

the populist

charismatic

leader

How to know one when you see one

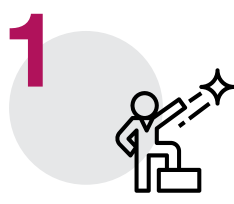
by Takis S. Pappas

Modern populism is a novel political system that combines democratic electoral politics with disregard for established liberal institutions. It can be conceptualized neatly, and defined minimally, as *democratic illiberalism*—a kind of rebuttal to contemporary liberal democracy. Under this definition, the term describes a class of political parties whose members have the specific characteristics of being at once democratic and illiberal.

Recent comparative research has shown that, to emerge and develop as a noteworthy political force, populism requires a particular type of leadership that is wholly personal and aims at the radical transformation of the established liberal order. This is the domain of leadership that, more than a century ago, German sociologist Max Weber termed “charismatic” in order to distinguish it from the other two types of authority: *traditional*, where people obey because of seniority, long-established norms, or custom, and *legal-rational*, which is best typified by the impersonal modern state administration.

With no significant exception, all successful populist leaders in modern and contemporary times have exercised charismatic leadership. But what are the characteristics of this extraordinary type of leadership?

This infographic explains.



1 personal

Charismatic leadership is highly **personal**. It always refers to a single individual leader, never to a collective body of leaders. Charisma cannot be shared, transferred, delegated or inherited.



2 achieved

Charismatic authority is **achieved** and cannot be conferred. As it is nonpermanent, charisma needs to be continuously proven by the leader. It disappears when the followers cease to believe in the worth of their leader.



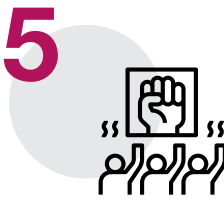
3 party control

Most usually, charismatic leaders **create** their own parties or movements. But even when they rise within already established parties, they completely seize their organization and alter their ideological and programmatic tenets.



4 radical

Political charisma is **radical** in that it goes against tradition or customs and seeks to introduce a wholly new political order. Charismatic leaders seek to re-institute authority and constitute afresh the political system.



5 plebiscitary

Charismatic leadership usually has a pronounced **plebiscitary** quality. It requires the implicit acknowledgement that the leader is above institutions and that these can be changed as he or she thinks fit.



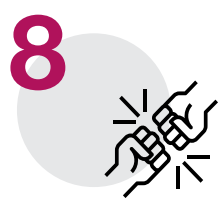
6 irrational

On the whole, the charismatic bond between leader and led is **irrational**. It is built upon strong emotions with a distinctly moral character that encourage risk-taking rather than more sensible, risk-averse logic.



7 missionary

Charismatic leaders assume a distinctly **missionary** stance toward society and politics. They seek to forge moral communities of supporters and have them rescued from impending catastrophe.



8 divisive

Charisma is a socially **divisive** force. It is typically opposed by established power groups, vested interests and time-honoured allegiances, which are set against the community of the charismatic leader's followers.



9 crisis generator

In most cases, charismatic leadership is a powerful **crisis generator** in itself. Such leaders may trigger crisis cycles that undermine traditional institutional structures that may even harm democracy.



10 rare

Charismatic leadership is **rare**, especially in the context of modern liberal democracy which is designed to work on the basis of stable impersonal institutions in a procedural, expertise-based, and moderate way.

10 characteristics of charismatic leadership

Prominent populist leaders who exercised charismatic leadership

Each of the following leaders is “populist” because, under his rule, the respective nation's democracy was led away from liberalism and toward an illiberal, and even autocratic, direction.

They are prominent among other reasons because, save Trump, each has served at least two terms in office. Their group represents postwar European and American, left and right populisms. Each and all of these populists, presented here in order of historical appearance, exhibit the ten characteristics of charismatic leadership listed above.

Juan Perón
Argentina



Rafael Correa
Ecuador



Andreas Papandreu
Greece





Viktor Orbán
Hungary



Silvio Berlusconi
Italy



Jarosław Kaczyński
Poland



Hugo Chávez
Venezuela



Donald Trump
United States



Sources

On the empirics and theory of populism, with detailed analyses of the cases mentioned above, see TS Pappas, [Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Populism is often confused with nativism, but they are different phenomena. On this distinction, see TS Pappas, “The Specter Haunting Europe: Distinguishing Liberal Democracy's Challengers,” *Journal of Democracy* 27:4 (October 2016), 22-36. One major difference between populism and nativism is that, as a rule, nativist leaders are not charismatic. On populist charismatic leadership more specifically, see TS Pappas, “Political Charisma and Modern Populism,” in J. P. Zúquete (ed.), [Routledge International Handbook of Charisma](#) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 226-37. For much more on both populism and charisma, visit my blog [www.pappaspopulism.com](#).

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