and scientists is required, especially concerning controversial scientific topics like climate change, evolution, and COVID-19. Unfortunately, most scientists are not trained on how to engage with policy.<sup>93</sup> The lack of individuals able to fill this niche highlights the need for more programs that bridge the gap between scientific expertise and political decision making. This calls for systemic and institutional reforms aimed at improving researchers’ training in policy engagement and enhancing their ability to influence policy decisions.<sup>94</sup> Undergraduate classes on science policy making would help future scientific leaders better understand how to collaborate with

policy makers and expose them to careers in science policy lobbying. Programs like those created by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the California Council on Science and Technology, which involve young scientists in the legislative process, are also essential steps in this direction.<sup>95</sup>

Leaders in the policy-making space have a responsibility to seek out and incorporate scientific expertise when making decisions about science-related policy. This means being open to scientific input and actively working with scientists trained in science policy to understand the implications of scientific findings. Additionally, they have a responsibility to craft and promote policies that support scientists and enable further research. This includes securing funding, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and ensuring access to necessary resources. This requires engaging with scientists trained in policy to understand the current needs of the scientific community. Providing funding for research translation and rewarding policy engagement can ensure that leaders in the policy space have access to researchers who are eager to engage with them.<sup>96</sup>

By equipping scientific leaders with the necessary skills and policy makers providing opportunities for scientists to participate in the legislative process, we can bridge the gap between scientific expertise and political decision making. Together, both groups can ensure that science informs policy driving progress and addressing societal challenges. As a result, the nation will be more prepared to face modern challenges.

## Conclusion

Leaders are essential in transforming how we address science polarization through effective

<sup>92</sup> Gaieck et al., “Opinion: Science Policy for Scientists.”

<sup>93</sup> Schneidmesser et al., “Prepare Scientists to Engage in Science-Policy.”

<sup>94</sup> Scott et al., “Bridging the Research-Policy Divide.”

<sup>95</sup> Gaieck et al., “Opinion: Science Policy for Scientists.”

<sup>96</sup> Scott et al., “Bridging the Research-Policy Divide.”



communication, policy making, building trust in science, and uniting people with diverse views. Effective leadership fosters a culture of open communication and respectful dialogue between the scientific community and citizens. Such leaders listen to different viewpoints and engage in constructive discussion, even in the face of disagreement. By encouraging open dialogue and debate, leaders help create a shared understanding of complex scientific issues and work toward finding common ground.

Now that society has emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, the discipline of leadership studies has a responsibility to extract key lessons and develop actionable strategies from this period that can be used to address science polarization. More specifically scholars must identify strategies to improve scientific communication, deal with intrascience uncertainty, enhance collaboration between policy makers and scientists, and decouple politics and science.

Meanwhile, scientific and political leaders also must take action. Scientific leaders must learn to communicate complex scientific information understandably and address how they discuss intrascientific uncertainty. Political leaders must stop using factually incorrect and decisive political rhetoric when discussing scientific topics and instead use the power of common identity politics to bring citizens together over science. Both scientific and political leaders must collaborate to strengthen science policy. Solving the issue of science polarization is of utmost importance. It not only affects the scientific community but every single human being. Just as science polarization is tearing our nation apart, it can also be used as a tool to reunify us and help citizens find common ground. Every crisis our society faces is an opportunity to do better for the future. As a society, if we want to be equipped for the next inevitable pandemic or climate catastrophe, our nation must

make great strides to decrease science polarization.

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