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# What Makes a Political Leader? Identifying the attributes of tourism industry advocates

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# **What Makes a Political Leader? Identifying the attributes of tourism industry advocates**

## **Introduction**

The tourism industry is greatly influenced by political decisions at the federal, state, and local levels. The policies and regulations that result from these decisions can hinder the industry's growth or create opportunities for its success. It has become vital for the tourism industry to inform policymakers on how their political decisions affect the industry. Political leaders, also known as advocates, from within the tourism industry have taken on this task and serve as the link between policymakers and members of the industry. While tourism industry advocates must be effective in communicating with policymakers, they must also be adept at creating relationships with tourism industry members. Such relationships help tourism industry advocates gain an understanding of industry members' political concerns. Without tourism advocates' efforts to act as a voice for the industry it would be challenging to attain the influence necessary to create political support for tourism. Therefore, greater attention should be given to understanding tourism industry advocates and the attributes that shape their engagement in leadership efforts. This study focuses on exploring the attributes of tourism advocates working for the industry at the state level through the use of a Political Model of Leadership.

## **Literature Review**

Previous efforts to explore how the tourism industry can gain political influence examine how the industry communicates and interacts with policymakers (Bramwell & Meyer, 2007; McGehee & Meng, 2006; Stevenson, Airey, & Miller, 2008; Swanson & Brothers, 2012). These studies conclude that it is vital for the industry to speak with one voice on political issues (McGehee & Meng, 2006) and to develop a unified legislative agenda (Swanson & Brothers, 2012). While these conclusions provide valuable recommendations for success in gaining political influence, less is known about how the appropriate tasks are accomplished or who should lead the effort to create a unified voice and agenda around political issues affecting the tourism industry. This current study examines the individuals who take on these tasks, with specific focus on their efforts to create a unified voice and agenda for political issues.

The exploration of leadership in the tourism industry has become an important issue (Beritelli 2011). This attention has produced a deeper understanding of the connection between leadership and power (Blichfeldt, Hird, & Kvistgaard, 2014; Slocum and Everett, 2014); partnerships (Zehrer, Raich, Siller, & Tschiderer, 2014); and governance systems (Beritelli & Bieger, 2014; Valente, Dredge, & Lohmann, 2014). However, there is still relatively little known about the characteristics of tourism industry advocates. Exploration of this topic provides insight on how to identify and cultivate new tourism industry advocates, ensuring that political leadership for the industry is sustainable.

The broader leadership literature provides many tools for expanding upon the existing work on tourism leadership. This study utilizes the Political Model of Leadership (Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwater, & Ferris, 2002) (Figure 1) as a framework for exploring the context which influences a leaders' participation in political leadership as well as the antecedents that shape the behaviors in which they engage. This is the first time this model has been used in the context of tourism. This study focuses on the attributes identified in these contexts and antecedents in order to develop an understanding of the characteristics of tourism industry advocates.

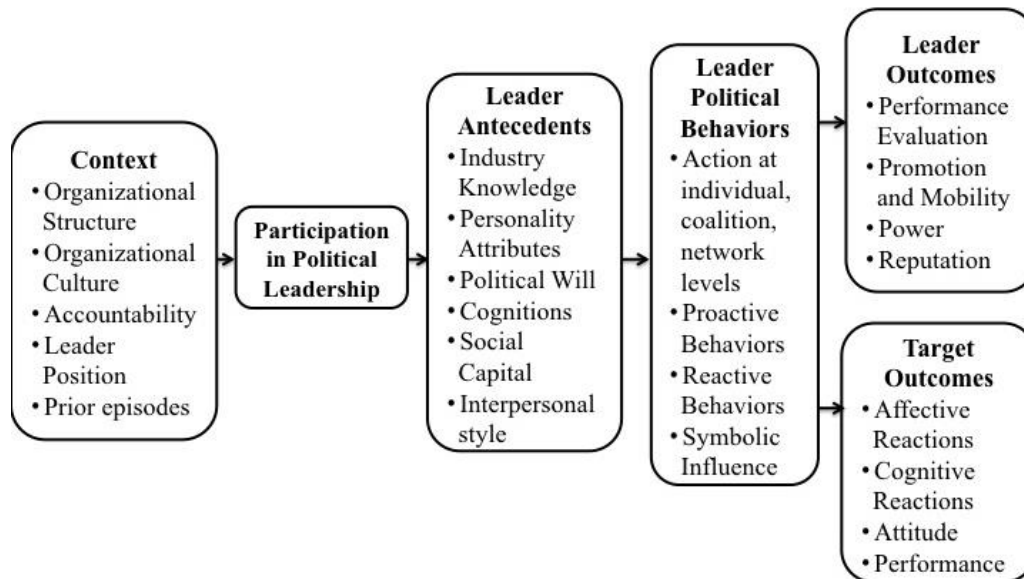


Figure 1. The Political Model of Leadership (Ammeter et al., 2002) adapted for use in the context of tourism

## Methodology

This study focuses on two research questions designed to advance the understanding of tourism advocates:

*Research Question 1: How do contextual elements influence tourism advocates' participation in political leadership?*

*Research Question 2: What antecedents determine tourism advocates' selection of political behaviors used to influence members of the tourism industry?*

This study targets a population of tourism advocates associated with the Virginia Restaurant, Lodging, and Travel Association (VRLTA) to explore these research questions. This population serves as an appropriate group for study as they are widely recognized as advocates for the tourism industry in Virginia. VRLTA employees, specifically the Association's President and Governmental Affairs staff and board of director's members served as the initial population of tourism industry advocate informants. They were asked to identify additional tourism industry advocates with whom they have worked, but who may not be directly connected to VHTA aside from general membership. This snowball sampling technique allows for the identification of both formal and informal advocate informants. A significant effort was made to ensure that advocates representing a variety of sectors in the tourism industry and regions across the state were included in the sample.

Semi-structured personal interviews with 26 participants representing the lodging, food and beverage, attractions, destinations, and tourism suppliers sectors of the industry were audio recorded and used to explore the contextual elements (RQ1) and antecedents (RQ2) which influence the leadership behaviors of tourism industry advocates. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo. Secondary data sources, including VRLTA by-laws and governance documents were used as an additional source of data.

## Results

Based upon the analysis of the qualitative data and secondary sources, multiple themes and subthemes related to the contextual elements and behavioral antecedents of tourism industry advocates in Virginia emerged. Many of the attributes included in Ammeter et al.'s (2002) Political Model of Leadership were identified as important characteristics of advocates in this study. However several additional characteristics were also identified. This required further adaption of the Political Model of Leadership for use in the context of tourism (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The Context and Leader Antecedents of Tourism Industry Advocates in Virginia (modifications from Ammeter et al. (2002)'s original model italicized).

Through open and axial coding of the interviews and secondary data, evidence was found that many tourism industry advocates attributed their participation in political leadership to contextual elements such as organizational resources and prior episodes. Below is an example of what was termed a “Watershed Moment” in which an advocate described a past interaction with a politician that demonstrated their ability to gain influence for the industry:

*“I sat there and I talked to him [a state legislator]. He told me ‘I am pretty sure I am going to go against this.’ I said ‘Why?’ He explained it was about this referendum. I am like ‘You are going to let the whole bill die because you have a problem with one little portion? What about the greater good?’ and I had to talk to him. We finished our talk and he was going to vote on it. He switched his vote.”* (Lodging 6)

Such experiences seem to inspire advocates to continue to engage in political leadership behaviors. Other contextual elements such as accountability and leader position are found to be less influential on advocates' participation in leadership efforts.

The data also reveal the importance of leader antecedents such as industry knowledge. Below is an example of how participants use industry knowledge to help build relationships with tourism industry members:

*"In terms of when you see the people as far as the hotel industry itself, and you're going from a small mom-and-pop to a full-service Holiday Inn, I can relate to pretty much everybody out there. Whether it be the ownership level of those hotels, to the general manager level to sales and marketing, to whatever's out there, you see everyone that's involved in the industry. From every angle I think I've touched it and felt it and worked with it."* (Lodging 5)

Tourism industry advocates also discuss the importance of social capital as a characteristic that helps them create the relationships needed to develop a unified voice and agenda around political issues impacting the industry. The cultivation of trust was frequently discussed a component of social capital:

*"I think the trust thing is huge and the thing is if you say you're going to do something and you asked to be a part of something and you say yes, then for me I put 110 percent into it. I would say over the years that has been what people have come back to me and said, 'You are a person of your word.'" (Attraction 4)*

Antecedents such as political savvy and cultivated skillsets emerge as important themes that are not previously identified in Ammeter et al.'s (2002) model. Participants frequently discuss these antecedents as an influence on the behaviors they use to create relationships with tourism industry members. The findings of this study also suggest that some antecedents such as interpersonal style, personality attributes, and leader cognitions do not play a strong role in shaping advocates' approaches to relationship building.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The findings of this study suggest that there are many contextual elements and antecedents that serve as important characteristics of tourism industry advocates. Some are particularly prominent, including organizational resources, prior episodes, social capital, and industry knowledge. This suggests that if the industry is interested in gaining political influence in the future they need to ensure that organizations, such as hotels, restaurants, destinations, and attractions, support advocates' efforts to build relationships with tourism industry members. This may be manifest through the establishment of advocacy as a part of employees' job descriptions or creating opportunities for employees to engage in advocacy activities such as attending annual legislative outreach events.

Additionally, it was determined that advocates frequently possess high levels of social capital and industry knowledge. This suggests that it is important for individuals in the industry to have the opportunity to cultivate these attributes so they have the potential to become successful advocates. Again, there are opportunities for many components of the industry, including employers, DMOs, and associations, to create spaces where individuals can cultivate these characteristics. Doing so will help to ensure that the industry can continue to gain the political influence it needs to be successful.

This work provides ample opportunity for further research which may focus on identify specific types of leaders who are successful in fostering political influence for the industry. Additionally, it is evident that further exploration of how antecedents such as social capital, mentorship, political savvy, and industry knowledge are cultivated may be prove valuable in helping to develop new leaders which can sustain efforts for political influence in the industry.

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