The effects of crisis, cynicism about change, and value congruence on perceptions of authentic leadership and attributed charisma in the 2008 presidential election

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines leadership in the context of the 2008 presidential election. Longitudinal data were collected across three regions of the United States to yield 414 responses. Perceptions of crisis were positively related to attributed charisma but not perceptions of authentic leadership. Value congruence moderated the relationship between cynicism and attributed charisma for Obama (but not for McCain) and between cynicism and perceptions of authentic leadership for McCain (but not for Obama). Attributed charisma was found to have augmenting effects over authenticity in predicting voting behavior. The contributions made to the charismatic, authentic, and crisis leadership literatures are discussed and directions for future research presented.

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1. Introduction

The context of the 2008 presidential election was punctuated by a country in crisis. Overtly evidenced by plunging financial and illiquid credit markets, the crisis was, at its core, a crisis of confidence in institutions and the leaders of those institutions. Public and private institutions heretofore regarded as too stalwart, too impenetrable, or too savvy to fail, suddenly did. The 2008 Presidential election thus provides a unique opportunity to study the selection of a leader during a crisis. It was also a unique opportunity to study a leader who not only promised change but also, at least symbolically, embodied change itself. This could be contrasted with a leader who represented the status quo which was associated with two ongoing unpopular wars and evidence of what is arguably the greatest financial collapse since the great depression, precipitating a national crisis.

Given the public perceptions of an increasing decline in the morality of some of today's business and political leaders there has been a renewed interest in positive forms of leadership and in leaders who demonstrate authenticity or the ability to be true to their own values (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). There is also growing cynicism in the public's belief that leaders will deliver what they promise in terms of real change. Yorges, Weiss, and Strickland (1999) suggest that beyond situational factors, leadership perceptions are influenced by interpretations of the personal qualities of the leader based in observations over time. For instance, a leader who is perceived as decisive, risk-taking or achievement oriented could be the beneficiary of attributions of charisma (Shamir & Howell, 1999). Past studies have demonstrated the role of charismatic leadership in the context of a crisis. In this study, we posit that leadership evaluations, expressed in the form of voting behavior, may be further influenced by the authenticity of a leader's responses to contextual factors.

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The current study focuses on an emerging area of leadership research: Authentic leadership. In the context of a decade of the various financial excesses (e.g., subprime mortgages) culminating in the financial collapse of 2008, there has been a steady stream of research on authentic leadership which draws from the literatures in leadership, ethics, and positive psychology, and organizational behavior (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Walumbwa et al. (2008) conceptualize authentic leadership as "a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development" (2008: 95). The influence of context on leadership perceptions and attendant outcomes has received limited attention to date. Yet the role of context is crucial as it influences both follower cognitions (that crisis exists) and affect (cynicism about change) which are formative elements in the development of leadership perceptions (Day, 2000).

Crisis is an especially salient context. Crisis in general implies time pressured change relative to standard operating procedures (Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007). In the particular context of presidential leadership, swift decisions are needed to resolve severe domestic and international issues facing the nation (Williams, Pillai, Lowe, Jung, & Herst, 2009). Cynicism About Organizational Change (CAOC) (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000) is an individual attitude (Ajzen, 2001) which develops from experience with and a loss of faith in (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997) leaders who have failed previous attempts at change and who failed to include follower participation in decisions. Kark and Shamir (2002) emphasize the importance of studying contextual variables as a mechanism through which to understand how a leader's identity and his or her resulting effectiveness are shaped. This sentiment is echoed by Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, and May (2004) who called for greater longitudinal integration of historical, current, and future possible contexts to extend our understanding of the authentic leadership process.

Research on charisma has often identified crisis as a sufficient but not necessary condition for the emergence of a charismatic leader (House, 1977; Willner, 1984). Williams et al. (2009) found crisis to be positively related to attributions of charisma for the challenger to an incumbent. However, Pillai and Meindl (1998) found charisma was negatively related to perceived crisis for incumbent leaders, possibly because the existence of a crisis implies ineffective leadership. Although the influence of context on attributions of charisma has been studied in the past (Williams et al., 2009), there is limited or no research to examine how context influences perceptions of leader authenticity. Despite calls for investigations of the effects of context on leadership perceptions (Avolio et al., 2004), the extant literature on authentic leadership has not addressed its effects during times of crisis, nor has the influence of cynicism about change been explored as a contextual variable affecting authentic leadership perceptions. Further, as previous research has demonstrated, it is important to build an understanding of how value congruence influences leadership perceptions (Williams et al., 2009).

There have also been calls for theoretical integration between leadership theories and process variables such as value congruence (Avolio et al., 2004; Jung & Avolio, 2000; Williams et al., 2009). Though few studies have heeded that call, Williams et al. (2009) found that leadership evaluations and value congruence were related to attributions of charisma and influenced reported voting behavior; they suggested that future research build on values that influence leadership emergence. Leader values must be aligned with those of followers if they are to engender trust (Jung & Avolio, 2000) and mitigate feelings of cynicism. Williams et al. (2009) suggest that an alignment of values might help followers connect more closely with the leader's vision. The purpose of this research therefore is to examine authentic leadership and leader charisma in the context of follower perceptions of crisis and attitudes of cynicism about the institution of government and also the role of value congruence in mitigating the negative effects of cynicism.

Walumbwa et al. (2008) suggest a need for greater theoretical integration of authentic leadership with behavioral theories and more longitudinal studies to explore the dynamics through which leader behavior influences follower attitudes and behaviors. In this study, we break new ground by examining the extent to which authentic leadership provides a base for effective charismatic leadership effects by investigating the augmenting effects of attributed charisma over authentic leadership perceptions on a leadership outcome (selection via voting behavior). The U.S. presidential election of 2008 provided a rich contextual opportunity to study these relationships.

2. Background

The concept of authenticity may help to inform our understanding of how charismatic leaders influence followers by exploring the processes through which followers form perceptions and select leaders. Authentic leaders are individuals who behave ethically, are guided by a strict moral code, are impervious to external influences, engender hope and optimism in followers, help people find meaning in themselves and their life, facilitate recovery from catastrophic events, and are honest and truthful even when it is tough to stay the course (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) posit that authenticity is associated with higher levels of cognitive, emotional, and moral development. Avolio et al. (2004) "…propose that authentic leadership influences followers' attitudes and behaviors through the key psychological processes of identification, hope, positive emotions, optimism, and trust" (p. 815).

Research by George (2003) and Bass (1985) illustrate how authentic leaders may or may not be charismatic or described as charismatic by others even though they build enduring relationships, work hard, and lead with purpose, meaning, and values. It follows then that the more authentic a charismatic leader is, the more potential that leader has to build trust with followers. The 'Leader Self-Awareness' component of authentic leadership indicates the level at which the individual trusts in their own emotions, cognitions, and motivations. In short, to be self-aware is to 'know one's self' (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Charismatic leaders may be able to create a 'vision' and lead with purpose, but followers may not develop trusting relationships because they have not had the time to develop a more personal relationship with the leader. In other words, the relationship may be 'at arm's length'. When we add authenticity, it allows for followers to see that the motivations and emotions a charismatic leader presents