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False Dilemmas of Political Leadership: A Polemic

Duke Ofosu-Anim

Yemyung Graduate University, Seoul, South Korea
Email: duke.ofosu.anim@gmail.com

Abstract

The article seeks to show the presence of false dilemmas (FDs) in political leadership discussions. In some areas of the political leadership debate, arguments are made from two opposing positions. When issues are presented from two dissenting viewpoints, essential alternatives are removed from the discussion. The paper utilizes narrative literature by relying on secondary data for the analysis and argues that some dichotomies in political leadership discussion, such as cause-effect, nature-nurture, and politics-administration could be false. The paper concludes that there is a need for further debate to address these FDs to advance the political leadership discussion.

Keywords

False Dilemma, Political Leadership, Political Philosophy

1. Introduction: False Dilemmas and Political Leadership

False dilemma (FD) occurs when an argument incorrectly restricts other viable options. FD arises when a reasoner unfairly presents a few choices and suggests a selection proposition among these limited lists of favorites (Tomić, 2013). FDs erroneously stress that one option among a list of alternatives must be valid and, by so doing, reject other viable options. FDs are problematic because they inherently oversimplify choice(s). An FD can hold that two opposing statements are the only possible alternatives when there could be more. Thus, FD reduces choices to dichotomous options, forcing a favorite among them (Hurley, 2014), and therefore, discards all possible gray-area-options between two opposing scenarios. FD can also take the form of a reasoner rejecting alternative options in instances where two options provided as choices could be false, and a third option could be valid. Commonly, FD presents choices as contradicting when they could be contraries. When two propositions contradict, one is false, and the other is

true. For two premises to be contraries, at most, one can hold at a given time. Engel (1994) explains that in the case of contraries, both propositions may be false, a situation that is impossible with contradictions. Whereas contradictions follow the "law of the excluded middle", contraries do not. So, in essence, FDs occur when options are presented as being collectively exhaustive, thus, as a complete representation of all possible outcomes. As Arfi (2010) suggests, a reasoner can consider all possible options, such as partially true or partially false, when considering scenarios as a way to correct this error. The current study concurs with Liebnizian argument that under different circumstances, every judgment can either be true or false (Kolmogorov, 1925).

FD is often used in politics to force a choice between two nominated options (Brisson et al., 2018). Political settings view situations from two conflicting propositions. For instance, divergent positions of leftist versus rightist politics may stem from differences in elitist versus populist, capitalist versus socialist, and democratic versus dictatorial ideologies (Heywood, 2015). The erroneous notion of "us versus them" pervades political discourse. However, emergent literature claims not all political ideologies possess strict opposing inclinations (Cereseto, 1982; Geurkink et al., 2019). For instance, the *Christian Democracy* political ideology incorporates center-right ideas on morality and center-left beliefs on civil rights, foreign policy, and economic and labor issues (Vervliet, 2009).

Another example is *Regionalism*, which integrates left-right beliefs by seeking to increase political power while developing a political system based on one or more regions (Meadwell, 1991). The current paper argues that ideological overlays pervade political studies. The emerging scholarship provides a motive for a new direction.

Dichotomy in political viewpoints emerged from Aristotelian antecedents of Western political thought, categorizing political leanings as either "right" or "left". Aristotle in *Politics* prescribed aristocracy as an alternative to oligarchy and kingship as a substitute for tyranny. Aristotle's ideas charted the path for inceptive political philosophy. Thenceforward, philosophers have often portrayed traditional political propositions as being at loggerheads with one another (see Hume, 1739; Kant, 1785; Nietzsche, 1887; Rand, 1943; Hayek, 1944; Žižek, 2009), and there has generally been little or no consideration for the middle-ground or "gray areas". Neither have there been any consistent attempts to suggest a careful reconsideration.

Leadership literature suffers similar biases considering its close association with and heavy dependency on philosophy (Takala, 1998; Case et al., 2011). For instance, some leadership literature describes leaders from dichotomous viewpoints based on either trait (Zaccaro, 2007). Other literature focuses on environmental factors (Heifetz, 1994) and either as being authoritative (Lewin et al., 1939) or consultative (Bolden, 2011), often without consideration of overlaps and intersections in these seemingly opposite and unrelated causes. However, considering the complexities of human behavior and the diversity of situational

factors that influence political leader decision-making, the current paper suggests that contemporary leadership theories oversimplify leadership style options. The oversimplification creates a delusion by excluding leaders' ambidextrous ability to tap into "opposing choices" in executing their leadership functions.

2. Methods

The study uses a literature review on narrative literature (Baumeister & Leary, 1997) in social sciences. The literature examined discussions on subjects that address issues similar to arguments used to discuss the three political leadership FDs posed in this study. The study explored databases such as JSTOR, Cambridge Core, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, ProQuest Direct, and EBSCO. I focused on published articles in peer-reviewed journals using terms that are related to phrases used in leadership and political studies. The terms used to search the databases include "autocracies", "political elitism", "hierarchies", "political power", "populism", "egalitarianism", "social equity", "plurality", "liberal democracy", "authoritarianism", and "tyranny." I entered several permutations of these terms along with "leadership", "political", "politics", "political discourse", "false dichotomy", and "false dilemma".

The research focused mainly on books and peer-reviewed articles in journals published by publishers listed under the American Political Science Association Ranking (Goodson et al., 1999) and the ranking of top scholarly publishers in political science (Garand & Giles, 2011). A review of references of books and articles revealed additional relevant material on the subject matter. The retrieved materials spanned economics, political science, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, allowing diversity in scope and breadth.

3. FDs of Political Leadership

As I outlined above, the basis of this paper's proposition is that political and leadership theories oversimplify political leadership behavior by polarizing choices instead of viewing them through a continuum. The outcome is what this paper attempt to describe as FD or "the principle of the excluded middle". The following discussion presents three dilemmas falsely applied in political leadership studies. These three "principles" are not exclusive but result from repeated literature examination. Based on this setting, the three FDs of political leadership include the following.

• FD of cause and effect:	Political leaders' performance is determined based on their actions and ensuing outcomes.
• FD of nature versus nurture:	Political leaders' abilities are innate (by birth) or acquired (through experiences).
• FD of politics-administration:	Political leaders' role is separate from that of public administrators.

3.1. FD of Cause and Effect

As Demosthenes put it, "every advantage of the past is judged in the light of the final issue". Consequently, political leaders' tenure is generalized as "good or bad" and "successful or unsuccessful". It is commonplace for political experts to view a leader's regime from a dichotomous "black-or-white" perspective. This premise is based on the classical assumption that actions determine outcomes. However, this premise is only partially true when it is compared with Kantian *enlightenment rationalism* theory, which argues that one's actions can be deemed suitable if the principle behind the action is based on moral responsibility (Kant, 1785). In other words, determining right or wrong must not merely be based on outcomes but on intentions as well. This notwithstanding, arguments suggesting causation/causality pervade political leadership studies (Teles, 2014; Rhodes & 't Hart, 2014; Ofosu-Anim & Back, 2021). Hence, political legacies have often been viewed as the consequence of cause and effect. Presidential biographers (Toland, 1992; Gilbert, 2014) depict political leaders based on their actions and ensuing outcomes, not on whether they showed responsibility. Failure in leadership does not necessarily mean a lack of accountability (Tomkins et al., 2020). However, it is often erroneously believed that good deeds always beget positive results and vice versa in politics without recourse to moral duty. The general notion is that good leaders are the ones who make the right choices, and bad leaders do not. The argument that the outcome is the result of the action is an age-old belief rooted in the philosophy of *consequentialism*. In countering consequentialist views, Locke (1847) explains that will and volition allow agents to do things within their physical capacity, but external forces could curtail freedom and will. In such situations, how one will act is not free. Based on Locke's (1847) analysis of consequence, it is erroneous not to consider "push and pull" factors that confront leadership decision-making. In other words, casually applying the principle of classical causality to the convolutions of political leadership amounts to ignoring external influencing factors.

The concept of political leadership is complex (Murphy et al., 2017; Ofosu-Anim, 2022). A popular assertion is that the political leader must choose between two conflicting options doing good or evil. It is also generally believed that good decisions yield favorable results and bad selections produce unsatisfactory outcomes. Leaders must select from many options; several complicated factors may influence the results. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) explain that due to the complex nature of leadership, it is inaccurate to describe it merely as an act of an individual or a group of individuals but, instead, as a complex network interchange of forces. Similarly, Morrell and Hartley (2006) underscore the influences that the complex nature of the environment within which political leaders have to act and its diversity of interrelated factors has on outcomes. Political leadership is complicated, so its examination should not be centered merely on many rudimentary dilemmas.

Garner (2009) describes a dilemma as a problem that offers two choices, nei-

ther of which is unconditionally desirable. Defining political legacies based purely on actions and outcomes and further conceptualizing that leaders who make good choices achieve desirable results and vice versa ignores the role of "in-betweens". The current paper suggests that the simple application of causality and consequentialism in the political leadership narrative erroneously limits discussions on the leader's options and ignores in-betweens' role in determining political outcomes, creating an FD for the phenomenon.

3.2. FD of Nature versus Nurture

Are leaders born or made? This debate is an age-old controversy. The nature versus nurture debate is based mainly on two ideas, each generating substantial disagreements and discussion in psychological and political thought. The first idea derives from *biological determinism*, i.e., how much of our animal nature makes up the human being. The second is whether sentient capabilities are innate or arise through experiences and social interactions. The dispute span disciplines (Stephenson, 2004; Boerma et al., 2017), suggesting that a leader receives nurturing learning and training, which usually opposes opinions that leadership skills are natural biological traits. The current paper argues that drawing opposites between nature and nurture is needless and further attempts to explain.

To adequately appraise this difficulty, it is necessary to uncover the origins of the "innate" versus "acquired" dialectic. The early writings of Plato and Aristotle show traces of this disagreement. Aristotelian essays on knowledge and cognition in *De Anima* reject the initial innate ideas in the work of Plato. According to Platonic idealism, concepts, mental structures, and mental capacities are natural rather than acquired through learning (Takala, 1998). From an epistemological standpoint, Plato says ideas are innate and are present in our minds the moment we are born. Aristotle uses the *tabula rasa* or the "blank slate" empiricism to counter Plato's conception that knowledge is innate. Aristotle avers that the human being is born initially with a "blank mind", so humans can only acquire intelligence through experience and perception.

Some prominent proponents of Plato's innatist argument include rationalist philosophers such as René Descartes and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz of the 17th and 18th centuries, respectively, and more recently by influential 20th-century philosophers Noam Chomsky and Jerry Fodor. Chomsky contends that much of our knowledge of natural languages is inborn. Chomsky's views on knowledge and cognition are firmly rooted in 17th-century rationalist ideals (Friesen, 2017). Similarly and perhaps more radical, Fodor argues that most of our concepts are innate (Mercier & Sperber, 2017). However, it is essential to note that neither Chomsky nor Fodor categorically claims that nature is the only determining factor in knowledge and cognition development. Earlier, Stich (1975) explained that innatists admit that experiences are necessary to unleash the power of knowledge and ideas. Some studies on children, especially newborns, support the innatist argument and reveal that newborns show signs of preparedness for social interaction. This awareness manifests in facial expressions and grasp ref-

lexes. There is no connection between this behavior in newborns and any current form of social interaction. So, their behavior may be genetically inherited (Futagi et al., 2012).

On the other hand, Aristotle's "tabula rasa" argument evolved in Ancient Greek philosophy primarily through the Stoical era (Bardzell, 2014). The modern era accredits the idea of the theory to John Locke's descriptions in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke upholds the "blank slate" theory by claiming that the ability to process data and its associated rules are formed mainly through one's sensory experiences (Locke, 1847). More recently, Sigmund Freud addressed the *tabula rasa* argument. According to Freudian's *Oedipus complex*, family dynamics determine an individual's personality traits (Nagera, 2014). There have also been claims favoring *tabula rasa* in psychology and neurobiology. For example, concerning one's ability to acquire specific knowledge or skills, Howe et al. (1998) argue against the presence of innate talent in favor of social experiences.

Similarly, in political studies, the nature versus nurture discussion rages on. Research shows that there is a difference in reaction to socioeconomic and political stimuli for persons who are deemed genetically similar. Conventional social and economic forces do not exactly influence these differences. Two individuals can possess similar genetic traits and still make different social and political choices (Masters, 2001). De Neve (2010) argues that personality traits are innate and precede political ideology and behavior, so one's personality traits determine their political preferences—however, childhood experiences such as trauma influence intellectual curiosity, creativity, and imagination on political ideology. De Neve (2010) concludes that the nature and nurture of the individual's personality influence political differences among people.

There is ample evidence supporting the genetic influence on behavioral traits argument, but the evidence of the role of environmental impact in shaping these traits is likewise apparent. It is then misleading to assume an entrenched position on the "innate" and "acquired" debate in political studies. As Plomin and Ashbury (2005: p. 8) aptly put it, "the appropriate conjunction between the words *nature* and *nurture* is not *versus* but *and*". In agreement with Masters (2001), the current paper suggests that in seeking the cause of political behavior, researchers must discard the argument that nature and nurture are alternatives.

3.3. FD of Politics versus Administration

Generally referred to as the politics-administration dichotomy theory and attributed to US President Woodrow Wilson, this theory suggests a separation of roles and disunion between politics and public administration. Wilson (1887) contends that public administrators are apolitical, non-partisan, and neutral with no political inclinations and attachments and, by doing so, implies that politicians are direct opposites of administrators. The Wilsonian concept also infers that politicians do not perform the administration's role. Early scholars such as Goodnow (1900) and Taylor (1912) uphold these views that the public service

function is distinctively separate from the political function. Demir and Nyhan (2008) explain that the politics-administration dichotomy theory is perhaps one of the most contended theories in public administration. However, neither its utility nor influence has entirely waned over the years. It is the foundation upon which seminal theories in a bureaucracy, such as *Weberism* and *Taylorism*, were formed (Uwizeyimana, 2013). This theory's strength lies in its potential to sustain a separation of duties between elected and administrative officials as it strengthens the democratic accountability of politicians and the planning and implementation abilities/roles of bureaucrats (Demir & Nyhan, 2008).

Notwithstanding the preceding arguments, if we create paradoxes between the functions of politicians and bureaucrats in political studies, we have erroneously claimed that the overlaps and interconnectivity within the political-administrative roles do not occur even if they occur; perhaps we must ignore them. The political process involves carrying out the people's will through legislative policymaking, and the public administrative process focuses on the implementation of these policies impartially and effectively. So, even though the political-administrative functions may seem distinct in theory, this distinction does not work in practice. The dichotomy is most likely false. Demir and Nyhan (2008) explain that predicted tendencies of the theory fail to materialize. First, less experienced politicians rely on experienced bureaucrats and public administrators for policy. In practice, bureaucracy drives policy formulation more than theory suggests. Second, under the *Wilsonian* theory, public administrators are apolitical and free from politics. However, in practice, they are not. For instance, political appointees oversee public agencies, some of whom may be politicians. So, politicians can serve as bureaucrats. The influence of these politicians in executing policy means the bureaucratic function is not devoid of some political pull. Third, professional public administrators must adhere to the requirements of their professional disciplines as per their specialty areas in the execution of their mandates. Most of these professional bodies' standards, ethics, credentials, and methodologies usually are politically motivated.

Waldo (1948) debunks the public-administration dichotomy when he notes that the position held by a public servant is *political.* It transcends merely implementing policies determined by the legislature. Juggling efficiency, management, due process, and government access requires the public servant to do more than function as a business executive whose utmost priority is profit-making. Public service is not immune to political affiliation, and politics is not immune to bureaucracy.

4. Conclusion: Implications for Political Leadership Discourse

In this article, I have identified three FDs in political leadership studies. I believe further studies may reveal even more. I have also argued that political leadership literature is beset with these FDs. FDs create a distorted view of the subject, hin-

dering efforts to develop political leadership discussion. For the sake of advancing political leadership theory, it is essential that scholars of this discipline first clarify these false paradoxes. Integrating political leadership with mainstream social science disciplines will be challenging if these inconsistencies remain in political leadership studies.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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