

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

The art of charisma

What is it, who's got it — and how is politics being reshaped by the power of the X factor?

Henry Mance

Published AUG 1 2025

Unlock the White House Watch newsletter for free

Your guide to what Trump's second term means for Washington, business and the world

[Sign up](#)

In 2013 a hospital in Birmingham, UK, hired workers to help with a Christmas fundraising campaign. Some of the workers were given a charismatic induction speech, in which a professional actor told them they were doing “something special” and used his arms to make the point. Other workers were given a serviceable but less charismatic speech by the same man.

By the end, the workers who heard the charismatic speech had stuffed 17 per cent more envelopes than those who had heard the standard speech. Charisma had motivated them almost as much as the chance of a bonus, according to researchers at the universities of Lausanne, Milan and Zurich. Inspiration had rivalled compensation.

Such experiments are not conclusive, but other evidence surrounds us. Who wins elections, whose ideas spread, whose companies capture attention — the answer is often less rational than we think. The messenger often matters more than the message.

Possibly the best rule of politics is that, in a genuine two-horse race, the more charismatic candidate will win. Barack Obama beat John McCain and Mitt Romney. Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris. Joe Biden (2020 vintage) beat Trump. It’s the personality, stupid.

Charisma helps explain the success of populists like Giorgia Meloni, centrists like Mark Carney and progressives like Jacinda Ardern. Charisma is a major reason that the experience-free radical Zohran Mamdani won the Democratic primary for New York mayor. Voters bypassed the strongest candidate on paper, the competent but dull Brad Lander.



Giorgia Meloni at a rally in Rome in 2019, three years before she became Italy's prime minister © NurPhoto via Getty Images

Dull candidates do win, but generally only when the fundamentals lean heavily in their favour. When Keir Starmer won the UK election, some commentators wondered whether the public were ready for sobriety. Fat chance. A year later, Nigel Farage leads the polls.

In appearance, Farage may be even greyer than Starmer. But he knows how to make run-of-the-mill sentiments flow like rapids. He stops and starts. Even when his point is mundane, he dramatises it with words like “utterly”, “dumbfounded” and “Not a bit of it!” He appears to wear his emotion on the surface: pausing for emphasis, raising his voice with anger, allowing himself sarcastic laughs. The UK Independence party had six different leaders before the Brexit vote, and nine more afterwards. Most had the same diagnosis of Britain’s ills, but only Farage could make it stick.

“Charisma, unfortunately, seems to count more than intelligence, integrity and competence,” says Olivia Fox Cabane, author of *The Charisma Myth*. “It’s the ace in the hole. It’s the trump card. And it’s a problem.”

Fox Cabane argues that charisma taps into our evolved survival responses: when we meet people, we have to judge quickly whether someone is a friend or foe and what power they have over us. We are programmed to overreact to this “the same way we are programmed to overreact to salt and sugar”.

The simplest test is to ask, when someone crops up on TV or your social media feed, if you find yourself lingering a bit longer, just to hear what they will say

Charisma is an emotional, irrational reaction that pervades our lives. Charlie Houpert, a charisma coach, told the *Diary of a CEO* podcast that, as a management consultant, he was given pay rises even though other analysts were better. His explanation was that his seniors liked him and wanted him to do well. “It’s not nepotism . . . It’s a charismatic connection.” Perhaps, in its unfairness, charisma is nepotism’s (more socially acceptable) equal.

Farage knows charisma’s importance. In his most famous speech in the European parliament in 2010, he insulted the then president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, for having “the charisma of a damp rag and the appearance of a low-grade bank clerk”. (Farage added that Van Rompuy was probably “competent and capable”: he knew these were lesser matters.) In 2021, he urged Trump to stand for the presidency again, saying: “No one has your charisma.”

Charisma is not sufficient: it needs to be coupled with a message. But it’s very likely that it is becoming more important in politics. In the new media environment, the public can just scroll past those who don’t grab their attention.

The simplest test for charisma is to ask, when someone crops up on TV or your social media feed, if you find yourself lingering a bit longer, just to hear what they will say. Trump passes this test. You have probably seen clips of him saying “China”, clips of him swearing at Israel and Iran, clips of him rambling. He didn’t persuade you, but, by being so watchable, he gives himself a chance to persuade someone else.

Charisma “has so much more power than it should have”, says Fox Cabane. “If everyone understood how charisma worked, it would have less power . . . If everyone has it, it’s no longer such an unfair competitive advantage.”

What is charisma? In the Birmingham hospital study, the researchers emphasised language. Charisma was generated by phrases that, for example, expressed moral conviction and created confidence that goals could be achieved. In the non-charismatic speech, the actor kept one hand in his pocket.

Fox Cabane has argued that body language matters far more than words. Charisma, in her view, comes from a combination of presence, power and warmth. Her tips include pausing for two full seconds before you speak, and reducing how quickly and how often you nod. She says that charisma can be learnt — at least to some extent. She charges a minimum of \$250,000 a year for coaching. (Her four clients include an executive at ExxonMobil, she says.)

Fox Cabane cites Amy Cuddy, whose concept of bold and seemingly unnatural power poses was adopted by then UK chancellor George Osborne, among others. Academics have debated Cuddy's research, but one recent paper concluded that the poses did make the people themselves feel more powerful (the effect on the audience is less clear).

Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch seems to have tried to follow a similar approach: according to the New Statesman, her speaking tips include “Breathe, breathe, breathe”, “Pause, Pause, Pause” and “You are a serious person who does big things”. It hasn't yet worked.

Political scientists take a different approach, following Max Weber, who established charisma as a sociological term. Weber drew on the tradition of religious preachers and prophets, and argued that other leaders could achieve similar authority.

Molly Worthen, a historian at the University of North Carolina, argues that the presence of charismatic leaders in today's US is proof that, despite secularisation, “Americans' spiritual impulse did not fade away”. The heart of charisma, Worthen writes in her book *Spellbound*, is “the act of unveiling a hidden narrative”. Charisma makes sense of a chaotic world, and makes people feel empowered.



Barack Obama addresses a crowd of supporters in Los Angeles in 2008, during the Democratic presidential primaries © Damon Winter/Eyevine

Charismatic leaders include Trump, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Martin Luther King Jr and Juan Perón. They tend to emerge in a crisis and offer themselves as saviour. They are presented as having almost divine powers: Trump recently tried to hand out “Trump was right about everything” baseball caps.

Political scientists emphasise that charisma is a relationship, not an attribute. “Charisma is both a signal from the leader and a response from the people,” says Caitlin Andrews-Lee, also of the University of North Carolina.

Humour is not essential. Blair was not regularly comic; Álvaro Uribe, the messianic former Colombian president, was darkly serious. But humour can help hold the audience’s attention

Differing definitions mean that there are disputes over who counts as charismatic. John Antonakis, a University of Lausanne professor who led the Birmingham hospital study, counts Margaret Thatcher as highly charismatic because of her rhetoric; Andrews-Lee sees her as a borderline case, because she acted through institutions. Andrews-Lee wouldn't categorise Joe Biden as charismatic, because he didn't pose as a hero. Others would find charisma in Biden's working-class folksiness, aviator sunglasses and apparent straight-talking. It was ephemeral — later fading with his health and his damaged message — but it allowed him to outshine Trump in 2020.

Fox Cabane's definition of charisma as requiring warmth would seem to exclude Trump, a man lacking in empathy. But she emphasises that warmth can mean passion for anything: "Trump passionately cares about what he's saying, because he passionately cares about himself." Steve Jobs was charismatic: his warmth was towards his products.

Perhaps defining what it takes to be charismatic is as foolhardy as defining what it takes to be a star footballer. No one could have sketched a blueprint for Barack Obama or Lionel Messi.

Political scientists can neglect the stylistic aspects of charisma. If charisma is the ability to keep an audience's attention, it must involve a mix of voice, language, humour and something ineffable that can be summarised as coolness. You don't need to be attractive, but it may help to look distinctive. Donald Trump and Boris Johnson have blond hair. Jeremy Corbyn has an avuncular beard.

Charisma is not the same as authenticity. Of course, voters are more willing to listen to politicians whom they deem to be real people. But Starmer is authentically dull. Nick Griffin, the now marginalised former leader of the British National party, was authentically extreme.

Charisma is also not precisely charm or likeability, although they often overlap. In his 1996 novel *Primary Colors*, Joe Klein depicted the handshaking genius of a barely fictionalised Bill Clinton: "He might put [his left hand] on your elbow, or up by your biceps . . . He is interested in you. He is honored to meet you . . . He'll share a laugh or a secret then — a light secret, not a real one — flattering you with the illusion of conspiracy." But even Clinton couldn't shake hands with everyone.

Charm mostly works close up, which is why many politicians are charming but unpopular. (He's very funny in private, their supporters protest.) Charisma is a long-range weapon. It still requires that the listener wants to spend time with the speaker, even if they have reservations about them. You can find Trump engrossing without finding him likeable.

Often charisma relies on the purveyor revealing their emotions, so that the audience can feel their own. “The ability to create emotion in others is usually a projection of emotion,” says Tali Sharot, professor of cognitive neuroscience at University College London. This is Starmer’s problem, says Fox Cabane: his voice lacks a warmth, a passion.

Humour is not essential to charisma. Blair was not regularly comic; Álvaro Uribe, the messianic former Colombian president who took on the Farc guerrillas, was darkly serious. But humour can help to hold the audience’s attention. Trump, Johnson and Farage all make people laugh (by the standards of politicians). In 2022, during the midterm elections, Trump nicknamed Ron DeSantis “Ron DeSanctimonious”; it was something his opponent in the 2024 Republican primaries would not be able to match.

Obama and Trump have thrived giving long speeches, in front of crowds. For Zohran Mamdani it’s TikTok videos

Once charisma was linked to trustworthiness. Now it’s almost the opposite: voters appreciate unpredictability. Even though all public figures are scripted to some extent, voters seem to view scripted remarks as dishonest — or at least out of place in the freestyling context of social media. New York Times columnist Ezra Klein has said: “It is Trump’s absence of inhibition that makes him a great entertainer.”

What counts as charisma changes. Fox Cabane fumes at Starmer’s habit of referring to journalists by name in interviews. “That’s Dale Carnegie,” she says, referring to the author of the 1936 bestseller *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. “No one does that any more, because it’s been integrated into every customer service manual since then. It raises people’s hackles.”

Formats change too: Obama and Trump have thrived giving long speeches, in front of crowds; for Zohran Mamdani it’s TikTok videos, where the backdrop is the urban landscape. Yet once elected, a politician will have to deliver lines at set pieces — at news conferences or arriving at events. In office, charisma cannot be so easily staged.



Zohran Mamdani, Democratic nominee for New York mayor, shakes hands with a supporter during the NYC Pride March in June © Alamy

In 2007, after the re-election of George W Bush, the psychology professor Drew Westen criticised progressives for assuming that their superior ideas alone were sufficient for electoral success. “If Republican voters should pay more attention to competence (which they should), Democratic voters should pay more attention to political intelligence,” Westen wrote in *The Political Brain*.

Soon after, Obama proved that progressives can do charisma. But the centre-left still struggles. The centre-left believes in institutions, it believes in meritocracy, it likes to promote people who have earned their stripes. It is generally intolerant of scandal, which can mean anyone who has said anything too unscripted.

This favours candidates who are competent but not necessarily charismatic. In the UK, many of the new Labour MPs elected in 2024, one adviser quipped to me, were “lobbyists with a good half-marathon time”. Such people are adept at operating within the system. Charisma is the impression of having stepped outside the system.

Sceptics of charisma may argue that it is just another excuse for accepting white men being put ahead of women and people of colour

If charisma matters, then selecting individual candidates matters perhaps as much as choosing policies or ideology. In 2016, many senior Democrats thought that Bernie Sanders was too radical to beat Trump. They should have focused on the fact that he, not Hillary Clinton, was best placed to match Trump's charisma. Rebecca Katz, the media

consultant for Mamdani, previously worked for a Democrat from the other wing of the party, John Fetterman. She realised that the two candidates both had an X factor (as well as a message that the system wasn't working for ordinary people).

In contrast, Harris lacked that X factor. Her presidential campaign had glitz and money, but couldn't make up for that fact that voters didn't find her an engaging speaker. This is where political news coverage goes wrong: it assumes that voters are very willing to change their first impressions.

Sceptics of charisma may argue that it is just another excuse for accepting white men being put ahead of women and people of colour. Did Harris and Hillary Clinton lose because they were uncharismatic, or because they were women? Or because our conceptions of charisma often exclude women? Nicola Sturgeon, the former Scottish first minister, is among those who argue that our conceptions of charisma are gendered.

There have been and are charismatic female leaders: Sturgeon, Ardern, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Angela Rayner. But on the narrow academic definition of charisma, there have been fewer. "You could ask people, who are the 10 most charismatic leaders in the world? Likely they would be strong men," says Andrews-Lee. "Research shows that agency itself is masculine, and this is like hyper-extreme agency." Interestingly, political scientists have argued that it is hard for anyone to follow a charismatic leader: the lack of successors to Clinton, Blair and Obama would support this.

Charisma often doesn't overlap with competence. That leaves us with stark choices. We can, as Fox Cabane advises, all learn techniques in order to democratise the effect of charisma. (In 2020 she wanted to coach the candidate for the Democratic nomination, Elizabeth Warren, whose campaign did not take up the offer.) We can pick charismatic leaders, in the hope that they may turn out to be competent or at least be restrained by others. We can build institutions, like political parties, that filter out those who are charismatic but who lack merit.

Ultimately, our brains, and increasingly our media ecosystem, are not optimised to choose the best people to do the job. Either we compensate for that or we live with the consequences.

Henry Mance is the FT's chief features writer

Find out about our latest stories first — follow FT Weekend on [Instagram](#), [Bluesky](#) and [X](#), and [sign up](#) to receive the FT Weekend newsletter every Saturday morning

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Life & Arts

US politics & policy

FT Edit

The Weekend Essay

Henry Mance