
The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 13 (2016)

Review of: Maurizio Viroli, How to Choose a Leader: Machiavelli's Advice to Citizens,

Michalis Katsimitsis

doi: [10.12681/hr.11560](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.11560)

Copyright © 2017, Michalis Katsimitsis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Katsimitsis, M. (2017). Review of: Maurizio Viroli, How to Choose a Leader: Machiavelli's Advice to Citizens,. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 13, 147-152. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.11560>

Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

Maurizio Viroli,

HOW TO CHOOSE A LEADER: MACHIAVELLI'S ADVICE TO CITIZENS,
Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016, 144 pages.

The question of leadership is anything but new. Even before the emergence of philosophy, there were oral tales and myths about leaders (kings, gods, warriors, etc.), which were used, directly or indirectly, as examples, or even paradigms, of a good leader. We can find such “case studies” in *Beowulf*¹ and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, whose protagonist is depicted as the perfect leader.² In Ancient Greek literature, there are descriptions of leaders, as well as of the relations between a leader and his followers. Accordingly, in the Homeric poems we find a community that actively participates in politics and whose opinion the leader cannot disregard.³

In addition, Hesiod in his *Theogony* presented Zeus as a model leader to be imitated by mortals.⁴

Plato's *Republic* can be seen as the earliest comprehensive study on leadership, focusing not only on leaders' qualities but also on the relation between the “philosopher-king” and his citizens. Since then, leadership has been extensively studied. Today, there is a body of literature on leadership, mainly dealing with what one must do in order to become an efficient leader: what character qualities to develop, what methods of problem solving to adopt, how to face one's employees or followers, and so on. What is more striking is that, in most cases, those to be led (employees, followers) are treated more or less like one of the factors that

¹ Studies of *Beowulf* from this perspective include Tom Loughman and John Finley, “*Beowulf* and the Teaching of Leadership”, *Journal of Leadership Education* 9/1 (Winter 2010), pp. 155-164.

² See *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation*, transl. Andrew George, London: Penguin, 1999, lines 29-46.

³ Dean Hammer (ed.), *A Companion to Greek*

Democracy and the Roman Republic, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015, pp. 26-27.

⁴ Johann P. Arnason, S. N. Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock (eds), *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005, p. 258.

make one a good leader; in other words, those for whom a leader even exists as leader take a secondary role. Bestselling books on leadership are based on various pieces of research into what people think a leader must have or be in order to be good and efficient, making use therefore of the estimation of the people in favor of that of the leader and not vice versa.

If that is, to some extent, understandable in the case of business leaders, where the relationship between leader and employees has its particular characteristics and needs, it is a wholly different matter in politics. We could mention various reasons for that, but the main one is that the leadership problem we face today concerns modern democracies, that is, a political system in which the “followers” are supposedly at the foreground and the leader is (purportedly) serving them. So, when it comes to leaders in modern (democratic) politics, the literature must be concerned not only with how one can be a good leader, but also with how the people can develop the necessary “skills” in order to make good choices of leaders.

Why? Because democracy is not just about people electing their leaders. This is the safest way for a democracy to decline. In Ancient Athens, after the death of Pericles, the Athenians did elect their leaders; but they did it using the wrong criterion – flattery⁵ – thus making grave mistakes and endangering democracy itself. In other words, the

problem with democracy (at least, one of the most crucial ones) is not voting itself, but to vote responsibly, specifically to improve and preserve the quality of democracy.

Is such an “education” possible? In theory, this is supposed to be one of the aims of education – if we set aside approaches of the Foucauldian type and consider education as one of the means of social control. There is, though, another, more practical way to teach people how to behave: through specific advice on what to look for in choosing their leaders.

This is where *How to Choose a Leader* by Maurizio Viroli comes in. Unlike other leadership books, *How to Choose a Leader* makes a shift of perspective, giving the point of view of the leader to the people. This is in itself interesting, since we rarely come across such an attempt to “teach” citizens so systematically.

What is even more remarkable in this book is the choice of Niccolò Machiavelli as the “Counselor”, as the author calls him. How can the “murderous Machiavel”, as Shakespeare characterized him in *King Henry VI, Part Three* (Act III, Sc. III), with his *Prince*, a book banned by the Catholic Church, or his *Discourses*, where he expounded a theory for republican rule using the Roman model, have anything of interest to say today to citizens concerning their leaders? Can anything of value to the people be drawn from an admirer of the ruthless Cesare Borgia, the master of deception? How can citizens be advised by a man who taught a leader that it is better to be feared than loved by his people (“The response is that one would want to be both the one and the other

⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.65.10-11.

[feared and loved]; but because it is difficult to put them together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two.”)⁶ How then can Machiavelli, who was interested not in what a leader *should be*, but in what he/she *is*, focusing on themselves (as was the spirit of his times) in order to increase his/her power, become the counselor of citizens?

Viroli has a different, more complimentary view of Machiavelli (pp. 9-10): “As is well known, he portrayed men’s cruelty, ambition, meanness, and ferocity in the most vibrant way and vividly described the misery of the human condition. But [...] [he] also offers us a wealth of reflections on the remedies to the miseries of the human condition. Love, politics, poetry, irony: he analyzed and practiced all of them, without pretending to have found the ultimate solution. [...] His conception of life encompasses [...] the grand and the ordinary, the grave and the light, rigor and transgression, commitment and irony. Many readers will find it confused, unacceptable, or even irritating. I find it a refreshing alternative to the culture of self-interest, reasonableness, and dull decency, as well as the bigotry, the moralism, and the zealotry which pervade our time.”

This general attitude towards Machiavelli, that “refreshing alternative”, is further elaborated in *How to Choose a Leader*. In the introduction (pp. ix-xviii), Viroli considers the Italian an appropriate counselor for teaching the

citizens, and not the leader, for a number of reasons: “Machiavelli has offered American political thinkers and leaders a rich republican theory centered on the principle of liberty as ‘non-domination’ [...]”; “[...] outlined the theory of political revolution that inspired the birth of the Republic of the United States [...]”; “The art that Machiavelli mastered was that of interpreting the intentions and the motives of princes and republican leaders [...]”; and “Machiavelli has yet another virtue of the good political advisor, namely, honesty [...]”; above all, however, Machiavelli was chosen, because, as the writer explains, the Italian “[...] based his political judgments (and predictions) on facts (conveniently selected and interpreted) and on reason.” Therefore, who else seems more appropriate to be chosen as counselor in order to write a book with practical rules and suggestions or, as Viroli puts it: “[...] to find in these pages mainly cautions intended to help us avoid some of the rather common mistakes in our choice of representatives [...]”?

However, we cannot disregard the fact that Machiavelli lived in a totally different era and wrote for entirely different purposes. In addition, his political realism made him cautious in avoiding the formulation of general theories; so, there is nothing that can be considered as applicable to all eras, societies and political situations. Viroli tries to solve the problem, remarking that, “If we consider the matter carefully, we will discover that politics has not changed much since his [Machiavelli’s] day. Political leaders, and citizens, are guided in their deliberation by the

⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, transl. and intro. Harvey C. Mansfield, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 21998, p. 66.

same passions.” Furthermore, “History, Machiavelli believed, often repeats itself, in the sense that political leaders and citizens often face problems that have already emerged, in a more or less similar fashion, in the past [...]” (p. 31). This view was embraced by Theodore Roosevelt when, in his “Man with the Muck-rake” speech (1906), he said: “The material problems that face us today are not such as they were in Washington’s time, but the underlying facts of human nature are the same now as they were then.”⁷ Furthermore, Machiavelli “[...] maintains that the true skill of the political advisor is the art of interpreting passions, the passions of individuals and peoples [...]” (p. xvi).

Finally, and this is more important, for Viroli, “Machiavelli does not envisage a political leader who does all the work by himself, followed by passive citizens or subjects who obey his orders. He invokes a leader capable of persuading, inspiring, and motivating fellow patriots to commit themselves to the arduous task of political redemption [...]” (p. 106). In other words, Machiavelli, in his own unusual way, put the citizens into the play of political power.

In general, in order for a book that aims to be used as a guide of any type to be efficient, it must have three basic characteristics: clear structure, simple language, and comprehensible ideas. *How to Choose a Leader* has all three of them; in addition, its small size makes it more usable. Regarding the content, each of its twenty chapters develops a

different subject; there is not a line of thought that continues from one chapter to the next, so the reader can consult any section independently.

Most importantly, though, the book is full of examples. Viroli, following his Counselor, does not only select, state, and interpret Machiavelli’s views; he also clarifies them by presenting as many examples as he can. These examples are mostly drawn from American history, revealing the author’s concern to “advise” the American public. In this way, he manages something more, to show that the counsel of Machiavelli can be applied to the American reality. This, however, might lead non-American readers to think that the book is of no interest to them, while it requires from them further effort to focus on the book’s advice.

In the first chapter the author tries to convince the reader of the importance of being interested in politics as a citizen. Knowing that democracy is a fragile political system that cannot preserve itself, Viroli remarks that, “When citizens are no longer willing, or capable, of properly executing their civic duties [...] republics decline and die.” Therefore, “Voting is, [...], the most important expression of citizenship.” Most of all, those who must set an example are the “citizens with high standards”, for if they stay home, “[...] those with lower standards will elect corrupt or incompetent candidates who, once in Congress or in the White House, will foster policies that will damage the common good.”

The second chapter provides a general guideline (judge the politicians by what they are and what they do, not by the appearances), which is elaborated

⁷ Brian MacArthur, *The Penguin Book of Modern Speeches*, London: Penguin, 2012, p. 19.

in the subsequent eighteen chapters of the book. Those chapters deal with issues such as putting the common good above personal interest (ch. 3), corruption (ch. 10), and the economy (ch. 12), as well as subjects that are less typical, such as the question of luck (ch. 7), which was of particular interest to Machiavelli himself, or the leader's attitude towards religion (chs 8, 14).

There are, though, subjects that might seem strange, such as the one in chapter 9, where the Counselor calls upon the reader to "[...] look for a president who cares for his repute with future generations and has the ambition to attain true glory [...]", but the citizens (and their leader, by extension) must make a distinction between fame, glory, vainglory and power. What is more unexpected to find in a book that offers advice to citizens on how to choose their leaders is the concern for the leader's eloquence (ch. 18), for we know that speeches are mostly used to cover, sometimes dubious, intentions. For Viroli, though, Machiavelli "[...] worried more about the lack of eloquence in political leaders than about its dangers."

The final chapter of the book deals with probably one of the most serious issues concerning a democracy: the introduction of political and social reforms and their relation to the principles of a republic. Considering that they are inextricably linked, it illustrates that the principles upon which a republic is founded are the ones that will make possible the introduction of any reforms.

How to Choose a Leader is a kind of Copernican Revolution regarding

Machiavelli's perspective and objectives. It is a project anything but easy, since one must not only have mastered Machiavelli's thought, but also have a good understanding of American history to grasp the examples supporting the Counselor's advice. Maurizio Viroli, it must be noted, has done a great job.

However, there is always a slight reservation regarding what such books of advice are trying to achieve – in this case, how to elect a good leader. Are they really useful, that is, can they fulfill their aim? Can or must the advice of *How to Choose a Leader* be followed to the letter? If not, what is the purpose of writing such a book?

As to whether the guidance must be followed to the letter, the author himself gives the answer in chapter 13, remarking that Machiavelli's advice "[...] must not be taken as a rule valid in all circumstances". Where does that leave us? If we can deviate from any advice, to a small or large extent, what is the purpose of reading these recommendations anyway?

Any advice can be used as a fixed rule that must be followed as it is, regardless of the person, the time, and the circumstances. That kind of advice is given to, and followed by, one who does not want to be responsible for one's actions. There is, however, another use of advice; this is to use it as a general guideline. In that case, one who takes that advice is responsible as to the way in which it is implemented.

The latter, I believe, is the case with *How to Choose a Leader*. In order to make a democracy work, we need responsible citizens, people who are able to judge and act accordingly. As the author mentions,

“[...] Machiavelli invites citizens to use their reason to evaluate political and social matters.” Therefore, if we consider *How to Choose a Leader* as just a book of advice, we not only misunderstand the role of the book (besides, Machiavelli’s advice, even though time- and place-specific and illustrated through examples, demands the leader’s ability to adjust it to specific circumstances), but we also reduce its meaning, and most of all we degrade our role as citizens. In other words, we must not consider *How to*

Choose a Leader simply as a book with advice on how to elect a leader, in the manner of other “how to” books; it is more of a general guide about a citizen’s way of acting in regards to a democracy’s leaders. Ultimately though, no matter how many books a citizen might read, it is up to him/her to decide whether to use these recommendations and to start evaluating his/her future leaders.

Michalis Katsimitsis
University of Athens