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## A General Model of Good Executive Leadership in Policy Contexts

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## About IJLS Commentaries

**I**JLS *Commentaries* is a section devoted to a more casual—yet thoughtful—consideration of leadership and leadership phenomena in the world. It’s designed to be a little lighter and more accessible to students and non-scholars who are interested in leadership and leadership studies.

In addition to publishing fully researched critical pieces, IJLS hopes that our *Commentaries* section will help scholars and teachers think about and have access to new ideas that are still percolating, ideas that reach across disciplinary boundaries, and ideas that might be more accessible to undergraduate or high school students without an extensive background in leadership studies.

### ABSTRACT:

This commentary stipulates a general model of policy leadership, encompassing decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. The model stresses attaining clarity about the nature of the issue being addressed, the values at stake, and the possible outcomes of alternative courses of action. While focused on the context of elected executives in municipal government, the stipulated model has broader applicability to other contexts. The article contends that following the model may both improve the effectiveness of political leaders and help build consensus (or compromise) among distinct political actors.

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# IJLS COMMENTARIES

## A General Model of Good Executive Leadership in Policy Contexts

by Thad Williamson, University of Richmond

**P**olitical leaders are charged by their constituents with making consequential decisions, in real time, often in difficult circumstances. The skill and judgment leaders display in making such decisions are of profound public significance.

We live in an era of deep political stalemate, with deep divides among Americans about the proper ends of politics. Some of these divisions may be beyond repair. But political stability in a multi-party system nonetheless requires some basic level of respect among political actors across profound partisan and philosophical differences. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr insightfully described politics as an “area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises.”<sup>1</sup> The ability to forge productive compromises that address significant issues, within the constraints set by competing interests and values, lies at the heart of democratic governance and the heart of our social contract.

If it is not possible to agree on the ends of good political leadership, perhaps it is possible to develop a measure of agreement on the *means*

<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 4.

of good political leadership. People may disagree profoundly with the ends a political leader pursues while showing respect, even admiration, for the means utilized. And in that space of mutual respect might be born the possibility of unlikely alliances and broader consensus, on at least some significant issues.

Advice for political leaders is one of the oldest and most venerable genres of leadership studies, as exemplified by Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The aim of such texts is not simply to advise power holders, but also to provide readers (citizens) the tools to assess and evaluate the actions of leaders. A clear, easily digested, and broadly applicable model of good political leadership can contribute not only to the scholarly assessment of leaders, but also to the improvement of real-world leadership practices. Particularly at the local level, where "ordinary people" lacking formal training or credentials may rise to positions of extraordinary responsibility, leaders (and their followers) may benefit from having a clear, easily referenced guide to effective and responsible decision making. Providing an initial sketch of such a model is the aim of this short essay.

The general model of policy making, implementation, and evaluation sketched here is deliberately simplified, and applies to one particular kind of political context: elected executive leadership, specifically at the local level.<sup>2</sup> But the basic model can be adopted and extended to other political contexts, and also usefully complexified by adding consideration of additional variables (including, crucially,

<sup>2</sup> Not all cities have elected executive leadership; in fact, especially in relatively small cities, the council–manager system of government whereby an elected council appoints a city manager, with a mayor who serves on and presides over the council, is more prevalent. Mayor–council systems, with an elected mayor serving as chief executive, often characterize larger cities (as well as some smaller and midsized cities). The analysis here is developed within the mayor–council framework, though it has broad applicability to other frameworks.

*politics* itself).<sup>3</sup> The model is strongly informed by my own firsthand experience participating in and leading significant municipal policy initiatives, working closely with both elected and nonelected officials and with a variety of community stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

The initial scenario considered is one in which the elected executive has (a) acknowledged public responsibility for a problem, (b) freedom to act (though this is rarely, if ever, unlimited freedom), and (c) resources to act, creating the possibility of (d) meaningful action to address said problem.

Where any of (a), (b), or (c) are not present, the model does not apply. For instance, when authority to address a problem rests primarily or solely at the federal or state level, a mayor's capacity to act is correspondingly limited, or absent altogether. But in many cases, the structure of American federalism allows space for meaningful local-level policy making, within contexts set by state and federal actors.<sup>5</sup> This model is presented in the familiar format of a ten-point plan.<sup>6</sup> Each step in the model allows for

<sup>3</sup> For helpful general discussion of political leadership in a variety of urban contexts (from Missoula, Montana, to Philadelphia), see Bissinger, *Prayer for the City*; Kemmis, *Good City*; Nutter, *Mayor*; Stone, "Political Leadership in Urban Politics."

<sup>4</sup> From 2014 to 2016, I served as first director of the City of Richmond's Office of Community Wealth Building, an agency charged with implementing poverty reduction initiatives identified by the Mayor's Anti-Poverty Commission (on which I also served). In 2017 and 2018, I worked as a senior policy advisor in the mayor's office and led negotiation of a cooperation agreement between the mayor, Richmond City Council, and Richmond School Board on educational issues. Most recently, I chaired the 2022-23 City Charter Review Commission established by Richmond City Council to make recommendations on potential changes to the city's governing document.

<sup>5</sup> See Hinze and Judd, *City Politics*, for a detailed discussion.

<sup>6</sup> Political theorist Danielle Allen has independently developed and briefly described the seven "basic elements of political decision-making" in her recent book *Justice by Means of Democracy* (73). While this essay is broadly congruent with Allen's short account, it goes into considerably more detail. For a related, more general account of "adaptive leadership" that also stresses the connection between values and leader-

considerable elaboration and detail; such elaboration for purposes of this short essay is only briefly sketched.

## 1. Defining the Problem or the Issue

Step 1 is deceptively difficult: define *exactly* what is being talked about, debated, or decided. Precision at this stage is important to be sure an issue or problem is not conflated with an adjacent or related issue.<sup>7</sup> For instance, a *policy* conversation about poverty reduction is best served by a tight focus on the end goal of finding ways (within constraints of available resources and relevant laws) to get low-income households more money, whereas an academic discussion on poverty quite properly might explore numerous related social and cultural dynamics and causal (or possible causal) factors, most of which may be beyond the ability of policy makers (especially) at the local level to address.<sup>8</sup> The acts of defining a problem in such a way that it can be addressed, and then placing it on the agenda for consideration, are also critical leadership tasks at this stage.<sup>9</sup>

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ship processes, see Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*. For broader accounts of the public policy process, see, for instance, Heymann, *Living the Policy Process*; Smith, *Writing Public Policy*.

<sup>7</sup> See Smith, *Writing Public Policy*, chapter 3, for elaboration on this point.

<sup>8</sup> To be crystal clear: it is certainly a good thing for policy makers to be aware (in a conversation about poverty) of the ways race, gender, national economic trends, national policy decisions, and other factors impact local people and their ability to earn money to support their households. But local elected leaders generally lack the authority and capacity to address all such issues simultaneously; instead they must identify actions *within their sphere of influence* that can plausibly impact the core policy goal. An analysis that suggests everything must be changed before anything can be changed is not helpful to the officials who have actual responsibility for addressing critical issues (such as poverty).

<sup>9</sup> Agenda setting has long been recognized as a primary dimension of political power (Bachrach and Baratz, "Two Faces of Power"). Analysis of how particular agenda items rise to the top of decision making is another much-studied phenomenon (Mucciaroni, "Garbage Can Model"). In the specific urban lead-

## 2. Identifying the Normative and Political Values at Stake

Here we ask: Why, exactly, does this issue or problem matter, and how much does it matter? How important is the issue in terms of the leader's overall goals, the expectations of the political coalition that supports the leaders, promises or commitments made, and in terms of the public interest itself? Some issues (such as health and safety in a pandemic) are so significant to the broader public that they trump, or should trump, any other concern. But in the more prevalent case, how important an issue is will vary based on the goals and commitments of the leader in question. Some elected officials, for instance, make public commitments to significantly reducing poverty in their campaigns, and some have other priorities.

At this stage as well, it's important to identify, in advance, potential tensions or conflicts among stated values or interests. There is rarely just one thing at stake in a significant issue, and clarity on their relative priority will often be of decisive importance in selecting a course of action. A major upgrade of a city's information technology system so as to improve internal functioning and ultimately service delivery may fit well with a mayor's stated commitments to improving organizational operations, but what if funding the upgrade requires trimming the schools' budget, or raising the property tax rate? Here an elected executive is well advised to make crystal clear both his or her priorities *and* their relative importance, so that staff and advisors do not waste time on proposals with no likelihood of being

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ership context, while a bewildering array of issues requiring decisions may potentially arise, most elected executives (and their voters) will be primarily concerned with similar issues: employment, housing, education, planning and development, and service delivery.

adopted and to assure that difficult (and inevitable) policy trade-offs are made on the basis of clear priorities, not ad hoc internal lobbying among competing advisors or competing interests.

### 3. Collecting Data and Pertinent Information from a Variety of Trusted Sources

Here the goal is to obtain as much pertinent information as possible related to the problem or issue: background data, locally specific information, information on how the issue is addressed in other localities, and states, and understanding of competing approaches to the issue. As Machiavelli noted, it is incumbent on the executive to judge who is most credible and which information is most pertinent, and a wise executive will appoint a gatekeeper to make sure charlatans and hacks don't make it through the door.<sup>10</sup> Many people will seek an executive's attention for reasons that do not primarily concern the public interest, and often people who are incompletely informed about the relevant facts and constraints believe that their favored idea, policy, or project deserves immediate consideration and implementation. Without a proper vetting process, an executive may waste time, or worse, allow themselves to be misled, by whoever makes it through the door.

At the same time, it's critically important wherever feasible to garner information from a variety of sources, perspectives, and points of view.

<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli writes insightfully about the relationship between leaders and advisors in chapter 22 of *The Prince*. On the gatekeeping function of chiefs of staff at the presidential level, see Whipple, *Gatekeepers*.

Often this may mean reaching out beyond one's immediate, permanent circle to obtain additional expertise; at times, reaching out directly to the public for input and information is appropriate. Data rarely speaks for itself (and anyone who claims this should be distrusted). There must be time and space for assessment of the data and information.

For example, in a diverse, urban community, it often is not enough simply to issue a survey on a contested public issue and then take the results at face value as representative of community opinion. Responsible policy makers will also want to know *who* exactly responded, assess the degree to which those respon-

dents were representative of the entire community, and also assess whether the reasons those respondents offered for their opinions carry weight relative to other concerns. To take an extreme example, if a majority of adults object to traffic calming measures in a neighborhood with pedestrian safety concerns on the grounds that they are inconvenient, it's not clear those opinions should override a concern with pedestrian safety. No single, decontextualized data point ever tells the whole story on a policy question—a key point elected executives should both know and stress to their staffs.

On major, ongoing issues, the collection and assessment of pertinent information is necessarily an ongoing process. But there will also often be a need to garner time-sensitive information to inform real-time decision making. An effective executive should have good processes for both ongoing collection of information and for those time-sensitive data crams.

*No single, decontextualized data point ever tells the whole story on a policy question—a key point elected executives should both know and stress to their staffs.*



#### 4. Defining Options for Action

At some point, the executive, along with advisors and subject matter experts, must define potential courses of action: What, exactly, might be done to address the defined issue?

At this stage, options for action should include, to the degree possible, specifications of what is going to be done, who is going to do it, when it's going to be done by, how success will be measured, and at what cost. Proposed actions should be limited to actions the organization has the resources and authority to pursue.<sup>11</sup> (In cases where the most beneficial action to be taken is by another organization, the organization may choose to focus its efforts on lobbying or pressuring that other organization to act in the desired way. That would be the action step. In cases where it's a matter of dispute who has the relevant authority, the executive must understand the potential legal risks and costs of taking action.)

Nonaction is always an option, so the articulation of even one course of action in itself gives the executive a choice. It's usually desirable to specify multiple possible courses of action, however, in addition to the nonaction option. For example, in a city with both aging public school facilities and limited financial resources, a mayor or his or her

<sup>11</sup> In practice, these parameters assure that the defined option steps will typically be incremental in nature: that is, they will involve changing some things, while leaving others in place. This need not be understood as implying that impact of decisions or policies are not large and significant, but as an acknowledgment of the reality that it is not (in nonrevolutionary circumstances) possible to change everything all at once. In the local context, many factors are beyond the executive's control; solutions that from ten thousand feet appear ideal are often not viable because they would require commitment, cooperation, or change from other entities (such as neighboring governments) that a municipal leader can neither compel nor obtain at reasonable cost. For a classic discussion of the imperative of incremental policy making, see Braybrooke and Lindblom, *Strategy of Decision*.

advisors might treat “do nothing” as a default policy option. But a responsible mayor may ask staff to examine four distinct courses of action that could begin the process of upgrading and modernizing facilities—such as (a) persuading the school board to save money by closing some facilities to consolidate students in fewer buildings, thereby freeing up funds that could be used to modernize the remaining facilities; (b) persuading city council to implement a new tax or increase an existing tax to provide the needed funds; (c) seeking support from the state or federal government for the needed resources, either via existing programs or (less likely, but not impossible) the implementation and funding of a new program; or (d) cutting funding for other city agencies to free up resources for school modernization. Needless to say, each of these courses of action carry costs and risks of their own, and will have varying prospects for success. While lobbying others for funds (option c) is relatively costless, it is conceivable (depending on the specifics of the case) that a mayor would ultimately prefer the status quo to options (a), (b), or (d). But a responsible policy maker will nonetheless ask for reach of those options to be explored, developed, and considered in depth.

Depending on the nature of the issue, once policy options are generated, it might be helpful or even essential to solicit public input on the options under consideration. That input might improve the options under discussion; even if it doesn't, it may provide helpful information about how possible courses of action are likely to be received.

#### 5. Assessing Probable Consequences of Alternative Courses of Action

As a general rule, in complex organizations and complex situations, leaders cannot fully forecast the consequences of their decisions. Nonetheless,

leaders must make the best effort they can, within the time and resources available, to assess the most likely consequences, as well as the full range of possible outcomes, of alternative courses of action.<sup>12</sup>

Questions they might ask include:

- How will the action/policy course impact the problem itself?
- What ancillary impacts will the course of action have on other issues?
- Where is opposition likely to emerge? Who is at risk of losing out in the course of action?
- What new problems/opportunities will be generated in the course of undertaking the action?
- What is the probability of success, and what is the probability of failure?
- What legal liability, if any, might the action generate?
- Generally speaking, what is the worst that could happen, and what is the probability of that worst outcome?

For instance, consider the difficult case of local school boards weighing the question of whether and when to reopen school buildings for in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many states both mandated shutdowns and then reopenings for school buildings, but in the interim (2020-21 academic year) localities often had at least some authority on this question. In retrospect, many analysts have judged that urban school systems stayed closed too long, sacrificing students' mental health and contributing to massive long-term

<sup>12</sup> This account is broadly congruent with the "rational actor" account of decision making: that is, decision makers are seeking to maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative ones. For discussion and critique of that model, see Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*. Note that Allison and Zelikow's primary purpose is to *explain* a decision-making process (taking as their case the Cuban Missile Crisis), hence their detailed attention to historical, organizational, and political factors. The purpose here is simply to stipulate how actors *should* intelligibly approach decision making.

learning loss for the sake of relatively small health benefits.<sup>13</sup> Yet one could argue that given the conflicting data points and lack of clear answers to the questions noted above, school boards acted prudently to seek to minimize the highly visible worst case outcome, namely schoolwide outbreaks that led to deaths of children and staff members. The stakes of being wrong influenced the adoption of policies that arguably were excessively cautious, in a case where it was wise to err on the side of caution. But more generally, in cases where the stakes are lower and the costs of being wrong less extreme, leaders may often choose to take risks, knowing something could go wrong. But a good leader will want to know (to the degree possible) exactly how wrong things might go before taking decisive action.

## 6. Making a Decision

At some point a decision to act (or not to act) must be made. Generally speaking, to make a decision the executive should assess the projected consequences and risks of an action (step 5 above) in light of the significance of the issue (step above). An action with a 90 percent chance of success and 10 percent chance of humiliating failure may be worth taking on an issue of critical importance, especially if alternative actions offer significantly less positive payoff; but most executives would eschew a 10 percent risk (or even a 2 percent risk) of total humiliation on relatively minor issues. A mayor elected on a bold racial equity agenda, for instance, will not want to risk her entire policy agenda or entire credibility as a citywide leader on a district-specific dispute about neighborhood parking regulations.

A decision in this context is not a prayer or a wish. Joe Biden praying for more world peace is not a decision. A decision means, again, specifying

<sup>13</sup> See Thompson, "School Closures."

what is going to be done; who is going to do it; when it's going to be done by; how success will be evaluated; and at what costs (financial, staff attention, political). In practice, once the chief executive has indicated the direction in which to move, top staff with relevant knowledge may prepare a fully specified plan containing the needed particulars, for final executive approval.

## 7. Communicating the Decision, Internally and Externally

To take effect, a decision must be communicated internally—minimally, to all the people who will be involved with the implementation of a decision—and in most cases externally as well, to “stakeholders” on a given issue and often the public at-large. What is going to be done and why it's going to be done should be explained as clearly as possible. Even in cases where no other body (such as a city council) is going to be directly involved in a decision, it's important to build public understanding and support for a course of action. (In many cases, of course, support of a city council or other significant actors *will* be required.)

Failure to communicate a decision clearly—both the *what* and the *why*—can severely impede implementation. Frontline staff who do not understand the goals of a particular policy or initiative may, precisely by doing things the way they have always been done, undermine their successful implementation. Failure to communicate can also lead to misunderstanding or misrepresentation of a policy objective, especially in adversarial political contexts. Most of the time, clear communication will not create consensus on the wisdom of a given course of action or prevent opposition to such policies, nor should that be the goal. (Good leadership means being willing to withstand inevitable criticism.)

But clear, repeated communication can help assure initiatives do not run ashore because of misunderstandings, false presumptions, simple ignorance, or simply someone “not getting the memo.” Indeed, leaders would be wise to err on the side of overcommunicating their key decisions and the reasoning for them.

## 8. Implementation of the Course of Action

Implementation is, as a general rule, easier said than done, and the executive typically is not the same person with primary responsibility for leading execution of a selected course of action. Selection, either directly or indirectly, of the person in charge of implementation is an executive responsibility, however, and the executive can set guidelines about *how* the work will be done. As suggested above, requiring responsible staff to develop *specific* plans for policy implementation, to the degree possible, is ideally part of the decision-making process itself, and should happen prior to a decision receiving final approval.

Once a policy decision has been made, requiring project directors to document what they have done will be a critical step in both monitoring the pace of implementation and assessing its results. Clear, up-front specifications of expected actions, timelines, outcomes, and resources allocated for the work are also essential preparatory steps. But once started, the work of implementation will take on a life of its own and often yield unpredicted or unpredictable challenges, at times leading to deviation from initial plans. Executives should be prepared in advance to allow flexibility, without allowing a project or policy to become something materially different than what was intended. (For instance, a youth employment program intended to serve the



most disadvantaged teenagers in an urban community could easily, without close scrutiny and great intentionality concerning who is participating in the program, become a résumé-building activity for relatively privileged youth in the same community—subverting the original intention of the program.) Especially with new and untested undertakings and interventions, close attention to how things are going in the early days of implementation will be important to keeping initiatives on track *and* to making any needed adjustments based on new or unexpected information.

### 9. Assessing Results of Action (Including Reasons for Success, Partial Success, and Failure)

Some actions can be assessed almost immediately; most policy actions will take a period of months, years, in some cases decades to assess or fully assess. Here it is important to ask and receive answers to questions like this:

- What in fact was done?
- What was left undone, or done incompletely?
- What results did the action produce? Did these match, exceed, or disappoint expectations?
- What factors are responsible for a plan exceeding or disappointing expectations? In the case of disappointment, we might consider factors such as: unexpected difficulties; flaws in project leadership or staff quality; insufficient or inappropriate resources; flaws in the underlying policy idea; external factors; bad luck; and more.

In short, we want to know what happened, and why it happened, with as much precision as possible. Requiring detailed documentation of each step of the implementation process is essential to being able to answer the questions posed above, especially for relative novel ventures. Any implementation plan

should build in time for leaders and teams to periodically hit pause to assess how things are going and to identify opportunities for improvement.

### 10. Reaffirming the Decision, Altering the Decision, or Reversing the Decision (Iterative Process)

Most public policy questions are never fully resolved. Issues related to public education, housing policy, environmental policy, and numerous other areas are permanent and ongoing in nature.<sup>14</sup> Rarely are policy makers tackling an issue in a once-and-for-all manner.

For that reason, in most cases the policy maker will want to reassess their policy decisions after an appropriate passage of time: normally, after a policy has had time to get “up and running” and has been in effect for some period of time. At that time, the executive may opt to reaffirm, or even accelerate or expand, the initial course of action; seek to alter the policy action in some way to take account of lessons learned from the process of implementation and outcomes of the initial assessment; or seek to stop or reverse the policy altogether. This last outcome could be selected if the course of action is found to have perverse or negative effects, or if its positive effects are too small to justify continued expense and effort, relative to other possible projects or policies.

Within the course of a single executive administration, completion of step 10 leads in a circular manner back to step 4, the definition of potential action steps. But in the case of a new administration, completion of step 10 may lead all the way back to step 1, to a fresh reconsideration of the issue or problem, “from the top.” An executive administra-

<sup>14</sup> This point is emphasized by Braybrooke and Lindblom, *Strategy of Decision*.

tion that seeks to have impact beyond its term of office will be aware of this likelihood by following and meticulously documenting each of these steps, in hopes that the organization may benefit from the cumulative generation of knowledge and experience, even in the (inevitable) event of executive change.

## Complicating the Model: Engagement with Other Actors

This model is but a basic model. Most importantly absent are *other* political actors, especially other governing bodies that may have a stake and a degree of decision-making authority over the same issues addressed by the executive. Further work, focused more explicitly on questions of bureaucratic and political power, would be needed to elaborate these complications. The model sketched here is intended as a guide for helping leaders determine what the best thing to do is. In circumstances where it is simply not possible to do the best thing, leaders must either negotiate a next-best compromise that is politically feasible, or work to build greater support for doing the best thing.

This short essay closes with three pertinent observations. First, the fact that an executive is not the sole political actor should increase, not diminish, the importance of using a sound decision-making process for the matters under his or her control. Second, to the degree that distinct or competing public bodies or political actors employ similar decision-making processes, it should be easier to build consensus, or where this is not possible, at least establish mutual respect in the midst of disagreement that may allow actors to negotiate acceptable and productive compromises.<sup>15</sup>

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15 See Mansbridge, "On the Importance of Getting Things Done," for a vital discussion of "democratic negotiation."

Finally, the model sketched here can be used both by actual leaders *and* by citizens (followers) seeking to assess and evaluate specific decision-making processes and the overall performance of specific leaders. In the case of outright failure, the model can (often) help provide an initial diagnosis of what went wrong: where exactly did leaders skip a step, move too fast, fail to communicate, or fail to follow through? In the more common case of incomplete or mixed results from a given decision or policy initiative, a rigorous assessment of how well the steps in the model were applied can help identify opportunities to do better the next time.

Indeed, the success (and viability) of democratically organized leadership structures depends on developing specific processes and mechanisms that allow for collective learning and accumulation of knowledge over time.<sup>16</sup> Absence of widely recognized processes of good leadership undermines our collective capacity to learn from past experiences and past efforts, including of those whose substantive policy goals we may disagree with. Even more concerning, lack of understanding among citizens and voters of the basic elements of sound decision-making processes hampers the ability of those same citizens to judge and choose their leaders wisely.

Consequently, development and promulgation of a widely understood framework of good public leadership, accessible not just to "experts" but to wider democratic public, is an urgent task—both for leadership studies, and for the ongoing and future health of democracy.

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16 On the moral basis of democratic leadership compared to aristocratic models, see Estlund, *Democratic Authority*; Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy*. Both accounts stress that democracy's viability rests on the ability to draw on knowledge held across the entire population, not just an elite.

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