DOES THE MESSENGER MATTER? THE ROLE OF CHARISMA IN PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

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The first link in any causal chain between the White House and influencing public opinion begins with the president. Every president is a unique individual, of course, and there is perhaps no subject that receives more space in the press than the personal characteristics of the president. The press is not alone in its emphasis on the personal in politics, however. Voters frequently focus on the personal characteristics of candidates rather than their issue stands when deciding whom to support.

Political commentators are quick to credit to presidents' personal qualities for both the successes and failures in achieving public support. They may be inspirational or passionless, empathetic or insulated, articulate or awkward, statesmen or crass politicians. There may be little consensus on these descriptions, however. Attributions vary according to the ideologies of the commentator. In addition, different analysts emphasize different ends of the same dimension. They may describe presidents as confident or arrogant, prudent or timid, compassionate or condescending, reserved or callous, responsive or pandering, dignified or regal, warm or corny, decisive or rigid, inspirational or slick.

Such commentary is based on the implicit assumption that personal qualities matter to presidential leadership, especially to public leadership. The strength with which the assumption of the importance of personal qualities is held seems to be in inverse proportion to the evidence in support of it.

In this article, I examine the impact of what could be the most powerful, and is certainly the most elusive, of personal qualities – charisma – on the president's ability to obtain public support. It is common to hear successful figures described as "charismatic" - or lacking in charisma. Indeed, charisma is one of the most commonly employed concepts in Western culture.[1] It is offered as an explanation for the "magnetic" attractiveness of presidents, preachers, and movie stars in particular and the emotionally charged aspects of social interaction in general. Its use has been extended to labeling perfume, shirts, songs, and even sheets and towels. But is the concept of charisma useful in explaining the president's public leadership? Do presidents to whom we attribute charisma evoke unique responses from the public, making their leadership more effective?

THE CONCEPT OF CHARISMA

The concept of charisma is taken from the idiom of early Christianity. It is a Greek word meaning gift of grace, used in two letters of St. Paul to describe the Holy Spirit ("Romans," Chapter 12 and "1 Corinthians," Chapter 12). Rudolf Sohm (1892) first employed the term in social science literature in his 1892 analysis of the transformation of the primitive Christian community into the Roman Catholic Church, emphasizing the "charismatic institution" and referring to the gift of grace, the possession of pneuma by a religiously inspired individual. Of course, a large number of contemporary fundamentalist Christians are termed "charismatic," as are the leaders of religious movements, ranging from James Jones to Oral Roberts.

It is with the use of the concept to understand politics, however, that is of interest to us in our efforts to understand the public leadership of presidents, and it was Max Weber who gave the term political relevance. He argued that the phenomenon of charisma was universal, although most common in the religious realm, and that it, along with the rational-legal and the traditional, was one of three pure types of legitimate authority (1968a, 212-301; 1968c, 1112, 941-1211). Weber attached great importance to charisma, and he saw it as "the great revolutionary force," especially in traditionalist periods (1968a, 245; see also 1968b, 1117).[2]

In general, Weber is ambiguous on just what charismatic qualities are. He did not make clear whether charisma was a quality possessed by leaders independent of society or a quality dependent upon its recognition by followers. On the one hand, he argues that "What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority." The perceptions of followers are ultimately based on performance, and if success eludes the leader for long, his or her charismatic authority will disappear. Charismatic leaders must continually prove themselves, making their authority naturally unstable (1968a, 242; 1968b, 1112-1114).

Conversely, Weber also asserts that "as a rule, charisma is a highly individual quality" (1968b, 1113; see also pp. 1111-1112). He defined charisma as a

> certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of

> divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader (1968a, 241).

He refers to those “truly endowed with charisma” (1968a, 247), and discusses at length the transformation of “pure” charisma (1968a, 246-254; 1968c, 1121-1148). Thus, Weber ends up emphasizing personality despite his earlier disclaimer.

Weber is not alone in his contradictions regarding the basis of charisma. Willner, for example, maintains at one point that charisma is more perception than personality. “It is not what the leader is but what people see the leader as that counts in generating the charismatic relationship” (1984, 14-15). A few pages later, however, she argues that “the prime precipitant of political charisma must be the element of the leader himself or his leadership. Some attributes or actions of the leader, some combination of attributes and actions, and/or some mode of presenting these to the public serves to catalyze charismatic perceptions” (1984, 60).

Scholars since Weber have equated the charismatic in politics with a variety of phenomena. According to James MacGregor Burns, the term charisma has a

> number of different but overlapping meanings: leaders’ magical qualities; an emotional bond between leader and led; dependence on a father figure by the masses; popular assumption that a leader is powerful, omniscient, and virtuous; imputation of enormous supernatural power to leaders (or secular power, or both); and simply popular support for a leader that verges on love.

Indeed, the term has been used in such a varied manner that Burns concludes that, “It is impossible to restore the word to analytic duty” (1978, 243-244).

Yet, there is a need to deal with the nature of the relationship between popular leaders and their followers. Thus, reliance on the concept is widespread. Burns, for example, uses “heroic leadership” to mean “belief in leaders because of their personage alone, aside from tested capacities, experience, or stand on issues; faith in the leaders' capacity to overcome obstacles and crises; readiness to grant leaders the powers to handle crises; mass support for such leaders expressed directly” (1978, 244). Another author might well have used “charisma” in place of “heroic leadership.”

The circularity of defining charisma as being perceived as charismatic diminishes its utility and reduces the concept of charisma to public relations campaigns. It certainly begs the question of whether there is such a characteristic as charisma and whether it has an impact on others.

For our purposes, charisma refers to a personal quality or qualities of leaders that induces large segments of the public to support them. (Our focus is on relations with the mass public and not with a small entourage of personal aides or a small sect or cult of devoted followers.) These qualities may best be described as a form of personal magnetism. Lindholm, for example, argues that “magnetic quality” “is the essence of charisma” (1990, 7), and Aberbach declares that charismatic leaders possess “magnetic power” (1996, 16; see also 7).

THE SEARCH FOR CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

Do some presidents succeed in leading the public because they possess or are perceived as possessing charisma? For us to conclude that a president has benefited from charisma, we must find evidence of a charismatic response by the public. If we find such

evidence, we may pursue the nature of charismatic leadership by inquiring what is it in the leader that makes people willing to follow and under what conditions are leaders most likely to evoke charismatic responses?

Interestingly, scholars have focused on these last two questions while ignoring the prior, and most important, question of whether the support some leaders have enjoyed was the result of their charisma. Weber did not explicitly deal with it. For the most part, he takes for granted the nature of the appeal of the charismatic (Weber 1968c, xxii) and does not consider alternative explanations for what he views as public responses to charisma (see, for example, Cohen 1972; Berger 1963). This assumption is even more common in subsequent analyses.

It is not unusual for authors to explain the historical significance of notable political figures entirely in terms of their charismatic qualities or to explain the success of movements such as Nazism and Bolshevism with the personal appeal of charismatic leaders. These explanations often substitute for more comprehensive analyses and preempt the search for alternative explanations (a point nicely made in Spinrad 1991).

There are many possible explanations for the rise of leaders, and manifestations of popularity cannot be taken at face value as evidence of special qualities of leaders. The issues with which a leader is associated and the grievances a leader seeks to right; the manner in which a leader proposes to deal with issues; the time a leader chooses for making these issues and grievances the passionate concern of those whom he thinks will be his followers; the way a leader exploits a political environment; the use of propaganda techniques; and so on. Any of these factors may be more important than personality (see, for example, Ratnam, 1964; Cohen, 1972).

Authors often present the importance of charismatic leadership in nonfalsifiable terms. For example, Schweitzer argues that John F. Kennedy was charismatic although most people did not recognize it. Hitler was yet another charismatic leader who followers managed to miss, at least at first (1984, 6, 8).

Other authors find charismatic leadership waxes and wanes. Apter (1968, 763) argues that Nkrumah had it for certain years and then lost it. Moreover, Nkrumah's charisma applied only to a small band of followers who accepted his hortatory language. Fagen (1965), after examining the charisma of Fidel Castro, argues that an individual may be capable of generating a charismatic response in one context but may not succeed in doing so in another. Aberbach (1996, 2-3) agrees, contending that a wide range of leaders, including Napoleon, Lenin, Lincoln, Churchill, Hitler, and Gandhi, lacked charisma and then suddenly acquired it.

Taking a somewhat different approach, Tucker (1968, 744; 1981, 95-96) argues for a “situational charisma,” where a leader of “non-messianic tendency” evokes a charismatic response simply because of being in position in a time of acute distress. For example, both Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, he argues, evoked charismatic responses from their publics during the dark hours of World War II. However, both lost this response in better times. Similarly, Madsen and Snow (1991, 21-23) argue that a particular leader receives a charismatic response mostly as a result of being in the right place at right time and to being able to project a dramatic and positive impression of the capacity to lead. Aberbach agrees, declaring that “crisis creates charisma.” Churchill, for example, was only charismatic when his personality and the needs of the people were in harmony during World War II (1996, 4, 7).

How are we to determine charismatic leadership if we ignore alternative explanations for mass response to leadership, or if it may go unrecognized, vary across time for the same person, or be so situational as to be independent of the person doing the leading? There is a substantial potential for charisma to be a *post hoc* type of attribution, a residual category of explanation that is very difficult to objectively evaluate. Moreover, we are in danger of circular reasoning if we assert that leaders are charismatic when they are supported and noncharismatic when they are not. How are we to test for charisma if it is impossible to see its results?

Numerous authors begin their analyses by simply assuming the presence of charisma. In perhaps the most widely cited work on charisma, Willner (1984, chapt. 2) relies on anecdotal material for identifying charismatic political leaders. On such a basis she is able to identify seven "unambiguous" charismatics for further study: Hitler, Gandhi, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Sukarno, Mussolini, Castro, and Khomeini.

This certainty regarding charismatic leadership is especially impressive because of the author's demanding definition of charisma: a leader must be perceived by his or her followers as somehow superhuman and followers must blindly believe the leader's statements, unconditionally comply with the leader's directives for action, and give the leader unqualified emotional commitment (Willner, 1984, 8). This is formidable leadership indeed, and one might expect some equally impressive supporting evidence on behalf of its existence. Willner, however, does not provide such evidence.

A recent volume on Jesse Jackson asserts that everyone agrees that he has charisma, which is “clearly manifested,” because his followers see him as superhuman, and they blindly believe him, unconditionally comply with his directives, and give

unqualified emotional commitment (House 1988, 118-119, chapts. 10-11). No systematic evidence is offered to support these claims. The author later concedes that Jackson's charisma does not work with whites and that Jackson was not able to achieve the success he sought with PUSH\Excel. Jackson's lack of leadership success does not seem to raise any questions for the author about the utility of the concept of charisma.

The *Handbook of Leadership* devotes four percent of the volume to the discussion of “Charismatic, Charismaticlike, and Inspirational Leadership.” It simply asserts a wide range of leaders, including de Gaulle, Qaddafi, Ayatallah Khomeini, Lenin, Gandhi, Caesar, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy, were charismatic, and goes on to discuss the characteristics of leaders and followers (Bass, 1990, chapt. 12).

Similarly, an area of research focused in industrial psychology finds charisma everywhere in complex organizations, ranging from business executives in corporations to officers in the armed forces. Analysts then provide lists of the personal attributes and behavioral components of charismatic leaders and focus on how to produce more such leaders (see, for example, Bass 1990, 198-201; Conger et al, 1989; Conger and Kanungo 1987).

Lindholm (1990, 6) simply accepts the reality of charisma, and turns his attention to what involvement in it means emotionally and psychologically for leaders and followers. Portis (1987, 241) premises his discussion of charisma on the “ever-present possibility of charismatic leadership” and argues that “charismatic leaders are a recurring phenomenon in any society characterized by voluntary social movements.”

Schweitzer (1984) finds charisma everywhere, including both Roosevelts, Mao, Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Lloyd George, Churchill, de Gaulle, Gandhi, Nehru, Indira

Gandhi, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, George Wallace, and Joseph McCarthy. In general, he asserts that these leaders possessed charisma but does not critically evaluate this assumption.

Edward Shils (1965; 1982, chapt. 5) sees a charismatic element in all societies, because men in all societies confront the exigencies of life that demand a comprehensive solution. Thus, there is a universal need for order, and charisma attaches itself to those who satisfy that need or promise to do so. The generator of order arouses a charismatic response as awe and reverence are evoked. The exercise of power on a large scale evokes a legitimating attitude, so *all* [italics added] rulers possess charismatic qualities, i.e., have them attributed to them. In addition, charisma need not be limited to individuals; institutions may be repositories of charisma as well.

Clifford Geertz (1977) agrees with Shils, adding that charisma is ever present and stems from the "inherent sacredness of central authority," a view apparently shared also by Etzioni (1961, chapts. 9-10), who argues that leaders can become charismatic *after* achieving their positions of authority. Many other scholars, including Kellerman (1984, 83), Bathory (1978, 47), Aberbach (1996), and Hunt (1984, 113-138, especially 132-134) assume charismatic leadership. Peter Drucker (1989, 108), for example, asserts that "No century has seen more leaders with more charisma than our twentieth century." Yet, these authors provide little justification for such assertions.

The primary exception to the lack of rigorous examination of the existence of charismatic responses by followers is a thoughtful study by Madsen and Snow (1991) on the leadership of Juan Peron in Argentina. After presenting a theory of why the country

was ready for a charismatic leader, they examine election data and conclude that Peron did receive a charismatic response, although one limited to the working class (1991, 54).

The authors examine estimates of the size of crowds at demonstrations for Peron several months before the election, and conclude that one of four voters for Peron in 1946 were true believers (1991, 76-77). Their confidence in their conclusions is buttressed by the fact that Peron received his strongest support in urban areas (where they authors conclude misery was the greatest) and some crucial support from migrants (who they believe were most likely to have lost the perception of coping). These voters are the ones that their theory predicts were most likely to have charismatic responses to a "savior" (1991, chapt. 3).

There are several limitations to such an analysis, despite the care that the authors have taken with it. Using voting as proxy for devotion to Peron and relying on estimates of crowd size and participation in demonstrations as indicators of charismatic response are very weak bases for inferring charisma, especially when Peron only got 52.4 percent of the vote (in 1951 and 1973 he received 62 percent). How are we to differentiate this behavior from commonly occurring political behavior?

In another chapter the authors present survey data on a small segment of the population, and they argue that it displays evidence of strong emotional ties to Peron. Unfortunately, this survey data was gathered a decade after Peron had been sent into exile Madsen and Snow 1991, chapt. 4).

In the end, scholarship on charismatic leadership provides numerous descriptions of the leaders to whom authors attribute charismatic leadership and countless assertions about charismatic responses to these leaders. We also find in the literature many

discussions of the conditions favoring the appearance and disappearance of charismatic leadership and of the characteristics that charismatic leaders share (for one effort at this, see Willner 1984, 61). As rich as these discussions often are, they circumvent the question of whether the leadership was in fact of the charismatic variety. We still lack systematic evidence that leaders to whom authors attribute charisma evoke a different response from the public than noncharismatic leaders. We must investigate charismatic leadership more rigorously before we can employ the concept usefully in explaining presidential leadership of the public.

DO PEOPLE PERCEIVE CHARISMA?

Robert C. Tucker argues that, "To be a charismatic leader is essentially to be perceived as such" (1968, 737). If leaders are going to evoke charismatic reactions, there should be evidence that people perceive them as having charismatic qualities. If leaders are not perceived as charismatic, it will be difficult to conclude that they have evoked a charismatic response.

Systematic data on the perceptions of people about historical figures is not easy to obtain, but we do have one important resource on which to draw: the National Election Studies. This invaluable data source allows us to examine survey data on presidents over the past half century.

Recent Presidents

When we examine recent American leaders, we find the voters' perceptions of charisma in short supply. Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk (1986) examined the national election studies in 1952-1984 period and created a scale of "charisma" based on

the perceptions of the public. They defined charisma in terms of responses regarding leadership abilities, ability to communicate, inspire, and get along with people, and the dignity, patriotism, and humility of a candidate.

Apparently, charismatic qualities have not been much on the minds of the public. The authors (Miller et al 1986) found fewer comments on "charisma" than on candidates' competence, integrity, reliability, or personal appearance and demographic characteristics. In addition, perceptions of a candidate's "charisma" were the least important factor in predicting both votes and candidate ratings on the feeling thermometer.

Wattenberg (1995, 248) provided an index on the "charisma scale" for candidates in presidential elections from 1952 through 1996. The results appear in Table 1. The figures in the far right column represent the net of positive and negative comments for candidates who have served as president.

Insert Table 1

Dwight Eisenhower, the staid, methodical military manager with the convoluted syntax, had by far the highest scores on the charisma scale. John Kennedy, the handsome, eloquent young proponent of the dynamic New Frontier, on the other hand, achieved only a "1" - while his opponent, Richard Nixon (to whom virtually no one has ever attributed charisma) got a "5" in the same race!

Lyndon Johnson, who complained that his problem was that he lacked charisma (Burns 1978, 54) and whose appearances before large audiences were notable for their stiffness and awkwardness, came out higher than anyone aside from Eisenhower. Ronald Reagan, the "Great Communicator," only achieved a "0" in 1980. Four years later, when

the economy was strong, he rose to a "6." Bill Clinton won election in 1992 with a "-2" rating.

An examination of the National Election Studies data shows that public perceptions of "charisma" do not correlate with the conventional wisdom of which presidents possessed charisma. This is not a definitive test of perceptions of charisma, of course. To begin, not everyone will be satisfied with the definition of "charisma" employed by Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk. We must examine "charismatic" presidents from other perspectives and in more detail.

CONSEQUENCES OF CHARISMA

Whether one views charisma as something an individual possesses or something others simply perceive that an individual possesses, charisma will be a useful concept to social scientists to the extent that there are *consequences* of it. In an ideal situation, we would investigate charismatic responses to leaders by identifying charismatic leaders and then comparing the response of the public to their leadership with the public's response to similarly positioned noncharismatic leaders. Unfortunately, the research context is far from ideal. To begin, we lack an independent measure of charisma.

Only one study (Cell 1974) has attempted to measure charisma. The author attempted to isolate measurable characteristics of charisma among 34 heads of state and then test explanations of the social context of its appearance. The indicators of charisma ranged from pictures of the leader posted in public or in homes and the leader giving long speeches to his sexual prowess and the degree females made sacrifices for the leader.

This novel attempt at bringing rigor to the study of charisma does not seem to have inspired others to follow and is unlikely to serve our purposes very well.

Although we are unlikely to agree on a measure of charisma, we can compare the public response to leaders to whom we commonly attribute charisma with those to whom we do not. If charisma is a useful resource for leaders, charismatic leaders should evoke different responses from the public than do noncharismatic leaders. The differential responses to charismatic political leaders may include:

1. obtaining unusually high levels of support
2. obtaining support from unusual sources
3. obtaining especially intense and committed support that is especially stable and easy to mobilize
4. successfully leading public opinion, changing the opinions of notable segments of the population on matters of public policy

Such consequences are not necessarily the result of charisma, of course, and there may be additional consequences of charisma. Nevertheless, these are the consequences most commonly attributed to charismatic leaders, and these consequences should reliably occur in response to leaders to whom we attribute charisma.

CHARISMA AND PUBLIC SUPPORT: JOHN F. KENNEDY

We have hypothesized that likely consequences of charisma include obtaining unusually high or stable levels of public support and obtaining support from unusual sources. John F. Kennedy is clearly the post-WWII political leader to whom the term "charismatic" is most frequently applied. Wicker (1991, 251), for example, calls JFK

"charismatic." Even Kennedy's critics attribute remarkable personal appeal to him (Miroff 1978). Thus, Kennedy provides a best-case test for the impact of charisma on popular support. If there is evidence of such an impact, then we should find it here.

Our concern is whether Kennedy's relations with the public indicate any basis for attributing a special rapport with it. There is room for skepticism. For example, in a book of essays published in 1963, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1963, 19-11), an admirer of Kennedy's and a principal chronicler of his administration, termed the concept of charisma "mischievous" and irrelevant to the modern world.

The 1960 Election

Let us begin with the election of 1960. What is most interesting about the election is that Nixon came so close to winning it (perhaps he actually did win). Kennedy, on the other hand, ran well behind the Democratic ticket - despite numerous advantages.

In 1960 the National Election Study found that only 29 percent of American voters called themselves Republicans, while 45 percent viewed themselves as Democrats, so the Republican should have been a decided underdog without a national hero at the head of the ticket. Moreover, Kennedy ran a very well financed and carefully planned campaign.

In addition, Nixon suffered a seemingly endless list of obstacles (some self-inflicted) to winning the presidency: his dubious choice of Henry Cabot Lodge as his running mate, his knee infection, his pallid appearance in the first presidential debate, the Martin Luther King incident, the heavy Catholic vote swing to Kennedy, the failure to unleash Eisenhower as a campaigner, the downturn of the economy, Nixon's burden of

defending the Eisenhower administration, his inability to answer Kennedy's charges on being soft on Cuba in order to protect the plans for the invasion of the island, Eisenhower's “give me a week” remark, and Nixon's erratic command of himself.

Kennedy was not able to win unexpected states nor was he able even to obtain a majority of the vote cast for president. In addition, there was little in the way of coattails as the Democrats lost 20 seats in the House. This is hardly evidence of a charismatic bond with the electorate.

Kennedy's Public Approval

Once in office, Kennedy enjoyed a much higher level of public support than he experienced in his election (see Table 2). Indeed, he achieved the highest average approval rating of any chief executive in the post-World War II era, 71 percent. His lowest yearly average was a remarkably high 64 percent approval. He never fell below 56 percent approval in any individual poll, always maintaining the support of a majority of Americans.

Insert Table 2

The question for us is whether this level of support provides evidence of charismatic leadership. Was Kennedy able to obtain notably different support than we might expect from a Democratic president? Was he able to mobilize the public behind his initiatives?

One way to evaluate Kennedy's support is to compare it to that of the first three years of his Democratic successor, Lyndon Johnson, which we do in Table 2. Johnson began his tenure with very high approval levels, only slightly lower than Kennedy's,

despite the passage of a large number of polarizing policies, including protections for civil rights and the war on poverty. By 1966, however, widespread unrest over the war in Vietnam, civil rights, and other social issues took their toll, and Johnson's approval level fell substantially.

The stability of Kennedy's public approval was less within years than across them. In Table 3 we find that, although his public support varied very little in his first year in office, the president faced considerable instability in the public's evaluations in 1962 and 1963. There was a general erosion of support among the public over the second and third years of his tenure, much of it due to the loss of approval in the South associated with the issue of the racial integration of educational institutions. However, this decline was punctuated by the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, which gave him a considerable boost in the polls.

Insert Table 3

The stability of Johnson's approval, also shown in Table 3, was as great as Kennedy's. Kennedy actually had less stable support in his second year, varying 18 percentage points to only 9 percentage points for Johnson. In their third years, the range of Johnson's approval was 17 percentage points, but Kennedy's was 18 percentage points.

When we disaggregate the public into demographic groups (see Table 4), the results are revealing and very similar for both presidents. Differences between the sexes are minimal, while racial differences are significant, especially after the issue of civil rights increased in prominence in 1962 and 1963. Nonwhites were more approving of the presidents, undoubtedly reflecting their commitment to civil rights and the Democratic party identification of most nonwhites.

Insert Table 4

Support for civil rights also had its costs for both presidents, however. The conservative South, rocked by the tumult over racial integration, gave both presidents lower support than any other region, while the more liberal East continued to accord them both the highest levels of approval.

Religion was a discriminating characteristic in Kennedy's years in office. Not surprisingly for the first Catholic president, Catholics were more supportive than Protestants. In addition, some of the relative lack of Protestant support is probably the result of the lack of support for Kennedy in the largely Protestant South and the fact that Catholics were disproportionately Democrats. Interestingly, the Protestant Johnson continued to receive most of the advantage of his predecessor in obtaining considerably more support from Catholics than from Protestants.

Education was not a particularly important predictor of approval for either president. Younger citizens were slightly more supportive of both presidents than those 30 to 49, and, especially for Kennedy, they were clearly more supportive than those over 50. Part of the explanation for these differences may also be the fact that older voters were more likely to be Republican, especially in the early 1960s.

Overall, the patterns of the levels, stability, and sources of support for Kennedy and Johnson are quite similar. Kennedy's approval was somewhat higher, especially in the third year, but the patterns are basically the same. Kennedy's support eroded substantially at the time of his death as he became involved in more controversial matters, notably civil rights. Would it have continued to decline if he had lived and pushed through civil rights bills, committed large numbers of troops to fight in Vietnam,

and presided over an era of turbulent social protest? We can only speculate, but the data provide little support for the conclusion that his approval would have been immune from a fate similar to his successor's or that he enjoyed a special relationship with the American people.

A Coda on FDR

Aside from John F. Kennedy, the twentieth century president to whom people most commonly attribute charisma is Franklin D. Roosevelt. Commentators frequently attribute Roosevelt's early successes in obtaining public support, and thus congressional action, to his charisma, especially as manifested in his radio speeches.

There is much less public opinion survey data on FDR than on more recent presidents, of course. Moreover, FDR served longer than any other president and his tenure occurred during the unique circumstances of the Great Depression and World War II. All of this makes it difficult to make reasonable comparisons with another president.

Nevertheless, we do know something about Roosevelt's public support. Matthew Baum and Samuel Kernell (1999, 17-18) concluded, "the Roosevelt presidency was unique more in its context than in the president himself." The authors conclude that FDR "was by no means immune to the normal political winds that nip and tug on every president's political support. On a number of occasions, Roosevelt's exceptional political skills failed to insulate him from the negative political consequences of pursuing unpopular policies."

CHARISMA AND LEADING THE PUBLIC: REAGAN AND ROOSEVELT

Perhaps the most important potential consequences of charismatic leadership is moving the public - changing opinions, mobilizing citizens into action, and placing new issues on the public's agenda. Are presidents to whom we attribute charisma, such as Ronald Reagan and Franklin D. Roosevelt, more successful in moving public opinion? I have shown elsewhere that even “The Great Communicator” found it difficult to move his fellow citizens toward his clearly articulated positions on the issues (Edwards and Eshbaugh-Soha 2000).

Reagan's Revolution

It is possible that the impact of charisma is most likely to be manifested in response to the drama of a single speech. The first six months of Ronald Reagan's tenure has become part of the folklore of American politics. The conventional wisdom is that Reagan went on television and by using of the bully pulpit mobilized the public to support his tax and spending cuts. The image of Reagan leading the public so successfully is a strong one, and his performance requires that we examine it more closely.

Budgetary Politics, 1981. On February 5, 1981, Reagan made a nationally televised address assessing the nation's economic problems and presenting the broad contours of an economic program. On February 18, he delivered another nationally televised address before a joint session of Congress in which he unveiled his proposals for tax cuts and spending reductions. There is no question that the public was anxious about the state of the economy, which featured high inflation, high interest rates, and

rising unemployment. Nevertheless, according to Kernell the public's response "was muted" (1997, 145).

On March 30, the president was shot as the result of an assassination attempt. Reagan's approval ratings increased by 7 percentage points after the attempt on his life. Within a week of the president's having been shot, White House deputy chief of staff Michael Deaver convened a meeting of other high-ranking aides to determine how best to take advantage of the new political capital the assassination attempt had created. Ultimately, the plan was for Reagan to make a dramatic nationally televised appearance before Congress, which occurred on April 28. The president showed himself to be recovering from his injuries and vigorously threatened legislators with the wrath of the people if they did not support the Gramm-Latta budget reconciliation resolution, which included the presidents' proposals.

We lack systematic evidence on the public's response to Reagan's speech. Kernell (1997, 146) describes the president's reception in Congress as a "love feast," and perhaps it was. We do know that there was no upsurge in the president's approval ratings in the Gallup Poll. Indeed, the polls nearest in time before and after the speech produced virtually identical results. Moreover, it is obviously illogical to employ Congress's reception *during* the speech as evidence of public reaction *following* the speech. We also know that in preparation for the president's speech the Republican National Committee stimulated grass-roots pressure on Southern Democrats whose districts had voted heavily for Reagan in 1980 (Kernell 1997, 146). The whole point of this effort was to develop support before the speech, and in this the Republicans seem to have been quite successful.

The next stage in the budgetary process was to decide on specific budget cuts. By mid-June, however, the White House concluded that the president could not successfully go public (Kernell 1997, 147). Nevertheless, the administration won by a narrow margin a crucial procedural vote on voting on all the cuts together on one vote, and then the House passed the president's budget.

The most notable recent example of a president mobilizing public opinion to pressure Congress is Ronald Reagan's effort to obtain passage of his bill to cut taxes in 1981. On July 27, two days before the crucial vote in the House, the president made a televised plea for support of his tax cut proposals and asked the public to let their representatives in Congress know how they felt. Evidently, this worked, for thousands of telephone calls, letters, and telegrams poured into congressional offices. How much of this represented the efforts of the White House and its corporate allies rather than individual expressions of opinion will probably never be known. Nevertheless, on the morning of the vote Speaker Tip O'Neill declared, “We are experiencing a telephone blitz like this nation has never seen. It's had a devastating effect” (quoted in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 1981, 1374; see also Kernell 1997, 150-151). With this kind of response, the president easily carried the day.

We must be very careful about inferring the president's success in leading the public from his victory in Congress. The White House was not content to rely solely on a presidential appeal for a show of support. It took additional steps to orchestrate public pressure on Congress. Kernell (1997, 169-170; see also 146) describes the auxiliary efforts at mobilization of Reagan's White House in 1981:

> Each major television appeal by President Reagan on the eve of a critical budget vote in Congress was preceded by weeks of preparatory work. Polls were taken; speeches incorporating the resulting insights were drafted; the press was briefed, either directly or via leaks. Meanwhile in the field, the ultimate recipients of the president's message, members of Congress, were softened up by presidential travel into their states and districts and by grass-roots lobbying campaigns, initiated and orchestrated by the White House but including RNC [Republican National Committee] and sympathetic business organizations.

Reagan's White House tapped a broad network of constituency groups. Operating through party channels, its Political Affairs Office, and its Office of Public Liaison, the administration generated pressure from the constituents of members of Congress, campaign contributors, political activists, business leaders, state officials, interest groups, and party officials. Television advertisements, letters, and attention from the local news media helped focus attention on swing votes. Although these pressures were directed toward Republicans, Southern Democrats received considerable attention as well, which reinforced their sense of electoral vulnerability. The president also promised not to campaign against Southern Democrats who supported him (Kernell 1997, 149).

In addition, the administration engaged in old-fashion bargaining on a wholesale scale. Reagan's budget director David Stockman was quite candid about the concessions that members of Congress demanded in return for their support for the tax cut of 1981, including special breaks for holders of oil leases, real estate tax shelters, and generous loopholes that virtually eliminated the corporate income tax. "The hogs were really

feeding," he said. "The greed level, the level of opportunism, just got out of control" (Quoted in Greider 1981, 51). Stockman recalled that “the last 10 or 20 percent of the votes needed for a majority of both houses had to be bought, period.” Similarly, he termed the trading that went into passing the final budget as “an open vote auction.” (Stockman 1986, 208-209, 214-215, 251, 253, 260-261, 264-265; see also *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 1981, 1372-1373). For example, Reagan agreed to raise sugar price supports to induce representatives from Louisiana to vote for his budget cuts in 1981 (Barrett 1984, 160-161; Greider 1981, 50).

After a careful study, Marc Bodnick (1990) concluded that the 1981 tax and budget cuts relied heavily on traditional bargaining and that Reagan's going public strategy was not as dominant as Kernell indicates. Conservative Democrats supported spending and tax cuts because they agreed with them, not because they were afraid of Reagan's public support. For example, 24 of the 29 Democrats who supported the president on specific spending cuts were long-time fiscal conservatives. The other 5 Democrats had conservative leanings, and each made a deal with the White House. The president's public appeals reinforced deals that were already made. Finally, Bodnick concludes that bargaining had produced a viable tax cut compromise *before* Reagan's public address.

Beyond the Tax Cut. The administration's effort at mobilizing the public on behalf of the tax cut of 1981 is significant not only because of the success of presidential leadership but also because it appears to be a deviant case - even for Ronald Reagan. His next major legislative battle was over the sale of AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia. The

White House decided it could not mobilize the public on this issue, however, and adopted an "inside" strategy to prevent a legislative veto (See *National Journal* 1982).

Reagan went public one more time regarding the budget in 1981. On September 24, he made a national address arguing for further budget cuts. In a Gallup poll of October 2-5, 1981 (*Gallup Report* 1981, 3-8), respondents were asked, "In general, are you in favor of budget cuts in addition to those approved earlier this year or are you opposed to more cuts?" Only 42 percent of the public favored such cuts while and 46 percent opposed them (12 percent expressed no opinion). The same people were asked, "To reduce the size of the 1982 budget deficiency, President Reagan has proposed cutting 13 billion dollars in addition to the $35 billion in cuts approved earlier in this year. About $11 billion of the new cuts would come from social programs and about $2 billion from defense programs. In general, would you say you approve or disapprove of the President's proposal?" In response to the question posed in this way, 74 percent approved of budget cuts and only 20% disapproved (6 percent had no opinion).

Kernell (1997, 152) concludes that these results provide evidence of Reagan's remaining a persuasive force with the public. This is unlikely, however. Only 36 percent of Democrats approved of Reagan's job performance, and budget matters were certainly salient at the time and central in evaluations of Reagan's performance as president. It is much more likely that the difference in the responses to the two questions was the result of Gallup raising the issue of budget deficits. In a poll taken just before the president's speech, 67 percent of the public favored a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution, for example (*Gallup Report* 1981, 9). It was the premise of budget cuts

being used to reduce the deficit, not the support of Ronald Reagan, that made people willing to support more budget cuts.

In the remainder of his tenure the president went repeatedly to the people regarding a wide range of policies, including the budget, aid to the contras in Nicaragua, and defense expenditures. He traveled widely, made television and radio addresses, and held evening press conferences. Despite his high approval levels for much of the time, he was *never again* able to arouse many in his audience to communicate their support of his policies to Congress. Indeed, it was not long before observers began labeling his budgets as DOA - Dead on Arrival. Most issues hold less appeal to the public than substantial tax cuts.

Although the public relations skills of Reagan's administration were impressive, they could not buy themselves create or sustain goodwill. Despite his staff's efforts at promoting a favorable image, he fell below 50 percent approval in the polls after only ten months in office and would not obtain the approval of more than half the public again until November 1983.

Nor was the president more effective in warding off criticism than he was in advancing his initiatives. For example, in 1987 Regan made two nationally televised addresses on the Iran-Contra scandal, the biggest crisis of his presidency. The first two were on November 13 and December 2, 1986. The president’s approval fell 16 percentage points in the Gallup Poll from the level he had before the speeches. He lost 6 percentage points after his March 4, 1987 speech. Only following his August 12, 1987 speech did he go up in the polls – four percentage points. However, after the August 12 speech, 49 percent reported that they were dissatisfied with his explanation and 39

percent thought he lied (ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll,1987). Finally, Table 5 shows that following his two 1987 speeches regarding Iran-Contra, the percentage of the public who felt he had made a major mistake *increased*.

Insert Table 5

Reagan as Facilitator. Rather than serving as an example of the power of a charismatic leader, the early months of Reagan's tenure show the president brilliantly exploiting his opportunities as a facilitator. The president enjoyed favorable conditions for making appeals in his first months in office, including public anxiety over the economy and the perception of a mandate as a result of his surprising margin in the presidential election and the dramatic elevation of Republicans to majority status in the Senate. The same factors drove the Democrats into disarray as they reeled from Reagan's electoral victory and their loss of the Senate. In addition, Reagan advanced a short policy agenda that allowed him to keep a focus on his priorities and made it easier to move rapidly to exploit favorable conditions in the public.

The fundamental conditions of public support in the president's legislatively crucial first year were established outside the White House. When Reagan's views matched the public mood, he effectively used the congruence to his advantage. Yet in the end, there was no charismatic magic. As one leading scholar concludes, “the supply of popular support rests on opinion dynamics over which the president may exercise little direct control” (Kernell 1997, 169). If charisma is to be a useful concept, it has to last longer than a few months of favorable conditions for public leadership. Reagan was much more effective at exploiting popular support that he was in creating it in the first place.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Reagan is hardly alone in failing to move the public. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt's typical radio address increased his public approval by only about 1 percentage point - and then only in peacetime (Baum and Kernell 1999, 13-14). The president responded to changing circumstances like advent of World War II by seeking popular support from those constituencies most inclined to deliver it rather than by convincing reluctant citizens to support him. For the two years before U.S. entry into World War II, Roosevelt, fearing a potential backlash if he moved too rapidly, sought to lead public opinion with prudent caution in "the direction, and largely at the pace, they [the public] wanted to go" (Donovan 1951, 316).

The distinguished historian Doris Kearns Goodwin (2000, 76) makes a representative argument when she contends that Roosevelt successfully used his famous fireside chats "to shape, educate and move public opinion at critical moments."

> After his first address on the banking crisis . . . large deposits began flowing back into the banking system. When he asked everyone to get a world map and spread it before them as they listened to his description of far-flung battles in the Pacific, map stores sold more maps in several days than they had sold the entire year. When he announced a scrap drive to collect old rubber for reuse, the White House was inundated with old rubber tires, rubber balls, rubber bands and rubber girdles . . . .

None of these examples, however, represents the president asking the people to change their minds. People were not opposed to looking at maps or participating in aiding the war effort. Nor did they offer much resistance to banking. After all, they had

their money in the banks in the first place. What they sought was reassurance for their normal inclinations, and Roosevelt provided that reassurance brilliantly. We should keep in mind that Roosevelt was moving people in the direction they already wanted to go.

Roosevelt recognized the limits of his ability to move the public, even if his many admirers did not. He only gave two or three fireside chats a year, and rarely did he focus them on legislation under consideration in Congress. It appears that FDR only used a fireside chat to discuss such matters on four occasions, the clearest example being the broadcast on March 9, 1937 on the ill-fated "Court-packing" bill (Cornwell 1965, 262-263).[3]

CONCLUSION

I began this article by raising questions about the common assumption that personal qualities are central to presidential leadership, especially to public leadership. I have attempted to explore the issue of whether the messenger matters in a rigorous manner, and we are now in a position to offer some answers.

I have been unable to find systematic evidence of some special form of leadership that we might characterize as “charismatic.” We cannot employ the concept to identify who possesses charisma nor identify any consequences of it. Charisma cannot be used to explain the relative success or failures of presidents to obtain public support. Thus, the concept of charisma does not appear to be either salvageable analytically or helpful empirically. Political consultant and commentator Dick Morris (1999, 211) may have it correct when he concludes that “charisma is the most elusive of political traits because it

doesn't exist in reality, only in our perception once a candidate has made it by hard work and good issues."

One might argue that I have not searched in the right places for evidence of charisma. Perhaps I have not focused on the right leaders, nations, chronological periods, or eras of economic or political development. Perhaps. However, the burden of proof should be on those employing the concept of charisma to provide evidence of a distinctive form of leadership and not simply assume its existence. We ought to have confidence that there is something there before we analyze it, much less attribute significance to it.

It does not follow that individual leader do not matter. Of course the leader matters. They make choices about what policies to pursue, how to frame their presentation to the public, how hard to fight for them, how many other issues to pursue at the same time, and a myriad of other aspects of taking a case to the public. Leaders have important influence over the outcomes of their leadership efforts and may fairly be held responsible for many of their leadership failures.

What we have found is that there is no magic associated with certain leaders. There is much less significance to charisma than the conventional wisdom indicates; personal characteristics are not the key to successfully leading the public. Major changes in public policy require more than just the "right" person in the job and do not necessarily turn on a leader's personal qualities. Public leadership is much more demanding and problematic than the simple solution of placing a charismatic leader at the helm of the ship of state.

Our findings also mean that we need a better understanding of leadership to think sensibly about the role of leadership in a political system. We need to reevaluate how we think about leadership. We have found that the ability of leaders to move the public is limited, and thus the role of the individual leader may be less important than many think. Scholars, then, need to emphasize less personalized and more theoretically meaningful explanations of successful leadership. We should expect less of leaders, focus less exclusively on them, and devote more attention to the context in which they seek to lead.

Table 1
Public's Evaluations of the Charisma of Selected Presidential Candidates

President	Year	Charisma Scale
Eisenhower	1952	+18
Eisenhower	1956	+17
Kennedy	1960	+1
Nixon	1960	+5
Johnson	1964	+8
Nixon	1968	-3
Nixon	1972	+1
Carter	1976	0
Ford	1976	-1
Reagan	1980	0
Carter	1980	-1
Reagan	1984	+6
Bush	1988	-2
Bush	1992	+1
Clinton	1992	-2
Clinton	1996	+3

Source: Adapted from Martin P. Wattenberg, "Why Clinton Won and Dukakis Lost," *Party Politics* 1 (No. 2, 1995): 245-260. Updated by Wattenberg.

Table 2
Average Yearly Approval for Kennedy and Johnson

President	First Year	Second Year	Third Year
Kennedy	76%	72%	64%
Johnson	74%	66%	51%

Source: George C. Edwards III, *Presidential Approval* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

Table 3

Range of Kennedy and Johnson's Approval Ratings

Kennedy			Johnson		
Year	**High**	**Low**	**Year**	**High**	**Low**
1961	79%	72%	1964	79%	69%
1962	79	61	1965	71	62
1963	74	56	1966	61	44

Source: George C. Edwards III, *Presidential Approval* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

Table 4
Average Approval of Demographic Groups for Kennedy and Johnson

	Public Approval					
	Kennedy			Johnson		
Group	**1961**	**1962**	**1963**	**1964**	**1965**	**1966**
Democrats	87%	86%	79%	84%	79%	67%
Republicans	58	49	44	62	49	32
Independents	72	69	61	67	60	44
Male	77	72	62	76	67	53
Female	74	72	65	74	66	50
White	75	71	60	74	64	48
Nonwhite	80	85	86	84	87	76
East	78	76	71	80	75	61
Midwest	77	73	66	77	69	50
South	72	66	51	69	57	44
West	76	73	65	72	64	49
Protestant	72	67	58	73	62	46
Catholic	87	86	81	82	77	63
Grade School	74	71	63	74	66	53
High School	78	74	66	76	68	52
College	73	67	59	75	64	48
Under 30	80	81	71	78	70	55
30-49	78	75	67	76	68	53
50+	71	66	57	73	64	49

Source: George C. Edwards III, *Presidential Approval* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

Table 5
Reagan Mistake in Iran-Contra

Date	Major Mistakes	Minor Mistakes	No Mistakes	No Opinion
3/4/87	46	47	4	3
3/5-9/87	52	45	3	1
7/21/87	40	48	10	3
8/3-5/87	39	52	6	2
8/12/87	44	49	7	1

Source: ABC News/*Washington Post* question: "Do you think Reagan has made major mistakes in the Iran/Contra affair, made minor mistakes or do you think he made no mistakes at all"?

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Notes

[1] A search of the Lexis-Nexis database identifed more than 3,000 stories in which the adjective "charismatic" was applied to someone in 2000. Half these instances were for political officials.

[2] Weber treated the concept of charisma in an explicitly value-free fashion, emphasizing the nature of the authority relationship rather than the direction in which the charismatic figure led. See, for example, Weber 1968a, 241-242; Weber 1968c, 1112. The lack of normative emphasis distressed some later commentators. See Friedrich 1961.

[3] Cornwell reports the other instances of FDR pointedly discussing pending legislation as social security, holding company legislation, and some other items on April 28, 1935; a program he had just sent to Congress to cope with the then current recession on April 14, 1938; and wartime economic stabilization legislation on April 28, 1942.