

Personalization and Concentration of Power,
Are they Consistent with Democracy?

Under the circumstances of mass society a certain degree of personalization of power is inevitable. The need to appeal to a large body of citizenry, many of them -- possibly the majority -- only tangentially interested in political affairs and scarcely conversant with governmental problems, puts a premium on the public's identifying politics with the choice of personalities.

Whether such personalization leads to a degree of concentration of power endangering the working of democratic institutions is another question. The analysis of the more successful experiences with popular leaders of our time -- to mention only FDR in the USA, Churchill in Great Britain and Adenauer in The Federal Republic of Germany -- would lead to a more differentiated answer. In either case the popular figure was able to translate his tremendous popularity into considerable influence in party organization and state apparatus. Personalization may also have helped two of these leaders to get a grateful electorate to extend their terms of office again and again. But in neither case did the person in question attempt to exploit his degree of popular leverage towards attempting ways of political change incompatible with constitutional democracy. In each case important foreign policy or domestic objectives were pursued within the framework of the existing institutions. The network of pluralistic institutions on which the fabric of the modern democratic state rests preserved its full scope and effectiveness; not even the party

organization of the reigning party, naturally most affected by the impact of such dominant personalities, became atrophied to the extent that its functioning would be endangered by the disappearance of the father figure.

Some South American, and especially the recent French, experiences indicate different development trends. The independent variable seems to be the absence or destruction of universally recognized political patterns allowing attempts to model institutions after the image of the momentary holder of political power. The referendum formula establishing a direct circuit between the momentary holder of political power and the masses is utilized to threaten, cajole, and pulverize what remains of existing political structures of a previous period and to force them into submission or oblivion. Such a device, as it is now constantly used in France, might be an expedient to solve specific problems (Algeria), or more broadly, to replace outworn political institutions as speedily as the engineering of consensus might allow by a more adequate democratic framework. But it seems more likely that the device of personalization is used towards full-fledged concentration of political power and degrading the remainder of the political establishment into a legitimizing and supporting machinery on the basis of the pseudo-democratic referendum formula.

I would, therefore, conclude that a certain amount of concentration of political power is a necessary concomitant of our present stage of mass society. How the ensuing possibilities

of power concentration are utilized depends on factors prevalent in the individual society. The political framework may give way and be replaced by a pseudo-legitimizing referendum apparatus forming part of an authoritarian balancing structure. Such an authoritarian political super-structure might coexist with a plurality of social power centers (professional, trade union, religious, etc.) with some staying power of their own. As long as the latter manage to keep some degree of independence, concentration of political power resting on the exploitation of the personalization factor is not liable to lead to new permanent political structures. However, the power holders' willingness, interest, and ability to effect long-range changes in social relations and expectations ^{might} would make the personalization factor, common to all political structures in mass society, a stepping stone for the setting up of a regime where acclamation absorbs other forms of participation.

Otto Kirchheimer

Columbia University
April 23, 1963