



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

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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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“If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer...Change has come to America. A new dawn of American leadership is at hand.” — Barack Obama, November 2, 2008 (cited in DeFrank, 2008).

“You campaign in poetry, but you govern in prose.” — Hillary Rodham Clinton (citing Mario Cuomo, January 6, 2008).

The recent 2008 United States presidential election has been labeled ‘historic,’ ‘momentous,’ ‘exciting,’ ‘incredible,’ and even ‘shocking.’ The somewhat overwhelming cacophony of media pundits, journalists, political commentators, and senior campaign staffers has provided over two years of commentary about the election, the candidates, and the leadership potential, experience, and background of the primary contenders. Noticeably absent from this dialogue, however, have been the voices of leadership scholars and researchers who develop, discuss, and test theories to describe and understand leadership. In addition, much of the commentary surrounding the presidential candidates remains primarily focused on the personal characteristics of the leaders themselves (e.g., Gibbs, 2008), with less attention paid to aspects of followers and the contextual backdrop of the election in understanding perceptions of leadership. The purpose of this essay is to explore the application of charismatic leadership theory to the 2008 presidential election, in hopes of inspiring future dialog about how leadership theory can inform the critical process of how we evaluate and ultimately elect public leaders.

In the following sections, we explore the application of charismatic leadership theory to the election of Barack Obama. We have chosen charismatic leadership not because it is the only leadership theory, or even necessarily the most appropriate leadership theory,

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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.

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