The enduring allure of charisma: How Barack Obama won the historic 2008 presidential election

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Article info

Abstract

We apply charismatic leadership theory to the historic 2008 United States presidential election, in hopes of inspiring dialogue around how leadership theory can inform the critical process of evaluating and electing public leaders. While numerous leadership theories are relevant to understanding the 2008 election, charismatic leadership theory highlights aspects of the leader, followers, and the unfolding economic crisis that are particularly relevant in helping us to understand how a relatively inexperienced political outsider ascended to the US Presidency. Given the potential perils and challenges newly elected President Barack Obama faces in the months and years ahead, we also suggest four core strategies rooted in charismatic leadership theory that may help him capitalize on his early charismatic appeal, as well as avoid the pitfalls of charisma that have plagued some of his predecessors.

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for understanding the events as they unfolded in the recent election. On the contrary, many leadership perspectives and theories could inspire fruitful discussion surrounding the characteristics and potential effectiveness of political leaders, and therefore build needed bridges between leadership theory and the “real world” leadership and followership issues of the 21st century. In addition, there were of course numerous other major factors that came into play in this election, including Obama’s significant monetary advantage, demographic shifts, voter registration issues, the impact of the controversial choice of Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, among many others, that we acknowledge were likely critical in understanding this historic election.

Charismatic leadership is ideally suited to our purposes for three reasons. First, due in part to its longstanding historical and sociological roots, it is a perspective that highlights the simultaneous roles of leaders, followers, and the situation in understanding leadership processes. In contrast, the dialogue around leadership is still primarily “leader-focused,” and the majority of political commentary continues to focus on aspects of leaders rooted in the trait-based “Great Man” approaches of the last century. Thus, one of our goals is to focus more attention on the equally important aspects of follower perceptions and moods, as well as situational contingencies, in evaluating leadership and leadership outcomes.

Second, charismatic leadership theory has been argued to be increasingly relevant to situations in which there is a large social distance between leaders and followers (Shamir, 1995). Therefore, it is well-suited to our purposes, as it is difficult to imagine a situation of greater social distance between leaders and followers than the election of a national leader. And third, we have utilized this theory in the past to explore perceptions of political leaders (see Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004a,b; Bligh, Kohles, & Pillai, 2005), presenting empirical evidence that charismatic leadership theory may be particularly relevant in crisis situations (e.g., President George W. Bush after 9/11) and when an outside candidate has demonstrated charismatic potential (e.g., Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in the California Recall Election). Therefore, we argue that it is particularly relevant in helping us understand how a relatively inexperienced African American political outsider could ascend to the US presidency.

In this essay, we hope to illustrate how charismatic leadership theory helps us understand the events that transpired in the historical election of 2008. We do so humbly, in full recognition of the fact that we speak from the safe pedestal of now knowing the outcome of the election, and with the clarity of vision that often reaches its zenith only with the benefit of hindsight. Thus, we hope to retain a sense of humility in this analysis; the 2008 election was close, complex, and riddled with experts ultimately proven both wrong and right (e.g., “Why Obama Can’t Win” Author CURSES ‘Stupid Silly Title’; Neyfakh, 2008). In addition, we hope to present our analyses free of party rancor and biased partisanship. Indeed, if there is one thing the 2008 election has taught us, it is that the perceptual blinders of party affiliation are alive and well. Analysis of the same “objective” leadership behavior on media outlets leaning left or right on the political spectrum reminds us that processes of selective interpretation, social contagion, and projection continually surround even the most mundane leader behaviors. In this context, the fragmentation and polarization of different types of media make the role of academic analysis more important today than ever before. As consumers are increasingly free to choose media sources that reflect their own values, assumptions, and biases, there is a real danger of increasing polarization according to political party that can potentially negate most apolitical discussions of leadership altogether. For instance, a Zogby poll conducted two days after the 2008 election indicates that Americans rate the internet as the most trusted news medium over TV and print media combined, and Fox News the most trusted TV source. In addition, the online survey of 3472 adults found that three out of four people think that the media influenced the outcome of the election, and approximately the same number reported that they think the media in general is “biased” (Snyder, 2008).

Finally, we conclude our essay with some brief speculation, acknowledging that the ultimate relevance of the scientific application of leadership theory to real-life outcomes must make accurate predictions about the future in order to earn its place in the popular vernacular. We offer some suggestions, grounded in leadership theory, regarding what Obama needs to do to demonstrate, both symbolically and through concerted action, that he can eventually become the effective president 53% of Americans believed in and hoped for on Election Day.

1. Understanding the 2008 election: the three lenses of charismatic leadership theory

First introduced by German sociologist Max Weber, the word charisma comes from the Greek word χάρισμα (kharisma), meaning “gift” or “divine favor.” Following this original definition, charisma commonly refers to a leader with powerful personal appeal or magnetism that captivates others. The exact nature of this appeal is ephemeral, and is often referenced “in quotes” to convey its ambiguous or ethereal nature in popular descriptions. For example: “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 Clarion Ledger, November 2, 2008).

Barack Obama has been described as follows:

“An early Obama campaign slogan declared, ‘We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.’ His critics deemed such rhetoric as too ethereal. Now it seems prescient, as the nation confronts a financial crisis of historic proportions, as well as all the other policy failures and debt-fueled excesses of the last eight years. The United States has to dig itself out. Barack Obama is the one to lead the way.” (The Boston Globe, October 13, 2008; cited in WSJ, 2008).

On the other hand, rival Republican contender John McCain was endorsed as follows:

Democrat Barack Obama is a great orator. His message of hope and change is inspirational. Republican John McCain isn’t an inspiring speaker, which is one reason his running mate, Sarah Palin, seems to draw more attention than McCain himself.
But being president is about more than inspiring Americans. It’s about leadership. The choice between McCain and Obama comes down to one of experience (cited in WSJ, 2008).

As represented in these popular media endorsements, this approach to charisma emphasizes heroic leaders with that ‘something,’ often encapsulated in their dynamic, dramatic personalities. When not referred to as that ‘something,’ the term ‘charisma’ itself has frequently been applied to describe an energetic and youthful Obama, from well before his bid for the presidency was announced (see Babington, 2006) to help explain after the election why his presidential bid ultimately succeeded (see Smith, 2008). In contrast, his less dynamic rival, John McCain, was described as “ill-suited to lecterns,” and his reputation as “not a great orator” only served to heighten the differences between the candidates in light of Obama’s ability to “dazzle on stage” (Leibovich, 2008).

Despite the references to Obama’s charisma in the media, academics have increasingly argued that charisma is ‘in the eye of the beholder,’ suggesting that charismatic leadership is more accurately understood as a relationship between leaders and followers. Charismatic leadership emphasizes the importance of symbolic behaviors, emotional appeals, and making events meaningful for followers. In turn, followers of charismatic leaders often make tremendous sacrifices, commit to difficult or seemingly unattainable objectives, and achieve more than was expected or deemed possible. While a ‘gifted’ leader is a critical element in this relationship, aspects of the followers and the situation are also critical (see Meindl, 1990; Dvir & Shamir, 2003; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), and not all situations are equal in predicting the emergence of a leader who will be viewed widely as charismatic (Beyer, 1999a,b; Shamir & Howell, 1999).

Charisma therefore represents a potentially fruitful area of overlap between popular vernacular and academic theory, and one that helps to unpack the complex interrelationships among the candidates, followers and the media, and the contextual factors (e.g., economic crisis and “bailout”) that surround the 2008 election. In the sections below, we discuss how we can better understand why Obama won through each of these three lenses.

1.1. Why Obama won: the role of charismatic content and delivery style

Numerous scholars have advanced our understanding of the characteristics of charismatic leaders (e.g., Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Conger, 1989; Conger & Kanungo, 1987, 1998; Deluga, 2001; Steyrer, 1998; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Due to the large social distance between the presidential candidates and voters, we focus specifically here on content and delivery style as the primary sources of information voters have to assess the potential leadership skills of each candidate. As such, Obama’s success is predicted by a long tradition of research. For example, characteristics of delivery such as intonation, timing, and gesture have been linked to audience receptivity of political messages (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986), suggesting that the way that a political message is delivered both complements and reinforces the message and how it is received (Atkinson, 1984). In addition, empirical studies have demonstrated the important relationship of delivery to charismatic attributions (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Howell & Frost, 1989; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996), and have also shown that a charismatic delivery style (operationalized as friendly, attentive, relaxed, dramatic, and dominant) is related to perceptions of likely effectiveness in office for political candidates (Bligh et al., 2005). As one potential voter described it: “One of the things that makes Obama such a good speaker is his cadence. His words and delivery have a rhythm that is pleasing to the ear — it just makes it easier to listen to him. I think we would find him reading the telephone directory to be easy listenin’” (cited in Kaiser, 2008). In contrast, McCain’s overly scripted “lack of smoothness,” argued by his campaign to represent authenticity over polish, seemed to underscore his inability to connect with voters (Leibovich, 2008). Even John McCain publicly admitted his admiration for Obama’s “eloquence” (Healy, 2008), conceding the talents of charismatic delivery to his opponent.

However, a charismatic delivery style can also be a double-edged sword. John McCain pointed to Obama’s “smooth” delivery style as a critical shortcoming, dismissing his eloquence as “empty rhetoric.” Hillary Clinton went so far as to “deliver a caustic parody of her rival’s lofty oratorical style” and “celestial” message (The Times (UK), 2008). Researchers have similarly cautioned that delivery style is helpful, but not sufficient, in fostering charismatic attributions, and have underscored the critical importance of the leader’s vision and the “meaning behind the message” (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Holladay & Coombs, 1993, 1994). In addition to gifted oratory, charismatic leaders must also be able to distill complex future ideals into simple messages with widespread and emotional appeal. Here, Obama’s vision of “change we can believe in,” “together we can” and “yes we can!” represent seemingly textbook translations of such distillation. One voter described Obama’s “capability to communicate complex ideas — not 30-second sound bites that mean little” as the most compelling indication of leadership potential “in this day and age” (cited in Kaiser, 2008). Another voter commented, “Obama does a great job of coming down to our level and not talking above our heads. He makes himself seem as common as you are” (cited in Broder, 2008a). However, it is important to point out that Obama’s vision was vague enough to attract many different types of followers seeking many different kinds of change. As a result, followers could attribute almost anything, and believe almost anything was possible, to this leader and his vision. An extensive range of followers was ultimately enlisted into the Obama campaign, which actively encouraged broad participation to further enhance the appeal of the vision through followers’ enthusiasm.

In addition, charismatic leaders use colorful, vivid language and imagery rooted in shared values to communicate these simple yet complex ideals. In their paper, Shamir, Arthur, & House (1994) outlined seven general propositions regarding the content of speech likely to produce charismatic effects among followers: 1) more references to collective history and to the continuity between past and present; 2) more references to the collective and collective identity, and fewer references to individual self-interest; 3) more positive
references to followers' worth and efficacy as individuals and as a collective; 4) more references to leader's similarity to followers and identification with followers; 5) more references to values and moral justifications, and fewer references to tangible outcomes and instrumental justifications; 6) more references to distal goals and the distant future, and fewer references to proximal goals and the near future; and 7) more references to hope and faith. The following excerpt from the final presidential debate illustrates Obama's skilled application of Shamir et al.'s (1994) ideas:

I think we all know America is going through tough times right now. The policies of the last eight years and — and Washington's unwillingness to tackle the tough problems for decades has left us in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. And that's why the biggest risk we could take right now is to adopt the same failed policies and the same failed politics that we've seen over the last eight years and somehow expect a different result. We need fundamental change in this country, and that's what I'd like to bring. You know, over the last 20 months, you've invited me into your homes. You've shared your stories with me. And you've confirmed once again the fundamental decency and generosity of the American people. And that's why I'm sure that our brighter days are still ahead... But it's not going to be easy. It's not going to be quick. It is going to be requiring all of us — Democrats, Republicans, independents — to come together and to renew a spirit of sacrifice and service and responsibility. I'm absolutely convinced we can do it. I would ask for your vote, and I promise you that if you give me the extraordinary honor of serving as your president, I will work every single day, tirelessly, on your behalf and on the behalf of the future of our children (Barack Obama, 10/15/08).

It is important to note that a common critique of presidential leadership analysis is that professional speechwriters largely control the rhetorical content of what a candidate says, and outside third party analyses are more indicative of the skill of speechwriters than the values and charisma of the leader. However, Obama has been lauded for taking an "unusually hands-on approach" to speech writing (Newton-Small, 2008), even crafting his own content before the demands of campaigning forced him to hire a speechwriter in January of 2008 (Kaiser, 2008; Wolffe, 2008).

In addition to evoking many of the charismatic rhetoric and delivery, the Obama campaign also employed the symbolism of greatness and presidential leadership. Charismatic theory emphasizes the importance of the site of speeches, visual symbols, props, music, and lighting to enhance the appeal of the message and increase the level of excitement and emotion in followers. Obama's speech accepting the Democratic nomination was delivered in a 76,000-person, "Mile High" stadium on a stage set with faux-Greek columns (mockingly referred to as the "Barackolos"), accompanied by a cast of world-famous pop stars and followed by an elaborate display of fireworks (Wangsness, 2008). These details demonstrate a nearly textbook application of charismatic leadership theory, which predicts all of these elements are instrumental in bringing the vision "alive" for followers: 1) the use of tone of voice, inflection, pauses, and gestures to increase the intensity and emotional meaning of their message; 2) the use of visionary rhetoric laden with analogies, repetition, metaphors, and stories; and 3) a situational backdrop rich with visual symbols.

Five months before the election, however, the Obama campaign "raised eyebrows and elicited snickers when it unveiled the Obamamania version of the presidential seal" (Saul & Katz, 2008), also referred to as "The Great Seal of Obamaland" (Broder, 2008b). Republicans ridiculed this use of symbolism, referring to Obama as "The One," and mocking the "Temple of Obama" (Wangsness, 2008). However, in spite of this criticism, the overall combination of charismatic content and delivery against the backdrop of elaborate symbolism ultimately helped communicate optimism and enhance perceptions and confidence that America could achieve the promise of a better future if followers would be willing to support Obama. Perhaps in response to Obama's charismatic appeal, the recruitment of VP candidate Sarah Palin for the Republican ticket may have been a calculated attempt to confuse charisma into the McCain campaign. This strategy seemed successful in the short term, as Palin rallies inspired a great deal of enthusiasm and fervor in many followers, although some of her appeal faded with her "lackluster performance" in sit-down media interviews (Page, 2008).

1.2. Why Obama won: the role of crisis and uncertainty

Charismatic rhetoric, delivery, and symbolic appeals notwithstanding, the presidential race remained volatile entering the month of September, 2008, with tracking polls from Gallup, USA Today and CBS News all showing McCain with “some kind of lead” over Obama in the wake of the Republican convention (e.g., Gallup Daily, 9/8/08). Pundits suggested that McCain would win the race if he could sustain the post-convention bounce, and the race was deemed “too close to call” as concerns rose about a potential “Bradley effect,” where poll respondents decline to say or lie to pollsters about whether they will vote for a black candidate (Youngman, 2008). Yet the events of the following week would highlight for Americans the full extent of the financial crisis in the US, six months after former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan forecast that the economic crisis would ultimately “be judged as the most wrenching since the end of the second World War” (cited in Drum, 2008). It is our contention that the timing, scope, and ambiguity of this crisis, which unfolded dramatically in the weeks leading up to the election, provided some of the crucial fuel and oxygen to ignite the spark of Obama’s charisma and help propel him into the White House (Klein & House, 1995). Pearson & Clair (1998, p. 59) define a crisis as a “low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly.” During the single week of September 14th, 2008, the crisis situation and the scope of looming distress became increasingly evident: Merrill Lynch was bought out; Lehman Brothers failed in the largest bankruptcy in American history; AIG was loaned US$85B in emergency funds; the Bush Administration asked Congress for new powers to execute a bailout plan that could cost taxpayers billions to buy toxic debt and bad mortgages; and Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley were transformed from...
investment banks into bank holding companies. In the following days, the American people watched as Federal Reserve Chairman Benjamin Bernanke and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson testified before Congress concerning ‘The Bailout,’ followed closely by the Dow’s largest one-day point drop in history (Berte, 2008).

Once again, leadership theory forecasts Obama’s success in the wake of such a crisis. Following Weber (1947), times of crisis have been argued to create an increased opportunity for charismatic leadership to emerge, and numerous studies have examined the effects of crisis on the leadership relationship (e.g., Bligh et al., 2004a,b; Halverson, Murphy, & Riggio, 2004; House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991; Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999; Pillai, 1996; Pillai & Meindl, 1998). Willner (1984) presents a thorough discussion of the sequence of events that underlie the relationship between crisis and charisma, including: 1) a crisis situation; 2) potential followers in distress; and 3) an aspirant leader with 4) a doctrine promising deliverance. Shamir & Howell (1999) point out that relatively “weak” situations (Mischel, 1977) characterized by ambiguity and crisis create a fertile ground for charismatic leadership. Crisis situations engender perceptions of uncertainty and ambiguity in followers (Pearson & Clair, 1998), which foster a greater appreciation for strong, decisive leadership often associated with charismatic leaders (Lord & Maher, 1991; Yukl, 1999). Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne (2007) point out that both peoples’ perceptions of leaders and the leader’s impact on group performance are higher under crisis than non crisis conditions. Specifically in the context of US presidential elections, McCann (1997) found that more charismatic presidents are likely to be elected during threatening times, and that more charismatic winners are likely to have wider victory margins during times of crisis. Yukl (1999) similarly contended that an uncertain and turbulent environment is a facilitating condition for charismatic attributions.

As strategy guru Michael Porter pointed out in a recent essay, the economic crisis highlighted that Americans are living in “an age of anxiety” in which “many Americans fear for their future” and “success has come with deep insecurities” (2008, November 10, p. 39). Accepting a leader’s interpretation of a crisis and believing in his or her ability to deal with problems relieves followers of the psychological stress and loss of control created in the aftermath of a crisis (Bandura, 2001; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). One senior GOP strategist put it this way: “the country is in love with the idea of Obama, and then the market melted down. If the Democrats couldn’t win in this environment they can’t ever win” (cited in DeFrank, 2008). As the quote suggests, the tremendous ambiguity surrounding the economic crisis and how best to respond meant Obama's message of “change we can believe in” more clearly resonated with increasingly uncertain and insecure voters and dramatically reified the danger of failing to embrace change.

In addition to the timing and nature of the crisis, several other contextual factors in the 2008 election worked in Obama’s favor. Shamir & Howell (1999) pointed out that low organizational performance leads to the desire for new leadership. A long tradition of research dating back to Grusky (1963) suggests that leadership changes tend to occur more often when organizational performance is lower than expected. In such situations, incumbent leaders are convenient ‘scapegoats’ who can easily be blamed for low performance (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Shamir & Howell, 1999).

In the 2008 election, sitting President George W. Bush’s approval ratings as Americans went to the polls “dipped to 20%, the lowest ever recorded for a president” (CBS News, 2008). According to Shamir & Howell (1999), when opportunities exist for a new leader to be elected or appointed, expectations for change among followers are likely to increase, as the new leader represents “numerous opportunities to re-frame and change existing interpretations, suggest new solutions to existing problems, and infuse a new spirit” (p. 273). Given these predictions, it is easy to see how a political outsider with charismatic attributes promoting a vision of “change we can believe in,” along with a great deal of supporting campaign dollars and volunteers, might prove an attractive choice for voters, despite lacking executive experience. And Shamir & Howell (1999) point out that this effect is likely to be even greater when the new leader is replacing an incumbent who has lost any charismatic appeal and is perceived to be unsuccessful (see Bligh et al., 2005). At the same time, the unpopularity of the Bush administration served as an ongoing challenge for McCain in crafting his own vision for change, and the Obama campaign took every opportunity to reinforce the connection between McCain and the Bush administration. This exchange culminated in the third and final debate, in which McCain declared: “Senator Obama, I am not President Bush, if you wanted to run against President Bush you should have run four years ago.”

1.3. Why Obama won: the role of “follower readiness” for charisma

Serwer & Sloan’s (2008) essay on “The Price of Greed” sums up well the response of the American people to the economic crisis:

If you’re having a little trouble coping with what seems to be the complete unraveling of the world’s financial system, you needn’t feel bad about yourself. It’s horribly confusing, not to say terrifying: even people like us, with a combined 65 years of writing about business, have never seen anything like what’s going on. Some of the smartest, savviest people we know – like folks running the US Treasury and the Federal Reserve Board – find themselves reacting to problems rather than getting ahead of them. It’s terra incognita, a place no one expected to visit. Every day brings another financial horror show, as if Stephen King were channeling Alan Greenspan to produce scary stories full of negative numbers” (2008, p. 32).

In this context, charismatic leadership can be viewed as a collective coping mechanism (Madsen & Snow, 1991; Meindl, 1993), in which anxious followers socially construct and project qualities on a person to help allay their fears (Beyer, 1999a). In such circumstances, exceptional qualities in a leader may be actual, attributed, or exaggerated. As Shamir & Howell (1999, p. 260) put it, post-crisis followers “will readily, even eagerly, accept the influence of a leader who seems to have high self-confidence and a vision that provides both meaning to the current situation and promise of salvation from the currently acute distress.” Pillai & Meindl (1998) found that followers used charismatic criteria for emergent leadership more frequently in crisis situations than under less threatening conditions. After the crisis of September 11, 2001, Bligh et al. (2004a,b) provide evidence that the terrorist
attacks set the stage for an immediate transformation of the leadership relationship between President George W. Bush and the American public. Before 9/11, Bush was not seen as a strong, charismatic leader that people would place their faith in during times of crisis. However, the crisis affected both the President’s rhetoric and the public’s desire for a charismatically appealing leader, in addition to dramatically enhancing the media’s coverage of the president. Together, these factors increased attributions of charismatic leadership in the short term, as followers sought to alleviate their anxiety in the aftermath of the attacks.

Finally, it is also important to point out that interactions among followers about a leader may be just as important as the actual behaviors of the leader. Obama’s “eye-popping” and “pulsating” early rallies and caucuses (Broder, 2008a) characterized by “energy and excitement” and “enthusiastic supporters” likely augmented perceptions of his leadership through processes of social contagion (Sommier, 2008). Bono & Ilies’s (2006) research suggests that mood contagion through positive emotions is one of the primary psychological mechanisms through which charismatic leaders influence followers. Researchers have also examined how leadership influence spreads among followers, even in cases in which followers have had no direct contact or little exposure to a leader (e.g., Meindl, 1990, 1995). In one Washington State rally, the largest in state history, “Obama’s entrance was greeted with booming cheers, shouts and applause. One participant audibly shouted, ‘I love you,’ to which Obama replied ‘And I love you back,’ prompting a roar of applause and crowd accolades” (cited in Sommier, 2008). Obama’s rallies became notorious for supporters fainting amidst all of the enthusiasm, and his smooth responses evoked admiration as well (Taranto, 2008). Followers’ decisions to attribute “charisma” to an individual are to a large extent the result of such interactions, observations, and communications with one another about such events (including the infamous song and video by “Obamagirl,” “I’ve Got a Crush on Obama”; see Tapper, 2007). Through these multiple avenues, both traditional and nontraditional, charismatic attributions are literally contagious, spreading from follower to follower. Further, the Obama campaign actively encouraged this contagion through innovative, online social networking strategies and a broad volunteer network that tapped the enthusiasm of followers themselves to help ‘infect’ others with their support.

1.4. Looking forward: how Obama can succeed

Although some may argue that the 2008 election is unique, or that the ‘Obama effect’ is simply due to his distinctive temperament and charismatic appeal, we point to other examples in which followers have yearned for a charismatic “larger than life” leader in a crisis (e.g., FDR and Churchill during WWII, Juan Perón in Argentina, Lee Iacocca during the Chrysler crisis; Schwarzenegger during the California Recall Election; see also Willner, 1984). There is adequate evidence that followers’ desire for a post-crisis charismatic leader is a fairly prevalent and generalizable phenomenon. In fact, it is interesting to note that despite the recent backlash against leaders in the wake of corporate scandals (e.g., Kenneth Lay of Enron, Bernie Ebbers of WorldCom) and increased recognition of the “dark side” of charisma (Yukl, 1999), leaders are still seen as potential saviors in times of crisis. Particularly in the context of an unpopular leader and perceptions of an unsuccessful administration (Steinhauser, 2008), followers remain receptive to an incoming leadership “hero” who can ride in on the proverbial white horse and “save the day.”

It remains to be seen whether or not Obama can capitalize on this challenging situation and his charismatic appeal to effectively resolve the current economic crisis. Charismatic leadership is often a fleeting phenomenon, gained or lost quickly as circumstances change. If the crisis situation ends, or if followers become more confident and feel that they are more capable of solving problems on their own, charismatic attributions will fade. Obama may make decisions that result in failure, seem to betray his core vision or followers’ needs, or focus more on obtaining power and influence for himself and his party, rather than supporting the greater cause. Alternatively, other attractive and credible leaders may challenge Obama’s vision and undermine his effectiveness. Furthermore, Obama himself may ultimately prove his own undoing in that charismatic leaders are particularly prone to becoming victims of their own success, as we discuss below. Given these potential perils and the challenges that Obama faces in the months and years ahead, we suggest four core strategies rooted in charismatic leadership theory that may help him avoid the pitfalls of charisma that have plagued some of his predecessors.

1.4.1. Act quickly and decisively to create short-term wins

As mentioned above, both prior research and historical record suggest that charismatic appeal is often short-lived. Trice & Beyer (1986) suggest all of the following are necessary for charismatic leadership: 1) a person with extraordinary gifts and qualities; 2) a social crisis or situation of desperation; 3) a radical vision or set of ideas promising a solution to the crisis; 4) followers who are attracted to the gifted person and believe in his or her exceptional powers and radical vision; and 5) the validation of the person’s extraordinary gifts and the radical vision by repeated successes in dealing with the perceived crisis. Obama has achieved the first four of these five, and has a relatively small window in which to act decisively to validate his vision.

Coombs & Holladay (2002) distinguish among types of crises according to the level of perceived personal control, or leader’s ability to control the event, and perceived crisis responsibility, or how much the leader is to blame for the event. These distinctions are of critical importance in evaluating Obama’s potential effectiveness moving forward. As an outsider and a newcomer to the Oval Office, Obama is not currently blamed for the economic crisis; however, if he does not take measurable steps in the early stages of his administration, he will likely be blamed in the years to come.

On a more positive note, Obama’s decisions and actions during the transition period thus far seem to reflect that he understands that his charismatic capital is relatively short-lived. Already, his “historic” transition has high approval ratings, and Obama has stated that “with our economy in distress, we cannot hesitate, and we cannot delay” (cited in Horsley, 2008). As Calabresi & Fox (2008, p. 20) point out, “Obama also sees in the current mess a rare confluence of both crisis and opportunity that gives him the chance to remake the US economy.” He must seize on this rare confluence quickly. President Bush sustained a tremendous surge in
popularity in the wake of the 9/11 crisis, but this effect was already waning six months later, and had completely dissipated one year after the attacks (Bligh et al., 2004a). Early signs suggest that Obama will act decisively: “taken together, his bold moves heralded the fastest start by a President-elect in memory and one of the most dramatic takeovers ever” (Calabresi & Fox, 2008, p. 18). In addition, given the tremendous ambiguity surrounding the crisis and perceptions of its vast global scope, Obama can strategically use the lack of clarity regarding exactly what “success” looks like in this situation to symbolically frame action, in whatever form, as progress. This strategy can free him to focus on implementing more lasting, sustained changes in a wide range of policies over the longer term.

1.4.2. Develop integrative leadership through bipartisanship

In the early months of his administration, Obama should continue to cultivate his bipartisan image. “Mr. Obama’s rise has been built in part on the idea that he represents a break from the established identities that have defined many of the nation’s divisions. To many, he embodies a promise to bridge black and white, old and young, rich and poor — and Democrats, Republicans and Independents.” (Toner, 2008). Due to their often powerful appeal and nonconventional visions for the future, charismatic leaders are often extremely divisive figures that create bitter enemies as well as devoted followers (Bass, 1985; Bryman, 1993; Howell, 1988; Howell & Avolio, 1992; Yukl, 1999). In some situations, the charismatic leader may prove so divisive that he or she paralyzes the change process. Historically, charismatic leaders have also become public targets for the opposition, and leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Benazir Bhutto, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. were ultimately assassinated.

For these reasons, it is critical for Obama to sustain his image as an integrator across parties and constituents in order to disarm the identity threat that his rise to power represents for those on both the left and the right of the political spectrum (see Hogg, 2001). Conservatives, facing Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress and narrowly escaping a filibuster-proof Democratic Senate, fear Obama’s (contested) label as the “most liberal” Senator in 2007. As Obama (2006) himself recognizes: “I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views.” Followers on the left fear Obama’s defection to the middle. Newton-Small & Scherer (2008, p. 40) point out that “as his pragmatic side fills that (blank) screen, those loyal foot soldiers who got used to seeing their own reflections are beginning to cry betrayal.” Obama has to ensure that relevant subgroups each see their own identities and values are adequately reflected in the top levels of his administration. Instilling this sense of inclusiveness will go a long way towards rebuilding cohesiveness across party lines (see Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003).

1.4.3. Cultivate dissenting points of view

Due to the extraordinary, even heroic qualities that followers attribute to charismatic leaders, Obama may begin to believe that he really is exceptionally qualified to determine America’s fate. Over time, this dynamic can result in increasingly autocratic, manipulative, dictatorial leadership that is increasingly intolerant of dissent or alternate points of view. In light of this general tendency, it is promising that Obama has publicly referred to President Abraham Lincoln’s strategy of incorporating bipartisanship and dissent into his administrative team, reading Goodwin’s (2005) book “Team of Rivals,” which focuses on Lincoln’s Cabinet (cited in Hornick, 2008). History reminds us that none of the ingredients of the charismatic leadership relationship guarantee that the leader’s vision is morally defensible or ethical, nor do they prohibit followers from carrying out unethical or violent behaviors in pursuit of the leader’s vision (e.g., Adolf Hitler, Jim Jones). The purposeful cultivation of dissenting points of view can provide an important check against sacrificing core ideals or cutting ethical corners for “the sake of the larger good” (see Price, 2003).

1.4.4. Foster pragmatism

Finally, we suggest that Obama should cultivate pragmatism, perhaps tandem to his charisma, in order to institute difficult systemic changes moving forward. Mumford & Van Doorn (2001) point out that pragmatic leaders exert their influence through an in-depth understanding of the social system at hand and the causal variables that shape system operations. Pragmatic leaders are skilled at manipulating current situations to bring about “efficient practical solutions to significant system problems” (see also Mumford, 2006). Early cabinet selections have already earned Obama this ‘pragmatic’ label, and descriptions of Vice President-Elect Joseph Biden have frequently evoked the term as well. Further, Obama’s appointments of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, General James Jones as National Security Advisor, and the retention of Robert Gates (an appointee of President Bush) as Secretary of Defense – all described as “pragmatists” – also seem to bode well for his ability to pursue his immediate policy goals (Zogby, 2008). Baker (2008) agrees, suggesting that “the times and circumstances of his election call not for a sharp ideological turn but for pragmatism.” Continuing to pursue a pragmatic course will help to ensure that the high hopes and expectations of followers are tempered by the practicalities of getting things done in difficult times.

1.5. Continuing the dialogue

Of course, there are many, many other suggestions that we could offer President-Elect Barack Obama – flexibility, consistency, authenticity, courage – to name just a few. But a quick search of the internet reveals that others have already offered these and other countless tidbits of advice. Leadership is ultimately an incredibly complex phenomenon that is not easily distilled into laundry lists of traits and behaviors, nor readily implemented based on the simple advice of pundits, a fact that Obama already appears to understand. We have presented one version of the election story through the lens of charismatic leadership theory. Hopefully, others will apply other relevant leadership theory and research findings to the unfolding Obama presidency, and continue to build needed bridges between leadership theory and current events.
Given the complexity and ambiguity of the current crisis, cognitive theories of leadership represent one potentially promising area for continuing this dialogue. Mumford et al. (2007) point out that crisis situations imply that novel ideas and responses must be generated by the leader, often involving complex multiple subsystems where the outcomes of action are ambiguous. In crisis situations, knowledge alone is an insufficient basis for solving problems. Leaders must also apply multiple cognitive processes, including environmental scanning, activation of descriptive and prescriptive mental models, plan formulation, development of back-up plans, and opportunistic implementation.

Ultimately, leaders are always defined by their successes and failures, and Barack Obama will be no exception. As of this writing, the nation and the world look to the promise of Obama with more than a little hope. At the core of Obama’s presidential campaign was “a promise that he can transcend the starkly red-and-blue politics of the last 15 years, end the partisan and ideological wars and build a new governing majority” (Newton-Small & Scherer, 2008, p. 40). As a skeptical chief Clinton strategist observed, “It’s a great promise. But are the actions consistent with the words?” (cited in Toner, 2008). And, ironically, the crisis context under which he began running for President two years ago was based on the war in Iraq. Perhaps he could not have imagined at the time the financial crisis he now faces.

Historically, Presidents are more often defined not by the agendas they set, but by how they adapt their agendas to respond to crises amidst an ‘unpredictable reality’ (Zogby, 2008). In Stengel’s (2008, p. 44) review of Nelson Mandela’s lifetime leadership lessons, he refers to Mandela as “the most pragmatic of idealists.” If Barack Obama is to ultimately succeed as the 44th President, he might aspire to a similar title. According to the voice of change himself, singer/songwriter Bob Dylan, “Barack Obama is ‘changin’ America’” (Jackson & Byers, 2008). But his followers must also remember “the truth is that the people create the conditions for the leader, not the other way around” (Coates, 2008, p. 33). Obama is neither Messiah nor miracle worker. Perhaps this is the clearest message of all, and one that is unlikely to foster high news ratings. In Obama’s words:

“young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled, Americans sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of Red states and Blue states…” we are and always will be, the United States of America.”

And ultimately, all of these Americans, more or less united under Obama’s leadership, have a lot of work to do.

References

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