Is There a Crisis in Political Leadership?

Date: Tuesday, February 4, 5:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.
Location: Osher Lifelong Learning Center, (OLLI) in Sedona
Facilitated by: Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

5:30 p.m. Welcome and Introduction
Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

5:45 p.m. Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

- What it means to be in a leadership crisis?
- Given the constraints of our two-party political system, can politicians have an independent voice?
- How has party polarization impacted the possibility of political leadership?
- What is the difference between a political representative and a leader?

6:50 p.m. Recap of discussion
What it means to be in a leadership crisis.

The focus of this Hot Topics Café is political leadership. However, there are worries about the quality of leadership in sectors other than politics. Just before the financial crisis of 2009, the public’s confidence in leadership in five significant sectors suffered a noticeable drop. In 2008, 80 percent of Americans thought there was a leadership crisis in Congress, organized religion, education, the Supreme Court, and state government. This was up from 65 percent in 2005, the first year the National Leadership Index was published by the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School.1

During the partial government shutdown in October 2013, the number of people who felt government itself was the main problem with government doubled. Sixteen percent of Americans held this view in September, and it climbed to 33 percent during the shutdown.2

Congress and Washington are often the focus of political leadership crises. However, political leadership crises are in no way limited to them. In state and municipal government there are too many examples to name, but some recent examples include:

- In 2012 Arizona State Senator Richard Miranda (D) pled guilty to wire fraud and attempted tax evasion.
- In 2013 former Arizona Representative Rick Renzi (R) was convicted of extortion, racketeering and other charges.
- In 2013 San Diego Mayor Bob Filner (D) pled guilty to charges involving sexual harassment.
- As recently as January 31, new allegations have sprung up that, despite his earlier denials, Chris Christie (R), Governor of New Jersey may have known about lane closings at the George Washington Bridge.

The examples help illustrate that political crises are not limited to Congress or Washington. It is easy to find examples of scandals in Arizona and in other states from coast to coast. The problem with corruption in politics is widespread and affects every level of government.

Many of the most important issues facing the U.S. are connected to leadership.
Given the constraints of our two-party political system, can politicians have an independent voice?

Certain factors seem to weigh against elected officials acting as independent leaders. Elected officials are often constrained by the party to which they belong.

A critical concern for most political candidates is securing support from their party in primary elections. This can constrain the degree to which they are willing to work across party boundaries and lead independently. However, many people vote based on party allegiances, so we must ask ourselves whether we want independent leaders or party leaders. If it is the latter, then it may be unfair to criticize elected officials for towing the party line.

What is the difference between a political representative and a leader?

People may be dissatisfied with politicians as leaders, as representatives, or both.

There are many types of elected officials; each type has various duties. For the most part, these duties can be straightforwardly determined and are delineated in documents that are readily available to the public. For example, members of the United States Congress have responsibilities to:

- Draft and introduce legislation
- Help constituents solve their problems
- Articulate and take positions on issues
- Educate and inform constituents about legislation
- Represent and advocate the district’s and constituents’ interests
- Campaigning, party leadership, and reelection
- Ensure that laws are administered as Congress intended
- Interact with the executive branch, interest groups and other levels of government
- Oversight of personal office

A representative’s duties are more clear-cut than those of a leader. There are many definitions and theories of leadership, but many people agree that leaders get people to do things that they would not do otherwise. By virtue of leading they chart a course and set a direction. Leaders inspire others to embrace their vision and take steps to enact it. They are known for their judgment, skill, and in the most positive frameworks, having goodwill toward those they are leading.

Political leadership has been called into question largely on the basis of moral failures of leadership. The moral failings can be identified on at least two levels. First, ordinary citizens wonder whether their elected officials are acting in the best interest of their constituents or making decisions that result in personal gain or foster party allegiance. Second, the personal conduct of our political leaders is very often considered morally reprehensible.

How has party polarization impacted the possibility of political leadership?

Party polarization has been blamed for the recent government shutdown and general government dysfunction.

In his recent State of the Union address President Obama pledged to use his executive powers to act alone to move his priorities forward. In each case, whether it was the minimum wage, health care, or clean energy, he invited Congress to take legislative action on these issues, however he did not seem optimistic about cooperation in Washington. Some may see this as a bold act of leadership, while others may see it as further dysfunction and polarization in Washington.
The “hot topics” in the Hot Topics Cafés are selected by community members representing diverse constituencies and viewpoints. We thank our committee for their participation.

**Flagstaff & Winslow**

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Coral Evans  
*Flagstaff City Council*

Jean Friedland  
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Patty Garcia  
*Coconino Community College District Governing Board, Nuestras Raíces, Raymond Educational Foundation Board, US Geological Survey*

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**Next Sedona Hot Topics Café:**  
**What Happened to the American Dream?**

**Date:** Tuesday, March 4, 2014  
**Location:** The Sedona Public Library

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**NAU’s Philosophy in the Public Interest is non partisan, and does not endorse any position with respect to the issues we discuss. Philosophy in the Public Interest is a neutral convener for civil discourse.**
“Politicians are supposed to work together to hammer out solutions for the benefit of the American people. Instead, they are too busy trying to win the argument of the day, to deliver the strongest sound bite, and to show that they are right and the other side is not only wrong, it is either ignorant or evil. How can trust possibly flourish in that environment? How can we possibly begin to have negotiations that are a win-win for the American people when our supposed statesmen have devolved into this win-lose view of politics?” 1--Jim Amos

“Where are the leaders that are willing to make the tough calls in a time of disaster? And by that, where are the leaders that are able to see the disaster of their own actions and will seek to put an immediate end to their abuse of the power of the purse? The issues the nation faces of unfettered government spending are real. It is not unheard of for a government to ruin a country through its spending habits.

So while Americans watch the events of a possible government shutdown unfold, people need to keep in mind that this problem was fixable countless times in the past. The only reason that it was not remedied earlier was that there is a severe political leadership crisis that is ongoing at the highest levels of government.” 2--Adam Bitely

“I don’t think there’s much debate the world is ensnarled in a crisis of leadership. The question becomes what do we do about it? We are still in need of hope and change – we are still in a crisis of leadership. Some of the actors may have changed seats, but the cast remains the same. This is not a democrat versus republican issue or a liberal versus conservative issue. The issue is one that extends beyond parties, philosophies and geographic boarders. The issue is simply this: we have forgotten what leadership looks like. . .Why does all this matter? Because leadership matters... Whether through malice or naïveté, those who abuse or tolerate the abuse of leadership place us all at risk. Poor leadership cripples businesses, ruins economies, destroys families, loses wars, and can bring the demise of nations. The demand for true leaders has never been greater—when society misunderstands the importance of leadership, and when the world inappropriately labels non-leaders as leaders we are all worse for the wear.” 3 --Mike Myatt

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