Politics Essay

Drawing on 'The Prince' as your source, provide a critical discussion of the characteristics necessary in political leadership.

Throughout *The Prince*, Machiavelli sets forward a selection of qualities for strong and consistent political leadership, which together combine to create an overall picture of a successful ruler in the harsh, volatile world of politics. Machiavelli identifies many radically different qualities, ranging from natural intuition to successfully dealing with foreign conflicts. <u>This essay will explore Machiavelli's arguments for some of these qualities and place them in the context of other political thinkers' theories for successful rule and the associated moral stances, and explore whether Machiavelli is a realist commentator or not</u>. **It will argue that often Machiavelli's views of leadership were accurate and can be seen in politics today**.

A primary quality outlined in *The Prince* is the need for a political leader to strike a balance between objectively morally good and bad actions to ensure that the outcome is consistently good. Machiavelli described this ability as *virtú*, meaning the ability to take actions that are not outwardly morally good, but have a beneficial wider impact. It also means that the ruler's morals are flexible. Machiavelli tells De' Medici that **'it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong', clearly indicating that a ruler wishing to remain in power must be willing to take immoral stances, breaking their promises and values at times (Machiavelli, 2016, p.50). However,** this example alone does not explain how morally bad actions can have positive outcomes. Machiavelli also mentions how lives '[are] so far distant from how [they] ought to [be lived]', suggesting that morality is an unrealistic and unachievable goal (Machiavelli, 2016, p.50). This **appears** to be a rejection of the works of political theorists such as Plato and Aristotle, who tried to work out what would constitute a perfect society in their major works *The Republic* and *Politics* respectively. **However**, this dismissal is criticised by Berlin, who argued that 'neither *fortuna* nor *neccessita* dominates the whole of existence' (Berlin, 1972, p.38). This opposes Machiavelli's arguments by suggesting that human work and innovation push society forward and allow it to change rather than action only occurring due to fortune or necessity. Indeed, this can be observed

throughout history; for example, the Liberal government's social reforms between 1906 and 1914 allowed those in extreme poverty to be able to afford to miss work due to illness, and the unemployed could get help finding work. If an eye was not cast to how society could be bettered, then these reforms could not have been implemented.

Despite Machiavelli's criticism of Aristotle, his work can be seen as partially indebted to Aristotle's classic text, *Politics*. For example, Aristotle said that 'the virtue of the magistrate must be different from the virtue of the citizen' (Aristotle, 2015, pp.35–36). While this was clearly not an argument in favour of separate moral codes for the political elite and the wider population, it does suggest that there must be separate spheres of virtue**;** they must exhibit separate sets of values. Thayer goes some way to explaining the reasoning behind this, saying that 'while the individual is subject to ethical and moral laws, the State, being impersonal, is responsible to no laws, since it is its own lawmaker' (Thayer, 1892, p.484), thus suggesting that the role of the state involves defining morality for its subjects, therefore separating it from public virtues.

The view of having separate moral codes for politicians and others is flatly rejected by Noam Chomsky, who, upon discussing the political fallout of 9/11, spoke of a 'principle of universality; if an action is right (or wrong) for others, then it is right (or wrong) for us' (Chomsky, 2002). While Chomsky suggests that actions must be uniform across society, he does not explicitly refer to the political sphere. However, this clearly refutes the principle of political *virtú*, strongly condoning a uniform moral code for all society and all situations.

The quality of political leadership can also, according to Machiavelli, be reflected in the image the ruler presents of themselves to their population. He professes that a successful ruler must not be overly generous or else risk 'unduly [weighing] down his people' (Machiavelli, 2016, p.52), thus implying that generosity could risk angering people who might then demand more or react against a leader who is forced to go back on spending promises. It also suggests that the political actions of a ruler can often be distorted or viewed differently, or even oppositely, by civilians. This could be demonstrated by the Dutch Revolt of 1568, where regent Margaret of Parma gave in to some of the demands of the Confederates who wanted religious freedoms. This affordance of liberality resulted in the outbreak of the Iconoclastic Fury where churches were ransacked and chaos ensued (Parker, 1977, pp.68–117).

Hobbes also looked at the relationship between the state and its subjects, instead arguing that by agreeing to be part of a society, subjects give away part of their liberty for the safety and protection of the state (Hobbes, pp.196–210), thereby implying that the state is to be trusted to rule fairly and for the benefit of society.

In order to address the necessity for a leader to not be overly generous, Machiavelli presents the need for a ruler to not only be able to exert brute force, but also to show cunning. He used the metaphor of having aspects of both the lion and the fox, because 'the lion cannot defend himself against snares and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves' (Machiavelli, 2016, p.57). This indicates that the skillset of a good political leader requires the ability to act in different capacities in different situations. It also implies a need to dominate advisors around them. This could be outwardly demonstrated in a modern context by Prime Minister John Major's announcement of a leadership contest in 1995. After Major beat John Redwood, therefore successfully being re-elected, his critics within the Conservative Party were forced to back down. The lion in Machiavelli's analogy would not have noticed the mood of dissatisfaction in the Party over Major's leadership, while the fox would not have been bold enough to call the election. Berlin argued that this balance of skills would be modified in different circumstances, and that in times of peace and stability rulers could 'afford virtue- chastity, affability, mercy, humanity, liberality, honour' but when this was not the situation then less virtuous qualities need to be utilised instead to restore peace and stability (Berlin, 1972, pp.51–52).

Machiavelli **emphasises** the need for effective political rulers to minimise the number of friends and close advisors that they have. He speaks of how those who are initially opponents of the ruler can be persuaded to come into the inner circle if they 'need assistance to support themselves'. The ruler can give this to them and then they will always be in their debt (Machiavelli, 2016, pp.67–68). On the other hand, Machiavelli describes those who begin as allies to be less trustworthy because 'it will be impossible to satisfy them' (Machiavelli, 2016, pp.67–68), thus connoting an expectation from them for the ruler to produce the ideal society that Machiavelli so strongly opposes throughout his treatise. However, Skinner mused on the idea that this might have been a passage intended to favour himself with De' Medici, saying that it had an 'element of special pleading' to it to reinforce his suitability for a senior role within De' Medici's court (Skinner, 1981,

Example used to apply the theory to a modern-day situation to show the relevance of Machiavelli today.

Verb 'emphasises' used to show the importance of this point.

p.25). **This makes Machiavelli's assertions about advisors less convincing, and most modern-day democracies do not adhere to this view, as exemplified by the UK cabinet which contains at least 29 individuals (ministers) with advisory roles (GOV.co.uk, 2018).**

This is reflected in Machiavelli's discussions around acting within the international community and responding to wars between foreign powers. He argued that a ruler must engage in conflicts between other states in order to maintain their global prestige. If they do not engage then the ruler's region may 'fall prey to the conqueror' next, and the losing forces 'will not harbour you because you did not…court his fate' (Machiavelli, 2016, p.71). This implies that a nation will be weakened on the international stage by non-intervention, and this could be demonstrated by Belgium and Luxembourg's positions of neutrality in World War One, which Germany invaded en-route to an invasion of France. Here, the aforementioned nations that did not want to take part in any conflict were treated just in the way Machiavelli had predicted; being invaded nonetheless and forced into a conflict through which they were weakened. Machiavelli's views are challenged by realist theories in international politics. Waltz argued that 'self-help is necessarily the principle of action', suggesting that states must never rely on any other states to act in an expected way because they all place their nation's interests first. Therefore, all nations must defend themselves before any others (Waltz, cited by Dunne and Schmidt, 2017, p.111). While this supports Machiavelli by suggesting that you cannot expect the victor or loser to treat you well for your neutrality, it also suggests that you cannot expect an ally to treat you well in the fallout of the conflict regardless of your role in it. This could be evidenced by the USA's refusal to back Britain in the Suez Crisis of 1956 despite them having been Allies in World War Two.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli also argues the case for a ruler needing to rely on their own intuition and only consult a handful of advisors, by stating that 'when everyone may tell you the truth, respect for you abates' (Machiavelli, 2016, pp. 75-76). Here, Machiavelli clearly suggests that a political leader must avoid risking their authority by allowing advisors to become too comfortable with them, and by letting everyone know their inner plans. **This gives credence to the idea** that a ruler that is known too well will lose authority because their weaknesses and methodology for work will become clearer and could thus be exploited. This idea was carried further by Arendt, who maintained that not only is politics a theatricality to put on

Criticality demonstrated through the evaluation of the situation.

Example demonstrates strength of critical stance.

Language of criticality and the writer's 'voice'.

appearance for outsiders, but it actually 'constitutes reality' (Arendt, cited by Brown, 2004, p.162), which implies that Machiavelli's ideas about leaders revealing little of themselves even to their closest advisors must also be true to an even larger extent with the wider public. They must put on a display of strength and ability. If this 'constitutes reality', then the perception of politics must also shape political developments.

More important than any other factor, however, Machiavelli counts *fortuna*, or fortune, as the most important factor in a ruler's success. In fact, he weighted fortune as the 'arbiter of one-half of our actions' (Machiavelli, 2016, p.79), heavily implying that despite his confident assessment of necessary qualities of leadership, some things are beyond control. In essence, he is saying that no matter how prepared a politician may be or how simple something appears to be, the way events turn out cannot be predicted. Machiavelli goes on to discuss how rulers should 'beat and ill-use her [meaning fortune]' because it is 'better to be adventurous than cautious' (Machiavelli, 2016, p.81). This suggests that it is best to act impulsively, acknowledging that though external factors may affect plans, a ruler will be better off if they take risks and prepare for complications. Machiavelli compares *fortuna* to a woman, who has received criticism. McIntosh described this metaphor as an example of Machiavelli '[blending] realism and unrealism' (McIntosh, 2004, p. 43), implying that Machiavelli, oft described as a realist, was not entirely grounded in the truth. In doing so, McIntosh brings doubt to some of Machiavelli's treatise, giving currency to those who argue that Machiavelli was writing to further his job prospects by exaggerating reality. While this interpretation has some merit, Machiavelli's use of analogy is not a frequent occurrence throughout the text, and so this is questionable.

Throughout his treatise, Machiavelli sets out various qualities that are necessary for effective political leadership. He emphasises how a political leader must act out of *virtú* rather than virtue, not be overly generous, display qualities of both the fox and the lion and to accept and embrace *fortuna*. Within this essay, these qualities have been shown to be valuable to politicians in some historical and some contemporary contexts. However, Machiavelli has attracted some criticism for promoting immoral actions in rulers and for being overly unrealistic in some of his analogies. *The Prince* also put forward the case for a multitude of other political qualities, such as needing to appear cruel in order to be kind (Machiavelli, 2016, pp.54-56) and for rulers to always have war at the forefront of their

Topic sentence has a clear link to title.

Clear, succinct conclusion that follows a standard essay style structure (see Ch 1, Getting started on your essay)

minds (Machiavelli, 2016, pp.48-49), and these qualities were not explored here. This essay also does not delve deeply into feminist critiques of the treatise, nor has it explored the interpretations of Machiavelli's text as being either a satire or a sabotage to weaken De' Medici's position. Despite this, this essay analyses some of the political qualities discussed in *The Prince* and finds that many of them are not only convincing political thoughts for the 16th century, but also in a contemporary context.

Bibliography

Aristotle, (2015), *Politics*, Leipzig, Amazon Distribution GmbH, pp.35–36

Berlin, I., (1972) 'The Originality of Machiavelli' in Gilmore, M. (ed.), *Studies on Machiavelli*, Florence, G. C. Sansoni Editor, pp.25–79

Brown, W., (2004) 'Renaissance Italy: Machiavelli' in Falco, M. (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Machiavelli*, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 162

Chomsky, (2002) 'Terror and Just War', Available at: https://chomsky.info/20020702/, (accessed 31st January 2018)

Dunne, T and Schmidt, B, (2017) 'Realism' in Baylis, J, Smith, S and Owens (eds), P, *The Globalization of World Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, p.111

GOV.co.uk, *Ministers*, Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/ministers, (accessed 3rd February 2018)

Machiavelli, N., (2016), *The Prince*, Great Britain, Enhanced Media, pp.50–58, 66–72, 75–76, 79–81

Parker, G., (1977), *The Dutch Revolt*, London, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 68–117

Skinner, Q., (1981) *Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 25

Thayer, W., (1892), 'Machiavelli's Prince' in *International Journal of Ethics Vol. 2, No. 4,* Chicago, pp.476–492

Diana and Tom's comments

This essay is thoroughly researched and provides an engaging and sophisticated line of argument. It shows a good knowledge of the topic, takes a historical document (The Prince) and shows its relevance to politics in a range of different contexts, both historical and modern-day, using secondary theorists. Organisation is signposted throughout with linking words and good use of topic sentences. There is good evidence of criticality, with sources used to build arguments, and evaluation and significance of arguments stated clearly.

It could be improved by tying the themes together more obviously, and the contemporary examples could be cited from a secondary source to aid flow.