

POLICY BRIEF

The Paradoxes of Legitimate EU Leadership. An Analysis of the Multi-Level Leadership of Angela Merkel and Alexis Tsipras during the Euro crisis

Femke van Esch

All democratic leadership suffers from inherent tensions between effective governance and the sovereignty of the people, but in the European Union the paradoxes of legitimate leadership seem particularly challenging. This contribution presents an analytical framework to unravel why this is the case. The framework introduces four so-called ‘vectors of legitimate leadership’ (see figure 1):

Of these vectors, the vectors of ideology and identification are less reliant on short-term output and forge stronger bonds between leaders and followers. Moreover, the legitimising logics underlying the vectors are to some extent social constructions and subject to political

craftsmanship. However, for any leadership relation to be legitimate, the inherent inequality and exertion of power it implies must be balanced by a vector of proper nature and strength.

What makes the problem of European leadership different is its multilevel and interdependent nature. This means that 1) leaders are called to cater on more diverse groups of followers at different political levels; 2) the tension between power and equality not only exists at the level of individuals but also at the level of states; 3) the vectors of legitimate leadership are weaker than at the national level and often work against each other.

Applying this framework on the leadership of the German Chancellor Merkel and Greek Prime Minister Tsipras during the euro-crisis reveals 5 lessons on European leadership:

1. The specifics of each of these leader-follower relationship must be taken into account when assessing the balance between legitimate and strong leadership;
2. Despite the differences in power, Merkel and Tsipras faced similar paradoxes in their