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Crisis, charisma, values, and voting behavior in the 2004 presidential election

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ABSTRACT

This study extends Pillai and Williams [1998, Pillai, R., Williams, E.A., Lowe, K.B., & Jung, D.I. (2003). Personality, transformational leadership, trust, and the 2000 U.S. presidential vote. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14, 161–192] and examines leadership in the context of the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Data were collected at two time periods from respondents in three locations across two major regions of the U.S. Our results indicate that respondents' perception of crisis was related to charismatic leadership in the negative direction for the incumbent George W. Bush and in the positive direction for the challenger John Kerry. For Bush and Kerry the relationship between crisis and voting behavior was mediated by charismatic leadership. For Bush, decisiveness was related to charismatic leadership, which in turn predicted voting behavior. For Kerry, decisiveness and charismatic leadership predicted voting behavior. Implications of the findings for leadership research, in particular with respect to an incumbent and the challenger to an incumbent leader, are discussed.

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The events of September 11, 2001 (“9/11”) and subsequent military initiatives in Afghanistan and Iraq have highlighted the enormous challenges faced by the U.S. president. Voter concerns have been jolted from an insular focus on domestic economic issues to an increased emphasis on candidate leadership abilities. The reality of 21st century U.S. presidential leadership is that voters are focused on an increasingly complex global stage both politically and economically. In this environment, presidential candidates who can make meaning from seemingly insurmountable complexity, provide a clear sense of direction, and appear willing to take principled action will be sought by voters. Thus, voter evaluations of candidates' leadership ability, character, and identification with his or her values are likely to play an even more important role in determining voting behavior in post 9/11 presidential elections. However, until recently, most studies of voting behavior have focused on voter party affiliation and identification.

Leadership and personality issues are receiving increased attention in research seeking to explain presidential performance (Simonton, 2006). This increase is not surprising given that most polling data collected close to a presidential election indicate that perceptions of leadership and character are often defining issues for the voter. In many popular polls (e.g., CNN, Gallup), it is customary to include single item questions about what is important (e.g., How important is leadership in your decision to vote for a particular candidate?). These impressions and attributions are likely to be extremely important in determining which candidates emerge as the victor since perceptions of leadership traits and behavioral characteristics have been argued to be far more

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important than actual leadership measured by group effectiveness in the emergence of leadership (Rubin, Bartels, & Bommer, 2002). Though leader emergence and leadership effectiveness are distinct concepts, when measured perceptually they often become blurred in practice (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). The idea of voting for the leader of one's choice lends itself to the emergence framework in which voters assess the candidates and cast their vote for someone who is perceived as most leader-like in conjunction with their perceptions of personality, values, and leadership. The present study, set in the context of the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, builds on a framework of prior research to explore substantive new questions into the process through which context, charismatic leadership, leader values, and decisiveness impact voting behavior.

Pillai & Williams (1998) showed that leadership perceptions were positively related to both intent to vote and actual voting behavior, after accounting for the impact of traditional variables such as party affiliation. Pillai, Williams, Lowe, & Jung (2003) showed that perceptions of candidate proactive behavior, empathy, and need for achievement were related to transformational and charismatic leadership. Leadership mediated the relationship between personality (in the form of need for achievement and emotional empathy) and vote. Further, trust in the leader was shown to be an important mediating variable between leadership perceptions and voting behavior. The work of Pillai et al. provided important insights into the process whereby voters evaluate leadership abilities and consequently make voting decisions. However, the variables investigated by Pillai et al. are relatively context free since they would be of high importance to voter choice in any presidential election context.

The 2004 elections were the first Presidential elections to be held after the terrorist attacks on September 11 and are historic in that regard. The elections were also the first elections in recent memory to be conducted when the nation was engaged in conflict. Consequently the 2004 presidential election provided an opportunity to explore the impact that a crisis context has on leadership evaluations and subsequent voting behavior. Consistent with our interest in crisis as context we are further interested in the role played by perceptions of value congruence and specific candidate traits such as decisiveness, in determining the vote.

The purpose of this study is to extend the scope of the Pillai and Williams (1998) and Pillai et al. (2003) studies in the context of the 2004 presidential elections by examining the role of crisis, value congruence, and decisiveness in influencing charismatic leadership perceptions and reported voting behavior. We begin by reviewing the elements of charismatic leadership theories and the major findings in that domain. Next we review the importance of context, specifically a context of crisis to the leadership literature and position our study within those research streams. This research helps to increase our understanding of how crisis shapes perceptions of leadership and then explores the process through which the effects of crisis on voting behavior might be mediated by other intervening variables.

1. Charisma

Interest in charismatic leadership has grown over the last two decades (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Charismatic leadership has been studied quite extensively in recent years (Lowe & Gardner, 2000) and is often described as one of the “new” leadership approaches that are better suited to the dynamic political and sociological environments that we live in (Bryman, 1993). Bass (1990) discusses charisma as a critical element in transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are described as influencing subordinates to perform beyond expected levels through activation of subordinates' higher order needs (Bass, 1990). The charismatic leader exerts influence on subordinates through a process of emotional identification with the leader which induces them to transcend their own self-interests for a superordinate goal. While transactional leaders are identified by an exchange relationship based on compliance (Bass, 1985), charismatic leaders are identified by the engagement of follower beliefs, needs, and values (Burns, 1978). Research by Bass (1985) has demonstrated that transformational leadership augments the effects of transactional leadership on outcomes.

Weber (1968) described charismatic individuals as possessing a personality that distinguishes the person as extraordinary and is therefore “...treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (p. 241). Bryman (1993) suggests that charismatic leaders enjoy great personal loyalty from followers because of their characteristics which cause them to be perceived as exceptional and thus deserving of commitment to accomplish their mission. Based on the work of Shamir (1995) and Yammarino (1994) it appears that this attribution of charisma operates for immediate followers as well as for those who follow at a distance as occurs in the context of a presidential election. In the present research, we suggest that voters are able to evaluate their candidates using values, perceptions of traits, and contextual criteria and allow a particular candidate to emerge as a charismatic leader for whom they signal their acceptance by casting their vote.

Research has examined charismatic leadership in a variety of settings. An empirical link has been established for such leadership with individual and organizational outcomes such as performance, satisfaction, and commitment (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; DeGroot, Kiker, & Cross, 2000; Dum Dum, Lowe, & Avolio, 2002; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). As noted by House & Shamir (1993), these studies have been conducted across a wide variety of samples including managers, the military, and U.S. presidents. In the political science literature charismatic leaders are characterized not only as accomplishing “the emotional seizure” of the masses (Schweitzer 1974: 157) but also ruling by that. Shamir & Howell (1999) suggest that perceptions of charisma can be influenced by the nature of the leader's prior performance in office. Madsen & Snow (1991) assert that perceptions of charisma are heightened when contextual circumstances cause followers to look to political leaders for a solution and the often evokes an emotional response to leaders that enables them to exert strong influence over followers. In the next few paragraphs, we examine the role of crisis in facilitating the emergence of charismatic leadership.

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