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### Public Interest vs. Elected Leaders' Interest in Staying in Power

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This is an author's draft of an article published in the PA Times.

The final version, the version of record, is available online at:

<https://patimes.org/public-interest-vs-elected-leaders-interest-in-staying-in-power/>



## Public Interest vs. Elected Leaders' Interest in Staying in Power

One of the interesting questions posed by a trainee in an executive training program about public policymaking was whether there has ever been an elected leader who focuses on creating public value and works all the time for the public interest, even though he or she wants to stay in office and remain popular to be re-elected. At face value, it may look like a simple question and the normative textbook response says that all leaders and elected officials in the public sphere should be automatically directed towards the pursuit of public interest and creating public value. However, on second thought, taking into consideration the reality of the world around us, it seems like a question with some deep ramifications. It is the issue of **how and to what extent a leader pursues, "Populist policies," to satisfy the short-term aspirations of the majority of the voters, versus working to pursue, "Public interest," and to create, "Public value."**

"Public interest," and, "Public value," are both very elusive concepts that have puzzled a lot of politicians, public administrators and citizens alike. Some have tried to describe the parameters of public interest by pointing out the need for seeking: fairness, reason, abidance by the law, avoiding corruption and conflict of interest and not being directed by private or partisan interests, at the very least. Meanwhile, "Public value," again a debated term, is what creates real value for the society.

In reality, are there cases of leaders who would do anything just to maintain their seat in power? Yes, there are. In a democratic system, that is why we have limited number of terms for staying in office, whether as presidents, members of Parliament, or other types of elected officials at the local levels. That is why as well, it has been observed that presidents of the United States during their second term in office are usually more courageous in choosing policies that may detract from their popularity, but that they believe are in the public interest. In 2014, Kehoe developed the term, "Terminal Logic Behavior," referring to how elected officials become much bolder during their last term in office because they no longer worry about re-election. Examples include how President George H. W. Bush sent 25 thousand troops on a humanitarian mission to Somalia one month before his Presidency ended, and how President Obama pushed through several last-minute policies before moving out of the White House.

In other developing non-democratic countries however, we find leaders often try to do whatever they can to extend their stay in office. The, "Whatever they can," may include thwarting *Coups d'Etats*, or attempts at forced removal. Actions may include changing the constitution to allow for extended and renewed terms or following populist policies to gain support at any expense, like confiscating land from the rich and distributing to the poor, or locking up businessmen until they pay up their dues to the current regime and announce their submission or metaphorically or literally getting rid of the opposition and preventing any voices of dissent.

Although there is no consensus in history, there are accounts of elected figures who actually worked to serve the public and did not go for the short-term populist policies that would guarantee their extended stay in office. Leaders like Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Ghandi top the list, but I am sure there are many more.

Elected officials need to satisfy their constituents, whether they are educated or not, illiterate or literate. However there are two important points here: one is that ethical values of the official should guide him or her towards choosing the policy option that will yield greater public value. If his or her constituents are not fully aware and are directing the official to go for a short term option with reduced public value, then it is his or her role to try to direct them, explain to them and advocate for the option that he or she believes and has evidence to indicate is the one with the higher value. The second point is that the elected official is not supposed to be working in a vacuum. The political system, including other political parties, civil society organizations, think tanks and media organizations should work in tandem to evaluate the suggested policies and present and communicate their findings to both the official and the general public. This ensures theoretically, to a

certain extent, that the elected official does not deviate from policies with high potential for creating public value. Having limited terms for elected leaders is also the lesser of the two evils. Yes, with a fixed number of renewable terms in office we find that elected officials may be more cautious in their first term compared with their last term. However, extended perpetual terms prevent citizens from holding their elected, or imposed, leaders accountable and provide no assurance that they will work for the public interest.

How can we have another Mandela or Ghandi? Do some in-depth reference checks to figure out leaders' ethical inclinations and let them operate in a democratic system with checks and balances. We all wish it was as simple as that.