

Democratic Leadership 8

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Abstract

This study examines the democratic leadership approach, which has been one of the most fundamental issues in the leadership literature in the past. Democratic leadership is a leadership style that ensures the active participation of employees in decision-making processes and is based on mutual trust and cooperation within the organization. One of the most prominent features of this leadership style is that it takes into account the views of employees instead of making decisions based on the leader's authority or power sources. Democratic leadership not only increases participation in decisions and expands their quality, but also strengthens the satisfaction, motivation, trust, and loyalty of employees within the organization. Especially when the literature is examined, findings that democratic leadership increases innovative and creative behaviors and strengthens organizational citizenship behaviors stand out. The main reason for this can be said to be making employees feel valuable by prioritizing the concept of democracy, which is at the core of democratic leadership. Although democratic leadership is a leadership style that emerged in the past, it has overlapping aspects with many modern leadership styles. In particular, it has similar characteristics to transformational, ethical, and servant leadership. Democratic leadership is a leadership style that prioritizes participation, ethical values, transparency, and cooperation, and is considered an important approach that can contribute to the strong presence of organizations in today's rapidly changing and competitive business world.

1. Introduction

The concept of leadership is an important concept in many disciplines, especially in social sciences, and is among the most fundamental topics in organizational behavior and management literature. From past to present, the impact of different leadership styles on employees and the phenomena

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affecting leadership continue to be researched (Northouse, 2019). Leadership is known as a person who has the power to influence and direct others. In this respect, the fact that leadership achieves different outputs with many factors, such as personality traits, the environment, and the power it possesses, has led to the emergence of leadership styles. One of these, democratic leadership, stands out as a leadership approach that supports the active participation of employees in decision-making processes and ensures mutual cooperation and trust. Democratic leaders adopt a “participatory” decision-making process by taking into account the views of group members instead of a management approach based solely on their own authority (Lewin et al., 1939).

Democratic leadership differs from classical leadership styles with its participative and employee-centered characteristics. In this leadership style, active participation of employees in all business processes is encouraged, and it is aimed at increasing the motivation and satisfaction levels of employees within the organization (Gastil, 1994). In democratic leadership, instead of imposing their own decisions, leaders base their decisions on giving importance to the ideas of employees, and communication channels are kept open. In addition, it is aimed that employees actively participate in all processes (Goleman, 2000). Keeping the channels open in terms of communication is seen as important in terms of contributing more to the organization while contributing to their active role (Somech, 2006).

Democratic leadership is a highly effective leadership style for organizational outcomes as well as for employees. Although it is considered a classical leadership style, it is still applicable today. Research in the literature shows that democratic leadership increases employees’ job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship, and encourages innovative and creative behaviors (Chen & Tjosvold, 2006; Bhatti et al., 2012). It is stated that employee loyalty and motivation are likely to decrease, especially in sectors where competition is intense, but these can be increased through democratic leadership (Mullins, 2016). In addition, democratic leadership plays an important role not only in the results of employee performance but also in the construction of organizational values based on justice and ethics (Iqbal et al., 2015). Democratic leadership stands out as a leadership style that strengthens the active participation of employees, encourages organizational creativity, and contributes to sustainable success in contemporary management understanding. In both theoretical and practical terms, democratic leadership has an important place in management and organizational behavior literature.

2. Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership is generally seen as a leadership style that is based on the participation of subordinates/followers and gives importance to their ideas. It is argued that democratic leadership came to the forefront in the 1970s when the idea of democracy became dominant throughout the world. In democratic leadership, where followers have a lot of say in management, both a sharing and a democratic management approach emerge. As a result, followers' satisfaction increases (Güney, 2011). In another study, it is stated that democratic leadership has become popular with the publication of the results of a series of experiments involving children and adults. Especially in these studies, democratic leadership was investigated together with autocratic leadership (Lewin et al., 1939). The reason for researching these leadership styles together is that they are at opposite poles. This means that most leaders fall at one point on this scale, depending on the level of participation of followers or the amount of control leaders exert over decisions (Schoel et al., 2011).

On the other hand, it is stated that democratic leadership is expressed as a style of having open and equal authority in terms of teamwork, in addition to these characteristics. In organizations where there is a democratic leader, ideas are discussed freely and openly, and everyone can put forward their opinions. It is stated that there are very few fixed elements in this leadership style and that everything is dynamic and can change rapidly. In addition, at the end of situations such as putting forward, discussing, and sharing ideas, the democratic leader is expected to synthesize them in the best possible way (Woods, 2021).

The concept of leadership should be considered as a more pluralistic and inclusive practice rather than a concept that is usually monopolized by one person. What is also important here is that it starts the process of seriously engaging with theories of participatory democracy. However, from the past to the present, it has not been fully realized to put forward democratic leadership as a theory in accordance with its purpose. In other words, it has not been fully emphasized that democratic leadership is a leadership style that can function outside of organizational environments. In addition, the proposition of democratic leadership as a democratizing leader opens a new field of discussion for this leadership style (Smolović Jones et al., 2016).

Although new areas of discussion have been opened, democratic leadership, like other leadership styles, has an important role in the effectiveness of an organization. Leadership in general is an indispensable part of institutions and organizations internationally, and is a concept that has been frequently

researched from the past to the present. Democratic leadership is claimed to achieve better employee performance than other leadership styles (Dixon & Hart, 2010; Polston-Murdoch, 2013; Mohammed et al., 2014; Ozdemirkol, 2025). In addition to employee performance, democratic leadership, which has an important role in creating competitive advantage for organizations, has a great share in achieving high profits (Negron, 2008).

When examined not only from the organizational dimension but also from a general perspective, it has been observed that effective leaders adopt democratic leadership styles. There is a consensus that democratic leadership practices generally yield more desirable results (Gastil, 1994; Caillier, 2020). Similarly, it is also stated that democratic leadership is a more acceptable style than autocratic leadership (Schoel et al., 2011). It has been suggested that adopting a more democratic style can be beneficial, especially when public interest is considered (Van Vugt & De Cremer, 1999).

Another term for democratic leadership is participative leadership. Many researchers argue that organizational leaders need a high level of trust to overcome challenges in a competitive environment. Therefore, participative leadership, which aims to encourage behaviors that support employees' participation in organizational decision-making processes, is gaining attention in many organizations (Huang et al., 2006). Participative leadership is a leadership style that exists in organizations of all types and at all stages, regardless of size. The delegation of authority to employees in organizational decision-making processes and the importance of their opinions are shown as the most basic feature that distinguishes this leadership style from other leadership styles (Huang et al., 2021).

When traditional organizational structures are examined, it is seen that they are mostly hierarchical structures, and it is accepted that leadership is strongly felt with top-down management approaches (Arnold et al., 2000). The role of a leader has been examined in various contexts in organizations, and the results show that the behaviors of leaders can help create an ideal organization for employees (Ahn, Y.-j, & Bessiere, 2022). Participative leadership is a leadership style that has an important place in organizations. The share of the participative leader, who has behaviors such as actively listening to the opinions of subordinates/audiences and taking their suggestions into account in decisions, cannot be ignored in creating an ideal organization (Arnold et al., 2000). In addition, when making strategic decisions, participative leaders can share decision-making authority and fully consult with employees to jointly address problems that may arise (Chan, 2019; Onen & Elkırımı, 2022).

In a participative leadership style, subordinates have a significant level of responsibility in the final thinking phase just before the leader makes the final decision. Therefore, it is argued that in a participative leadership style, subordinates are at least as influential in decisions as the leader and assume responsibility. By participating in decisions, the leader is relieved of the obligation to make decisions alone, and subordinates can freely express their own opinions. Therefore, one of the most prominent features of participative leadership is that activities can be carried out without the leader, but the presence of the leader in the final decision is a must (Sabuncuoğlu & Tüz, 2005).

3. Theories Explaining Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership is a leadership style that is evaluated within the framework of traditional leadership styles. In addition to the personal characteristics of the leader, it is thought to be effective in leadership in changing conditions. The period between the 1930s and 1940s was examined as “personal characteristics”, the period between the 1940s and 1960s as ‘behavioral’ and the period between the 1960s and the end of the 1970s as “situational” approaches. The common feature of these approaches is that there is not a single type of leadership, and that sometimes there are task-oriented and sometimes relationship-oriented approaches (Çeliköz et al., 2025).

Behavioral approaches were defined as four leadership styles: “libertarian”, “democratic”, ‘autocratic’ and “bureaucratic”. Situational approaches, which came to the forefront in the 1960s and later, are dominated by the main idea that “there are different leadership styles in different situations” (Jiang, 2014). When the emergence dates of democratic leadership are examined, it is seen that they coincide with the years of behavioral approaches.

Behavioral Leadership Theory is an approach that emphasizes the behaviors of the leader in ensuring the effectiveness of leadership. The theory aims to reveal that the leader is task-oriented and people-oriented. While there is high respect for people-oriented leadership style, technical aspects are emphasized in the task-oriented leadership style (Gül, 2003). Behavioral Leadership Theories started to gain importance after the 1940s. It is known that research contributed greatly to the development of these theories. Ohio State University Leadership Studies, University of Michigan Leadership Studies around 1947, Blake and Mauton’s Management Style Matrix, McGregor’s Theory X and Y, Likert’s System 4 Approach are among these studies (Bayram, 2013).

The inadequacy of the traits approach in leadership has led researchers to put forward different approaches. Researchers have tried to examine the behaviors of the leader and the effects of these behaviors on the leadership process. The Behavioral Leadership Approach, which emerged as a result of related studies, focused on the effectiveness of leadership rather than its formation (Szilagyi & Wallace, 1990). In general, the Behavioral Leadership Approach seeks to answer the questions of how leaders will make decisions in the face of an event or problem, or what behaviors they will engage in while making decisions. This is expressed as the key point of the approach. In the Behavioral Leadership Approach, which suggests that leadership can be explained by behaviors instead of traits, it is stated that the leadership process is not a process that belongs to a single person and can be explained by examining the behaviors of followers in the leadership process (Ozdemir, 1998).

On the basis of the Behavioral Leadership Approach, behaviors such as communication between leaders and followers, followers' commitment, leader's motivational ability, followers' participation in decisions, leader's management style, and leader's use of resources towards the group they address are among the prominent issues in order to achieve corporate goals (Demir et al., 2010). In this approach, leaders give their followers the feeling that "they are one of them" with their behaviors. In addition, one of the reasons why the Behavioral Leadership Approach was adopted at that time was that behaviors were not innate and could be learned. In the traits approach, the assumption that all the characteristics of the leader are innate was emphasized (Simsek et al., 2001).

One of the stages of the Behavioral Leadership Approach, the Ohio State University Leadership Studies, aimed to reveal some of the behaviors observed in the leader. This research, which revealed 1800 different leadership behaviors, was reduced to 150 with the analysis and turned into a questionnaire and a measurement tool (Luthans, 2011). In the related research, this questionnaire was applied to school administrators, students, soldiers, and some other organizations, and it was investigated whether the leader behaviors showed the same characteristics (Helms, 2006). According to the results of the research, it is stated that leadership is based on "building structure" and "showing understanding" in terms of role. Behaviors such as showing interest in the employee, supporting, planning, and organizing the work were put forward in this way (Bakan, 2008).

After the Ohio State University Leadership Research, the University of Michigan Leadership Research, one of the Behavioral Leadership

Approaches, is a leadership research initiated by Rensis Likert and his colleagues (Yukl, 2010). The University of Michigan Leadership Research is based on the premise that a leader can exhibit either a task-oriented leadership style or an employee/audience-oriented leadership style, but not both behaviors at the same time. On this basis, it is stated that it is more effective to show employee/audience-oriented leadership behavior than task-oriented leadership behavior. The reason for this is stated to be performance (Griffin & Moorhead, 2013). According to the University of Michigan Leadership Research, a task-oriented leader is a leader who constantly controls employees and uses the power of authority, while a person-oriented leader is a leader who adopts delegation of authority, tries to provide working conditions that will motivate employees, and focuses on the personal development of employees (Helms, 2006).

Another research used to explain the behaviors of managers in organizations is Blake and Mouton's Management Style Matrix. In this research, which is used in Behavioral Leadership Approaches, the researchers created a "Management Style Matrix" to explain leader behaviors based on the results of leadership research at Michigan and Ohio State Universities. In this matrix, the researchers tried to understand the orientations of the behaviors that leaders exhibit while they are in a relationship in the work environment. In this matrix, which consists of two dimensions, interest in work and interest in people, the dimensions were graded by assigning numbers between 1 and 9, and the weights of the behaviors were examined according to these grades (Findıkcı, 2009).

Another research used in Behavioral Leadership Approaches is the X and Y Theory put forward by McGregor. According to this theory, person X reflects laziness and an employee who does not like to work, while in Theory Y, the employee reveals a working and creative personality when given opportunities (Goethals et al., 2004). It is suggested that it would be right to develop a leadership style suitable for employees who resemble such theories.

Within the scope of Behavioral Leadership Approaches, Rensis Likert examined the behaviors of leaders in four groups in the model he developed as a continuation of the University of Michigan studies. He also addressed the leadership variables of trusting the followers, the degree of participation of the followers, and taking the ideas of the followers. In Likert's Quadrilateral Approach Model, it is stated that while abusive and benevolent autocratic leaders exhibit work-oriented behaviors, democratic leaders exhibit person-oriented behaviors (Sinha, 2008: 271).

Democratic leadership is mostly discussed within behavioral leadership approaches in the literature. This leadership style emphasizes the behaviors of the leader rather than his/her personal characteristics. A democratic leader is a leadership style that involves employees in decision-making processes, takes their opinions and suggestions into account, and thus increases both the sense of belonging and productivity. The Ohio State University Leadership Studies and the University of Michigan Leadership Studies, which are important studies of behavioral leadership approaches, are critical for understanding the behavioral foundations of democratic leadership. As a result of these studies, it is understood that caring and understanding towards employees is more effective than task-oriented leadership; democratic leadership is especially positioned in the “relationship-oriented” dimension (Yukl, 2013).

Moreover, since democratic leadership is defined by participatory decision-making and the inclusion of employees in the process, it plays a role in increasing motivation and commitment in organizations. In particular, McGregor’s Theory Y is in line with the democratic leadership approach that trusts employees and supports their creativity (McGregor, 1960). Among behavioral approaches, the fact that democratic leadership is a leadership style that can be learned and developed is one of the main factors that distinguish it from the trait approach. In addition, democratic leadership is not an innate characteristic; it is seen as a form of behavior that can be developed through education, experience, and organizational culture (Northouse, 2022). In addition, democratic leadership should be considered within the scope of behavioral leadership theories, both in terms of its historical development line and its positioning in the literature. In addition, it should not be ignored that the effect of democratic leadership may vary according to situational conditions. However, in terms of its origins, this leadership style has emerged as a product of behavioral theories.

In addition to its origin, democratic leadership has also formed a kind of infrastructure for modern leadership styles. In particular, it can be said that many sub-dimensions of modern leadership styles are directly or indirectly related to democratic leadership. For example, the dimensions of inspirational motivation and individual-level interest in transformational leadership overlap with the elements of democratic leadership, such as increasing the participation of employees in the process and managing change. On the other hand, the dimensions of ethical leadership, such as justice, transparency, and encouragement of participation, are directly compatible with democratic leadership. Servant leadership, like other modern leadership styles, carries today’s reflections of democratic leadership. In particular, concepts such as

serving employees, contributing to their development, and listening to their voices emphasize the essence of democratic leadership.

However, although there are leadership styles that have emerged in the recent past within the scope of modern leadership theories, it should not be understood that democratic leadership has remained in a certain time period in the literature. In particular, it is envisaged that democratic leadership can be explained by several different theories. For example, implicit leadership theory emphasizes employees' expectations and beliefs about the competencies that leaders should possess. The theory distinguishes leaders from non-leaders and effective leaders from ineffective leaders (Lu et al., 2008). In the implicit leadership theory, it does not emphasize the outcome of leadership behavior, and it takes place in the minds of subordinates as a schema of their perceptions about the leader. In theory, if the participative leader does not send strong enough signals to encourage employees to participate in the decision-making process in line with the expectations of participative management, the activation of the "participation model" in subordinates may be prevented. As a result, they do not react positively to the participative leader until they perceive that the leader's participative behavior has reached a certain threshold level (Lam et al., 2015). In addition, social exchange theory predicts mutual assistance and work welfare, and social cognitive theory predicts that employees' psychological safety and performance will increase (Usman et al., 2021; Zou et al., 2020).

4. Characteristics and Scope of Democratic Leadership

It can be said that democratic leadership has a complex structure in itself and is based on the principles of various theories of democracy and leadership (Arenilla, 2010). Although there is no clear definition for democratic leadership, it can be defined by considering the components of both leadership and democracy (Butcher & Clarke, 2006). Democratic leadership is defined as a participatory leadership process in which the leader and group members formulate decisions together (Dolly & Nonyelum, 2018). On the other hand, democratic leadership style is considered a process that involves both the leader and the followers at the same level and emphasizes multidirectional communication and cooperation (Wilson, 2020).

Democratic leadership encourages group discussions and creates a positive effect. Thanks to this, it contributes to the performance of the organization (Hilton et al., 2021). The basic principles of democratic leadership include participation, inclusiveness, open communication, and employee participation in organizational decisions. In addition, there is an

organizational climate in which employees are seen as valuable, allowing them to try and implement new ideas (Imran et al., 2025). In addition, there is accountability and delegation of authority in democratic leadership. Leaders delegate their authority to ensure employee participation (Abid et al., 2024). Research in the literature shows that high levels of democratic leadership in organizations create an environment that encourages participation and inclusiveness, which has a significant impact on both commitment and motivation (Hamze & Abdulkhaliq, 2025). In addition, research indicates that the creation of this organizational environment leads to employees' perception that top management is accessible and contributes to firm performance (Odiwo et al., 2022).

Some characteristics of democratic leadership are listed below based on the literature (Daft, 1991; Rowe & Guerro, 2011; Feldman, 2012):

- Democratic leaders trust their employees and allow them to take responsibility for the distribution of tasks.
- Democratic leaders approach criticism objectively.
- Democratic leaders encourage and reward employee creativity.
- Democratic leaders generally care about employees' opinions.
- Democratic leaders solicit ideas from their employees, even when the outcome is certain.
- Democratic leaders enable subordinates to contribute to goal setting.
- Democratic leaders show a well-motivated personality and keep the morale of subordinates high, who are responsible for non-repetitive tasks.
- Democratic leaders determine how the goals of the organization will be achieved.
- Democratic leaders tend to be accessible and approachable.
- Democratic leaders coach and mentor subordinates by providing constructive feedback.
- Democratic leaders support teamwork and interprofessional cooperation.
- Democratic leaders resolve conflicts through effective negotiation.
- Democratic leaders exhibit emotional intelligence.
- Democratic leaders provide accurate and complete information to subordinates.

5. Conclusion and Assessment

Democratic leadership is a leadership style that focuses on the participation of employees in decision-making processes, organizational communication, and a climate of trust, especially within the framework of classical leadership approaches and modern leadership approaches. The literature on democratic leadership states that it is a leadership style that focuses on individual outcomes such as employee motivation, commitment, and job satisfaction, as well as on innovation, performance, and competitive advantage of organizations.

When evaluated within the framework of behavioral leadership theories, democratic leadership draws attention as a leadership style that can be learned and developed. In particular, it is seen that relationship-oriented leadership behaviors emphasized in Ohio State and Michigan University studies form the basis of the democratic leadership style. In addition, it is understood that situational factors also play a role in the effectiveness of democratic leadership and may lead to different outcomes in different organizational conditions. In some sources, situational leadership theories are supported by theories such as Democratic Theory, Situational Leadership Theory, Agency Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Optimal Firm Size Theory, and Balanced Scorecard Model (Muli et al., 2025).

When compared with modern leadership approaches, democratic leadership overlaps significantly with contemporary leadership styles such as transformational, ethical, and servant leadership. The fact that it encourages the active participation of employees in the process, is based on the principles of transparency and justice, and supports organizational creativity and innovative behaviors, makes democratic leadership a leadership style that is still valid today. In addition, it is necessary to recognize that democratic leadership is not only a leadership style that remained in a certain period of time in the past, but also has reflections on the present.

Democratic leadership is a participative management approach that creates positive effects at individual and organizational levels. Especially in today's fast-changing and competitive business environment, democratic leadership can be seen as a powerful approach that can contribute to the sustainable success of organizations. In today's world, it is important for organizations to develop democratic leadership practices and to follow policies in this direction by giving importance to factors such as increasing employee participation.

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