

The leadership factor in populist emergence: Evidence from Europe*

TAKIS S. PAPPAS

This paper is part of a comparative project on populist leadership. It only includes the theoretical and conceptual bits since empirical analysis is still in progress (but will be presented in the conference in slides). At this stage, no part of this work is to be cited without the author's permission.

The issue

How does charismatic leadership relate to, and work on, populism? And how much does it account for the latter's continuing success? While several authors have considered charismatic leadership an essential feature of populism (Germani 1978, Betz 1998: 9, Canovan 1999: 6, Taggart 2000: 102, Eatwell 2002, Pedahzur and Brichta 2002, Hawkins 2003: 1138, Zaslove 2008: 324), quite a few others remain skeptical (Roberts 1995: 88, Mudde 2007, Art 2011: 56-7).

Although most students of populism stress the relationship between political populism and charismatic leadership, some remain unconvinced, and with good reason. As Mudde (2007: 262) explains, "[t]he key problem with the variable 'charismatic leader' is the vagueness of the term." Consequently, "as long as the notion of charisma is not explicitly defined, this explanation of support of populist parties is not open to empirical falsification, which in turn means that it is not useful for scientific explanation" (van der Brug and Mughan 2007: 44). No wonder, then, that several authors choose to dismiss the usefulness of the concept, as its "reasoning becomes circular, *unless we define very strictly what is (and what is not) meant by charisma*" (van der Brug, Fennema et al. 2005: 542; emphasis added).

There are at least two major reasons for such sharply different opinions – first, a lack of conceptual clarity about, let alone a theory of, charismatic leadership that remains dissociated from electoral performance and, second, the dearth of large-*n* empirical research on the relationship between charisma and populism. What we therefore need is a novel understanding of political charisma, which, besides rendering our object amenable to empirical falsification, will also provide us with specific indicators for distinguishing as

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¹ Note that, although our theoretical and empirical concerns are specifically about populist leadership, the present discussion applies to each and all instances of *democratic*, and hence legitimate, charismatic leadership irrespective of whether such leaders are populist or not.

² In his *Sociology of Religion* (1993), Weber distinguishes primarily between two different religious actors to whom laypersons in older societies used to turn seeking help and, often, salvation: the priest and the

unambiguously as possible charismatic from non-charismatic leaders. Our reconceptualization should moreover point via the causal hypotheses embedded in it (Goertz 2006: 65-6) to the ways that charismatic leadership may determine key facets of the populist phenomenon, like its emergence, development, and relative success. Ergo, this article aims at a novel conceptualization of political charisma, which will then be used for empirically assessing whether, and to which extent, contemporary Europe's populist leaders are indeed charismatic. I am herein undertaking the first part of the task (i.e., reconceptualization) while putting the second part on hold for a later time.

What is political charisma? A reconceptualization

In a nutshell, the question is: which democratic political leaders are charismatic, and which are not?¹ Since we obviously cannot resolve that charisma is to be found in the eye of the beholder, we need to stipulate generally agreed criteria for admitting certain leaders into the charismatic group while barring others.

True enough, charisma is related to a leader's qualities, but not any qualities; it is rather a function of such qualities associated with a leader's *extraordinary* political role within the otherwise ordinary political system that liberal democracy is reckoned to be. In essence, therefore, we need to establish criteria for extraordinary (i.e., charismatic) vis-à-vis ordinary (i.e., non-charismatic) leadership in democracy. Starting from what is our obligatory point of departure, Max Weber, it is worth keeping in mind while probing into this matter that, as Andreas Kalyvas (2002, 2008) has convincingly shown, in Weber's writings there are *two* dimensions of charismatic leadership: an individual and a collective one. We are today more familiar with the former dimension, which appears in Weber's mature works and conceives of charismatic leaders as creative agents endowed with extraordinary personal attributes who appear during political crises and other emergency situations to provide solutions. However, in his earlier (pre-1913) writings, Weber appreciated political charisma as the power of leaders (mostly of religious movements) to defy prevailing worldviews, forging instead new collective entities on the basis of "discourses of justification against the established order" and by providing a "radical founding of a novel structure of legitimacy" (Kalyvas 2002: 71-2).² While most scholars

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² In his *Sociology of Religion* (1993), Weber distinguishes primarily between two different religious actors to whom laypersons in older societies used to turn seeking help and, often, salvation: the priest and the prophet. Weber applied the term "priest" to denote "the functionaries of a regularly organized and permanent enterprise concerned with influencing the gods" and possessing a certain "professional equipment of special knowledge, fixed doctrine, and vocational qualifications" (*ibid.*, 28, 29). In contrast, he understood a "prophet" to mean the "founder of [new] religion" or "renewer of [old] religion" (*ibid.*: 46), who "break[s] through priestly routines to reawaken unfulfilled spiritual needs and restore religious vitality" (Parsons 1993: xii). "As a rule," Weber (1993: 66) claims, the prophet "is himself a layman, and ... every prophecy by its very nature *devalues* the ... priestly enterprise" (emphasis added). In rough correspondence, the relationship between ancient priests and prophets is akin to that between present-day ordinary (or *legal-rational*) and extraordinary (or *charismatic*) leaders.

are familiar with Weber's later ideas of charisma as exercised by plebiscitarian and demagogic leaders in normal politics, they sometimes seem to ignore his earlier ideas about the instituting potential of charismatic (i.e., extraordinary) politics. It is precisely those ideas that, as I shall shortly argue, are also relevant for – and usefully applicable – in particular to the study of leadership in contemporary populism.

Having said the foregoing, and granting that “a concept *is* its intention, for [it] encompasses all its characteristics or properties” (Sartori 1984: 40), our attempt in this section to reconstruct charisma will follow the spirit of Weber by focusing exclusively on charismatic leadership in the context of contemporary European democracies. Let us begin by underpinning the notion of *ordinary* leadership in pluralist systems.

As the closest approximation to Weber's ideal type of “legal-rational” authority, contemporary liberal democracies are highly institutionalized rule-bound political systems of bureaucratic domination in which formal procedure and the rule of law hold sway over adversarial politics and radical ruptures. In such systems, voters (or principals) are expected to select their leaders (or agents), who, in turn, are expected to exercise their rule in a *systemic* way – that is to say, “engage in everyday, normal politics that neither question nor threaten the instituted society but instead accept it and reproduce it” (Kalyvas 2002: 79). Ordinary leadership, then, entails the following ontological characteristics: the impersonality of its rule, an emphasis on procedural moderation, and continuity. It typically involves a hierarchical organization of offices regulated by common rules, norms, and procedures in a “spirit of formalistic impersonality [operating] *sine ira et studio*” (Weber 1978: 225); it also has continuity “as one of its most important characteristics” (*ibid.*: 1111). It is in these respects – the impersonal nature of relationship between leader and followers on the one hand and the emphasis on continuity through moderate, rather than radical, political change on the other – that ordinary leadership differs from the extraordinary and charismatic one. That being the case, how are we to empirically assess the constitutive properties of charismatic leadership?

The criteria in a liberal democratic system for deciding whether a leader is charismatic are two: the nature of rulership and the aims of rule. According to the first criterion, the leader counts as charismatic whenever, and as long as, he exercises personal authority with respect to both his internal party organization and its appeal to the party followers. But this is hardly enough since, according to Weber, what make leaders charismatic cannot only be the exceptional individual qualities that make them sovereign within their parties and among their followers. It is mainly the ability of such leaders to convey a message that effectively amounts to a call to radically break with an established order.³ In Weber's own words, “charisma transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms” (Weber 1978: 1115, 1117) seeking to cause a “*radical alternation* of the central attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the

³ “Radical change” is thus distinguished not only from moderate but also from revolutionary change, i.e., one involving outright challenges, often by extra-institutional means, to existing institutional systems. In his *Politics*, Aristotle was the first to tell apart radical change involving modifications to an existing constitution from complete (i.e., revolutionary) change from one political order to another.

different problems of the ‘world’” (*ibid.*: 245; emphasis mine). Our study of charismatic leadership should consequently “focus on the *individual* person who takes the responsibility for announcing a *break* in the established normative order and declaring this break to be morally *legitimate*, thereby setting himself in significant respects in explicit opposition to the established order” (Parsons 1993: xliii-xliv; all emphases in original). According to the second criterion, therefore, charismatic leaders affect democracy in radical ways since they aim for a wide-ranging makeover of a democracy’s institutional architecture rather than seeking to implement simple law and policy reforms (“It is written, but *I* say unto you”). The contrast of characteristics between ordinary legal-rational and extraordinary charismatic leadership is depicted in *Table 1* below.

Table 1
Types of legitimate leadership according to nature and aims of rule

	LEGAL-RATIONAL (“ordinary” leadership)	CHARISMATIC (“extraordinary” leadership)
<i>Rulership</i>	Impersonal	Personal
<i>Rule aims</i>	Moderation	Radicalism

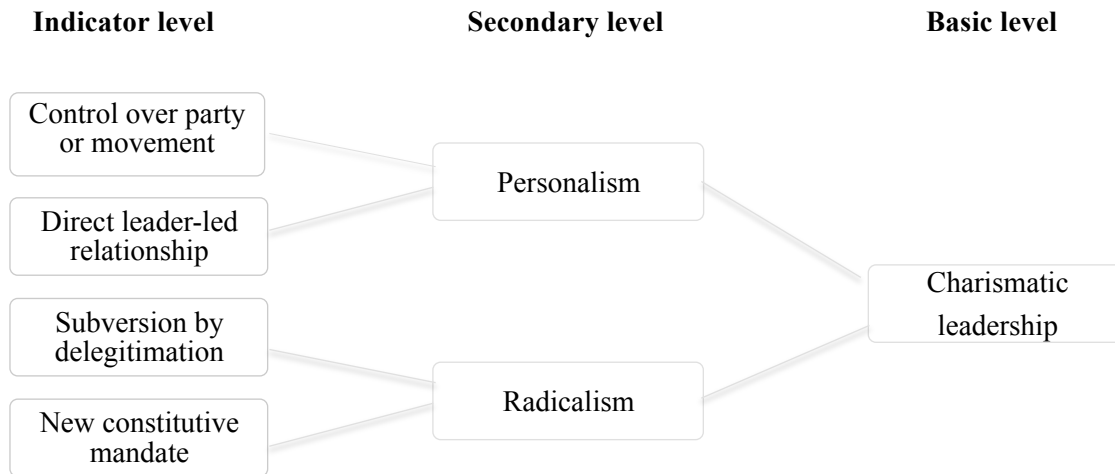
Having identified the core elements of our concept, we may now minimally define political charisma as *a distinct type of legitimate leadership that is personal and aims at the radical transformation of an established institutional order*. However minimal, this definition is fully amenable to empirical observation and sufficient in seizing the object. It tells us precisely the core (i.e., the necessary and sufficient) characteristics of charismatic leadership but remains open about its causes, mechanics, and outcomes. Most crucially, under this definition charismatic leaders are not identified as such by their electoral success, which, as Art (2011: 57) correctly points out, would make for a tautological analysis. In fact, our criteria for charismatic leadership can be used in a *predictive*, rather than postdictive, manner so as to establish patterns of populist success. Finally, our criteria point to the fact that charisma is a time-bound property: it may be lost once one or both of them cease to exist, in which case leaders are relegated to ordinary leadership status; inversely, leaders get elevated from ordinary to charismatic status once they come to meet both criteria.

Still, defining the fundamental constitutive (or, better, ontological) criteria of charismatic leadership is not the same as applying them in the real world for collecting, and systematically assembling, empirical data. That requires the operationalization of our two criteria, to which we now turn.

Since we are herein preoccupied with an empirical science based on descriptive data analysis, we need to be specific on how to determine whether or not some instance of leadership falls under our concept of political charisma. Such an operationalization necessitates the use of clear indicators or, to use Hempel’s own words (1952: 41), “criteria

of application couched in terms of observational or experimental procedure,” which will further lead us to a concise operational treatment of our term taking the form “let x be what can be defined (and verified or falsified) via the indicators a , b and c ” (Sartori 2009: 89). *Figure 1* below treats political charisma as a “three-level concept” (Goertz 2006: 6, 50-3) containing all the necessary and sufficient conditions for it to materialize. I have already pointed to the two secondary level properties, “personalism” and “radicalism,” which, when put together, is possible to clearly tell charismatic leadership apart from other known forms of democratic leadership. It is now time that we turn our attention to the indicator/data level. This is where “the concept gets specific enough to guide the acquisition of empirical data” (*ibid.*, 62) and eventually permit us to assert whether a certain leader may be classified as charismatic or not.

Figure 1
Charismatic leadership as a three-level concept



In the case of personalism, on the one hand, we have indicator-level variables of full leader’s authority over a party, or movement, and the direct and unmediated relationship between the leader and the led. As of the first indicator, whereas ordinary democratic leadership involves established hierarchies, institutional checks and balances, decentralized decision-making, and collective responsibility, charismatic leadership exhibits highly centralized authority structures, the absence of clear bureaucratic characteristics, and the leader’s untrammelled control over subordinates – in short, what Eatwell (2006) and others (McDonnell 2014) refer to as “coterie charisma.” Most typically, the leader is the one who has founded (or co-founded) the party. In many cases, winning full control requires fierce intra-party conflicts ending with the unconditional defeat (and often expulsion from the party) of the leader’s internal opposition. After the consolidation of the leader’s single-handed authority, “the division of labor [in the party] is constantly redefined at the leader’s

discretion, career uncertainties are considerable, no accepted procedures exist, and improvisation is the only real organizational ‘rule’” (Panebianco 1988: 146).

The second indicator of personalism obtains from the particular relationship that develops between leader and followers. In liberal democracy, this relationship is expected to be indirect and mediated through impersonal institutions, reliant upon non-passionate and undramatic narratives. In contrast, charismatic leadership has a quasi-missionary nature and is characterized by the unmediated and direct – and often quite intimate – relationship of followers to the person of the leader. Quite typically, such relationships are marked by their uncompromised loyalty and emotional passion, stand on high moral ground, and are self-righteous in that the leader’s program is presented as heralding a bright new world (Madsen and Snow 1991, Goodwin, Jasper et al. 2001, Zuquete 2007). The most classic manifestation of such a relationship are the mass political rallies, for which charismatic leaders have a strong penchant for both the collective mobilization and the social effervescence they tend to generate.

In the case of radicalism, on the other hand, we also have two indicators that can be empirically assessed with sufficient clarity: the legal (normally non-violent) subversion of the status quo through systematic delegitimation and the institution in its place of an entirely novel system of authority. Thus, our third indicator of charismatic leadership is its methodical attacks on the established authority structure in order to delegitimize it. Such leaders are radical precisely because they “challenge the existing widespread beliefs and meanings that sustain the legitimacy of a political and juridical order. They seek first to disrupt and subvert the motivational and normative grounds of an established institutional and legal structure before replacing it with a new [and allegedly better] one” (Kalyvas 2008: 27). Such attacks on the programmatic injustice or the moral and ethical deficit of the existing order abound in the political discourse of charismatic leaders and are easily traceable through the use of the various techniques of discourse analysis.

The fourth and final indicator of charisma is complementary to the previous one and consists in the introduction by charismatic leaders of some novel worldview from which fresh legitimacy will be derived to constitute anew the political community.⁴ During this process and mostly through their discourse, charismatic leaders present themselves as creative artists who “objectify new relationships” and provide new symbolic and normative foundations for a fresh cycle of politics to commence. Charismatic leaders, therefore, by winning both symbolic and real political battles, always seek to create new legal and institutional structures. Note that this indicator is valid both when charismatic leaders are in opposition (as traced in their political discourses, proposed policy programs and overall opposition action) and in power. Quite interestingly, once in power, charismatic leaders are often keen to provide new constitutions (or radically modify existing ones) reflecting the higher moral values and normative principles of their own worldview.

⁴ Evidently, putting forward a radical political agenda with hegemonic potential is not only a prerogative of parties in office. In fact, so strong is sometimes the identification of parties in opposition with a particular issue that enters public discourse, and radically seeks to alter the policy agenda, that both the government and other opposition parties have to define themselves and their policies in relation to it. Such, for instance, have been the cases of the French FN and the Austrian FPÖ with regard to nationalism and immigration.

For purposes of empirical analysis, the four indicators suggesting the ontological properties and, therefore, the existence of what denotes our basic-level concept of “charismatic leadership” can now be summarized in checklist form as in *Table 2*. On the basis of this list, by simply ticking the items independently, one can now assess (and, potentially, indeed measure) charisma on a two-dimensional scale.

Table 2. Index of “charismaticness”

Personalism	
1. Supreme control over party/movement; power centralization	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Leader-led relationship; unmediated & emotional, often divisive	<input type="checkbox"/>
Radicalism	
3. Subverting by delegitimation an established authority structure	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Constituting a novel authority structure	<input type="checkbox"/>

The operational basis of our measures is thus as follows: First, we do not count as charismatic leaders those who, at a given time, have little or no personal command over their parties, are part of collective leadership bodies, are kept in check by internal party factions or are effectively vetoed by party organs. Second, we use the “emotional seizure” of the masses (Schweitzer 1974: 157) as perhaps the most readily observable indicator of charismatic power. Third, charismatic leaders will militate against hitherto dominant ideas in society and seek to overturn the ethical, constitutional and political foundations of an existing institutional framework. Moreover, fourth, they will seek to introduce in the polity major policy shifts, new symbolic norms and moral values; they will also pursue fundamental constitutional changes from which claims to a new legitimate authority may be deduced. During those processes, charismatic leaders present as creative artists who “objectify new relationships” and provide new symbolic and normative foundations for a fresh cycle of politics to commence (Tucker 1977: 385, 386). Fifth, it is necessary that leaders, to be charismatic, must meet all the foregoing conditions simultaneously and irrespective of whether they happen to be in opposition or in power; once at least one of them goes missing, the case person is relegated to the category of ordinary leadership. Needless to say, at this point we remain agnostic about whether charisma may turn out to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for democracy.

To sum up and conclude, we have re-conceptualized political charisma within the context of contemporary liberal democracy and elevated it to new analytical significance. Concepts, however, “are not only elements of a theoretical system, but equally tools for fact-gathering, data containers” (Sartori 1970: 1052). It remains, therefore, to establish a relationship between our novel conceptualization of charisma (i.e., the ontology and

meaning of the term) and what we observe in the real world of populist politics (i.e., the term's empirical referents). This requires laborious empirical analysis.

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