

Charismatic Leadership, and Its Detrimental Role in American Presidential Elections

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Abstract: Presidential leadership in the U.S. is very much dependent on the seemingly rational support from voters, which can be obtained through the presentation of charisma. This paper delves into the compelling role of charismatic leadership in shaping the outcomes of American presidential elections, focusing on the charismatic appeals of John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama. By analyzing their distinctive campaigns and contextualizing their charisma within historical and socio-political frameworks as well as pre-existing works on charismatic leadership cross the globe, the study illuminates the intricate interplay between individual magnetism, strategic messaging, and collective resonance. While charisma emerges as a potent campaign tool, its impact is multifaceted and contingent upon contextual factors, making it a complex force in the electoral process. Through this analysis of charismatic leadership, this paper aims to understand how presidents in the US can be re-evaluated. The paper conclude that charisma played a pivotal role in the campaigns and presidencies of Kennedy, Reagan, and Obama, each leveraging their unique charismatic qualities, such as physical attractiveness, authoritative aura, inspirational rhetoric, and the ability to provide collective coping mechanisms.

Keywords: Charismatic Leadership, Presidential Elections, Campaign Strategy

1. Introduction

Presidential elections in the United States have always been a complicated event, not only due to their importance but rather the numerous factors that can alternate the results. Voters do not solely base their choices on rationality, or the policy changes the candidate suggested. Indeed, the purpose of presidential campaigns, as they slowly came into modern use due to the partisanship that emerged within the elections, is to establish a connection between the candidate and the wider public. What has been deemed essential throughout these campaigns, or the efforts to portray oneself as a worthy candidate, is the role of charisma, or more specifically, charismatic leadership, as the U.S. president.

However, charisma cannot be measured quantitatively. Even those who are usually universally acknowledged as charismatic, like Gandhi, or Hitler, there exists little similarity in their style of communication or presentation. Therefore, to understand charisma, it seems lacking to simply analyze the individual supposedly possessing the charisma, but rather the bigger context they exist in.

Weber identified the presence of charisma in political leadership at an early stage. In addition to the three types of authority he delineated—legal, traditional, and charismatic—he underscored the significance of charismatic authority. The classical Weberian definition of charisma lays its emphasis

its inherent individuality, as it claims that charisma is “a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers of qualities” [1]. Yet Weber’s later words implied that followers are ultimately the ones perceiving charisma, as on the basis of these qualities “the individual concerned is treated as a leader”. In the more modern studies of charisma, specifically its role in the political sphere, Shamir highlighted that “most recent writers about charisma greed that charisma should not be defined in terms of the personal qualities of the leader, but rather in terms of people’s perceptions and responses to the leader.” Charisma, other than a personality trait, is now commonly regarded as more of a relationship. since it “exists only if followers say it does or followers behave in a specific way” [2]. Reasonably, charisma can only be studied and understood when the group the charisma is subjected to is also studied.

Therefore, many scholars, later on, develop their studies on charismatic leadership based on social factors. House, Spangler & Woycke, for instance, believed that charismatic leadership is when “followers become less motivated by self-interest and more motivated to serve the interest of the large collective” [2]. Such seems to defeat the purpose of an election, as there lacks a consensus among the public on what is the collective interest, making the candidates free to define the collective themselves, thereby overlooking the satisfaction of their followers' individual needs.

The strategy, therefore, is to lead followers to succumb to the common goal created. It is indeed reasonable that supporters of charismatic leaders frequently make significant sacrifices, dedicate themselves to challenging or seemingly unreachable goals, and attain results that exceed initial expectations or what was considered achievable [3].

This paper is going to dive deeper into the impact of charisma, in elections of presidents that are mainly known for their charisma, namely John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama. Most importantly, this paper is going to understand the artificiality of the charisma present in these leaders, and how they favor their campaign.

2. The Essence of Charisma and Its Manifestation

When examining charisma in the context of American presidential elections, it's vital to consider the influence of partisanship, a fundamental and distinctive element of these elections. To gain a deeper understanding of charisma's role, it's valuable to draw parallels with instances of charismatic leadership in Europe, such as during the era of Nazism, where a charismatic leader could guide the public towards extreme ideologies. As a result, one might reasonably conclude that partisanship presents voters with pre-established choices, namely the conservative Republican Party or the liberal Democratic Party. In this context, the impact of personal charisma may appear to be less significant, as party ideologies hold greater sway in shaping the outcomes of presidential elections.

However, as pointed out by Shamir, "when the available voting options represent less distinct or extreme ideological stances, preferences in partisan elections may not solely mirror a voter's ideological positions. Rather, they might reflect the perceived charisma of the leaders vying for election." [4]. This suggests that when there is a lack of clarity surrounding either the existing state of affairs or proposed policies, voters may lean towards relying on their subjective assessment of charismatic leadership when casting their votes.

Scholars have established a connection between the belief in a candidate's charisma and the voters' personal interpretation of the prevailing political environment, particularly in times of crises. Notably, the emergence of "highly charismatic leaders often coincides with periods of profound national crises" [5].

Examining the 2004 presidential election as an example, Merolla, Ramos & Zechmeister identified a potential source of this sense of crisis—terrorism [5]. The period leading up to the election was marked by numerous news reports hinting at Al Qaeda's intentions to orchestrate an attack on the

United States. Given the extensive coverage by mass media on a national scale, many American citizens in the run-up to the 2004 election perceived the possibility of imminent terrorist attacks as a genuine crisis.

Presidential campaigns, therefore, would manipulate such use of the media to enhance discourse that favors a certain candidate. Again, looking at the 2004 presidential election, it was clear that Bush's campaign, despite the taboo circling around the 9-11 event, purposefully advertised and reminded the public of the tragedy [5]. Takala et al. also emphasized the role of mass media, as it "both create and maintain learning, thereby influencing our thinking and action [6].

Nevertheless, the public fear and uncertainty that arises in any era of crisis can lead to the public's tendency to seek a charismatic leader, who may present themselves as a "savior" or a "frontrunner" that can rescue the nation from either actual or imagined danger.

Such mentality to seek an individually powerful leader could be equated to a longing for transformational leadership. Many charismatic presidents that are remembered in U.S. history are also bold, or at least they put forward or claimed to put forward during their campaign transformational policies. Charisma is deemed rather necessary when the leader concerned is attempting something transformational. As Takala et al. mentioned, charisma plays a vital role in this type of leadership as the ability to "activate, motivate, develop, and authorize followers" are essential in initiating nationwide change [6].

3. Understanding Charisma: Kennedy, Reagan and Obama

3.1. John F. Kennedy, and His Magnetic Appeal

The 1960 election stands as a remarkable phenomenon in American history, characterized by a multitude of unprecedented elements. Significantly, the groundbreaking presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, which marked the first-ever televised presidential debate, had a profound impact on the outcome of the election. Kennedy's natural comfort in front of the camera, coupled with his confidence, stood in stark contrast to Nixon's apparent hesitancy, resulting in Kennedy's perceived victory in the nationwide televised debates. Kennedy's charismatic appeal was further heightened by his striking good looks, photogenic demeanor, and energetic presence, effectively overshadowing Nixon's deep understanding of key political matters. The immediate aftermath of the initial debate saw a pivotal shift, with Kennedy gaining a slight edge in the polls, a departure from Nixon's earlier popularity as the anticipated winner.

Murray Kempton, in his analysis, attributed Kennedy's victory to a distinctive quality—the projection of sexual appeal through charismatic leadership. He eloquently described Kennedy as conveying a message to women, as if he were inclined to walk alongside them "when the mad river meets the still water," hinting at a charismatic allure that extended beyond the political realm [7]. However, Kennedy's appeal wasn't solely hinged on physical attractiveness. Emerging from the post-World War II era and following Eisenhower's storied eight-year tenure, Kennedy's entry into the presidential race was marked by his youthfulness and his privileged background as the scion of a wealthy family. His financial resources effectively paved the way through the preliminary rounds, culminating in his position as the Democratic Party's nominee.

Yet, Kennedy's charisma wasn't confined to personal attributes alone. His strategic positioning within the complex political landscape preceding the election played a pivotal role. A defining transformative factor in Kennedy's campaign emerged through his ambitious "We Choose the Moon" speech, delivered against the backdrop of the Cold War. Promising to put an American astronaut on the moon by the end of the 1960s, Kennedy employed captivating rhetoric that invoked imagery-rich language, weaving words such as "explore," "stars," "desert," "disease," and "ocean depths" [8]. This

skillful rhetoric, combined with the articulation of a unifying national goal, accentuated the unprecedented nature of his leadership.

Kennedy's charisma was further underscored in his iconic inaugural address, wherein he famously implored, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." This resounding emphasis on collective well-being over personal pursuits highlighted his distinct leadership approach. Ultimately, it was the interplay of Kennedy's intrinsic charisma, strategic messaging, and the resonance of his collective vision that contributed to his triumph in the 1960 election.

3.2. Ronald Reagan, the Dictating Savior

Upon initial observation, Ronald Reagan's charisma is undeniably apparent—a former Hollywood actor, he possesses a magnetic physical allure that inherently exudes charisma. However, what truly sets him apart from the sexual appeal associated with Kennedy is his unique ability to connect his charismatic leadership with public rhetoric, creating a distinct and compelling aura.

Lundskow takes this notion further by asserting that Reagan wields a charismatic authority that demands submission from the public, introducing an authoritarian dimension to his appeal. According to Lundskow, Reagan's charisma relies heavily on an "emotional appeal," evident during his presidency when he maintained considerable personal popularity despite low job approval ratings [9]. This underscores the notion that "charismatic status hinges on unquestioning emotional dedication to the leader's persona," irrespective of apparent unmet outcomes.

Amidst the surge of liberalism in the American public sphere, Reagan positioned himself as the crusader against societal immorality—a strategic stance that resonated effectively, given that 80 percent of citizens felt the nation was headed in the "wrong direction." To address what he deemed a "wave of hedonism" characterized by drug use, entertainment corruption, and LGBTQ advocacy, Reagan advocated for a brand of political moralism that appealed to conservative Americans by combating perceived evils.

Similar to Kennedy, Reagan's campaign unfolded in the context of the ongoing Cold War, necessitating a heightened portrayal of the Soviet Union as the ultimate adversary to unify the nation politically. Reagan vigorously emphasized the stark contrast of communism's otherness and did not shy away from leveraging rumors or partial truths to bolster his assertions. Despite potential factual inaccuracies, Lundskow contends that the "perceived charismatic strength" or "relative credibility of the presenter" could render Reagan's statements remarkably convincing to his followers [9].

Hence, Reagan's distinctive charismatic essence played a pivotal role in propelling him to a resounding victory in the election, securing a landslide win over the incumbent, Jimmy Carter. Earning the highest number of electoral votes in the history of non-incumbent candidates, Reagan's triumph can be attributed to the amalgamation of his inherent appeal and his meticulously crafted campaign positioning. Even though his presidency was shadowed by economic challenges, Reagan's enduring legacy centers not on practical achievements but on his enduring personal charisma.

3.3. Barack Obama, the Father Figure America Needed

"Obama offers that 'something' – call it charm, charisma, a positive vision for the future, a voice for empowerment, a role model for youth – Obama has 'it.'"

The election of Barack Obama was a seismic event, not solely due to its historic significance in elevating racial minorities to the highest echelons of U.S. politics, but also owing to the personal magnetism he wielded over his followers. As asserted by Takala et al., Obama's exceptionally visible and successful campaign cast him as an influential leader who kindled hope on a global scale.

Foremost among Obama's sources of charisma is his remarkable eloquence—a gift that makes him a captivating and compelling speaker. His speeches, even when laden with seemingly superficial phrases like "yes we can," carry an undeniable emotional resonance. Furthermore, the deliberate vagueness inherent in his aspirational calls for change, as noted by Blign & Kohles, worked to his advantage [2]. Slogans such as "change we need" possessed a broadness that attracted a diverse array of followers, each yearning for their unique version of change.

In a manner reminiscent of Reagan and Kennedy, Obama's ascent is set against a backdrop of crisis—the Great Recession. Blign & Kohles contend that the timing, extent, and ambiguity of this crisis, unfolding dramatically in the lead-up to the election, provided the crucial elements that ignited the spark of Obama's charisma, propelling him into the White House [2]. The uncertainty swirling around the economic turmoil bolstered the appeal of Obama's campaign promises for change. Additionally, his differentiation from the incumbent President Bush, who was plagued by record-low approval ratings, effectively linked his opponent, John McCain, to the Bush administration. This strategic maneuver played substantially in Obama's favor. Confronted by such a dire crisis, Obama's rise can be seen as a collective coping mechanism—a salve for a nation in distress.

Thus, Obama's charisma can be best characterized as "paternalistic." He exudes a sense of safeguarding and nurturing his followers, drawing strength from his firmness, benevolence, and capacity for forgiveness [5]. In contrast to the martial nature of charisma seen in Kennedy and Reagan, suited for the confrontations of the Cold War against an archenemy like communism and the Soviet Union, Obama presented himself as a fatherly figure—compassionate yet unwavering. He positioned himself as a guide, ready to lead his followers out of the throes of economic recession and towards a brighter future. This distinct form of charisma, coupled with the tumultuous context and his carefully crafted campaign strategy, contributed to Obama's electoral triumph and his enduring legacy.

4. Discussion

Charisma, either as an inherent personality trait or a designed political strategy, has deemed itself crucial in the campaigns of Kennedy, Reagan and Obama. While in Kennedy, one can witness an appeal circling around physical attractiveness, from his youthful vigor, Hollywood-like charm, and eloquent oratory; in Reagan, one can see a similar physical attraction other than the authoritarian nature of his charismatic attraction. His charismatic authority required submission and was marked by an authoritative aura that, in part, led to his decisive victory over an incumbent president. The most recent president, Obama, presents a more fatherly appeal marked by his inspirational rhetoric, empowerment, and his role as a symbol of change and hope. Similar to Kennedy and Reagan, Obama emerged amidst a backdrop of crisis—the Great Recession—using his charismatic strength to offer a collective coping mechanism. To grasp the common traits among these three presidents and their election campaigns, it's crucial to take into account Deluga's study, which establishes a link between narcissistic behavior, charismatic leadership, and performance ratings [10]. While narcissism may appear negative, given its potential to distort one's perception of reality, the belief in self-love and self-assertion can help candidates present themselves as quasi-superhuman figures capable of changing the course of history, eliciting obedience and support from their followers.

There is a commonality in charismatic leaders, especially among Kennedy, Reagan, and Obama. All of them advocate for some sort of change, despite being in different forms of crisis, or at least pretend to be so and highlight their capability of leading the public toward a more positive future. What is truly appealing in all of these cases is rather not the ideas they put forward, but the ways they present these ideas. In these elections, one can observe the overpowering effects of strategic charismatic leadership, which is the manipulation of personality traits and political ideologies in political campaigns to support the presence of political charisma, over the rationality behind

presidential elections. Charismatic leadership, due to its vague and interactive nature, gives rise to presidential candidates who are skilled at campaigning.

There are limitations inherent to this study that needs to be acknowledged. The analysis majorly focuses on a select group of three presidents, which may not comprehensively represent the entirety of American presidential elections throughout history. Furthermore, the study draws extensively from existing literature and historical accounts, rather than being rooted in statistical scientific studies. As a result, the findings might be influenced by subjective interpretations and potential biases present in the reviewed sources. Additionally, the examination centers on past presidential campaigns and elections, without accounting for the evolving dynamics and unique circumstances that arise in each election cycle. Given the dynamic and ever-changing nature of presidential elections, the historical context might not necessarily provide a reliable blueprint for future electoral outcomes. Thus, while this study offers valuable insights into the charisma of specific presidents, its limitations underscore the need for a more comprehensive and empirically grounded approach to fully understand the intricate interplay between charisma and American presidential elections.

5. Conclusions

This study concludes that charismatic leadership, despite its variations specific to different personnels, is an important presidential campaigning strategy and plays a pivotal part in the success of key charismatic leaders in the U.S. like John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama. Although charisma can significantly contribute to a candidate's success in winning elections, the subsequent election results can also shape how the presidents are perceived.

There are fewer and fewer recent studies that tackle the issue of charismatic leadership. This void is particularly striking with the concurrent surge of populism, which has, in many ways, shifted the focal point of public opinion from an emphasis on charismatic figures to a shared ideological narrative. Considering the two recent presidents, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, the era of powerful leaders seems to have ended. The growing extremity of bi-partisanship diverts the public's attention from individual appeal but rather the nature of their overall ideology. The evolving dynamics of modern politics have led to a shifting paradigm where charismatic leadership's prominence seems to wane. The appeal of a singular charismatic figure is seemingly giving way to a collective ideological undercurrent that resonates across a polarized society. The dichotomy between Trump and Biden, emblematic of contrasting ideological stances, serves as a testament to this transition. This emerging landscape prompts intriguing questions about the apparent "disappearance" of charismatic leadership and its profound implications for the forthcoming panorama of presidential elections. Delving deeper into this realm, it becomes pertinent to explore the underlying factors contributing to this perceptible shift. Scholars in the future can investigate if the increasing complexity of modern political issues, the rapid dissemination of information through digital platforms, or the evolving expectations of an electorate are demanding more nuanced and systemic solutions.

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