# The enduring power of charisma in Australia’s federal election campaign



Charisma, often regarded as a defining quality of successful political leaders, continues to be a subject of interest as Australia's federal election campaign unfolds. While recent political discourse has incorporated various generational slang terms, one term notably absent is "rizz" — Oxford University Press's 2023 word of the year, meaning "style, charm or attractiveness," and within Generation Z vernacular, referring to romantic appeal.

Despite the gloss of youth culture language, the more enduring concept of charisma remains deeply intertwined with electoral success. Charisma, however, is complex to define and is often recognised intuitively rather than analytically. It is a trait historically associated with leaders such as Australia’s longest-serving Labor prime minister Bob Hawke, as well as figures including Barack Obama, Boris Johnson, and Donald Trump. Yet what exactly constitutes charisma—and whether it is intrinsic or attributed—has generated scholarly debate.

The modern sociological understanding of charisma originates with Max Weber, who described it as the possession of extraordinary, almost supernatural qualities that set an individual apart from the ordinary. However, Professor Alex Haslam from the University of Queensland emphasises that charisma is not an innate quality, but one attributed by observers. “It’s about being regarded as having those things,” Haslam explains. He highlights that charisma depends largely on the perception of the audience and the extent to which a leader embodies their followers' identity: “We perceive people as charismatic to the extent that they represent us, we see them as one of us, we see ourselves in them.”

This view is echoed by Professor Michael Platow at the Australian National University, who asserts charisma is not something one is born with. He dismisses the “great man” theory of leadership as outmoded, underscoring that leaders gain followership by articulating a collective identity: “Leaders must articulate not only their policies... but also a vision of us collectively. Politicians try to place themselves at the centre of that ‘us’.”

Donald Trump serves as an illustrative example of charisma’s relational nature. Platow notes that while a significant number of Americans view Trump as their saviour, many others do not, indicating charisma’s contingent quality. Similarly, scholarship measuring charisma often relies on subjective assessments by the public, which aligns with the subjective nature of voting behaviour.

Empirical research supports the notion that perceptions of charisma are influenced by political success. Haslam points to studies showing that a business leader’s perceived charisma increases with improved company performance. This provides insight into the “incumbency effect” in politics, where positive economic or macroeconomic conditions bolster the popularity and perceived charisma of sitting leaders, explains Lisa Lu, a University of New South Wales PhD candidate researching leadership and charisma.

Yet performance is not the sole driver of charisma. One study on Australian prime ministers found that Bob Hawke exhibited a charisma effect beyond what economic and political conditions would predict. Hawke’s image as a quintessentially Australian beer-drinking, sports-loving figure helped cement his connection with voters, contributing to his robust communication effectiveness and positive relationship with the electorate, as ranked in a 2020 survey of political scientists and historians.

The projection of shared identity through everyday cultural touchstones, such as working-class symbols and social rituals like “having a beer at the pub,” is a hallmark of charismatic leadership according to Platow. He suggests that election campaigns are worth observing for how candidates position themselves as embodiments of their nation’s identity.

Additional factors influencing perceived charisma are traits like height — which statistically correlates with greater leadership charisma among men — and gender considerations. While some studies suggest women may be perceived as more emotionally intelligent, historical underrepresentation of female heads of state reflects broader societal biases rather than innate leadership qualities. Haslam remarks that growing up, people were seldom encouraged to view women as charismatic leaders, a circumstance that contemporary societal developments are slowly changing.

Intriguingly, a rare circumstance that enhances a leader’s charisma is death. Haslam’s research on 48 heads of state who died in office from 2000 to 2013 found that their posthumous charisma was perceived as twice as intense. “You get this very pure, undistilled image of them as a group member,” he says, suggesting that death refocuses perceptions on leaders’ social contributions while downplaying flaws.

Despite the challenges, charisma can be developed through learned rhetorical and non-verbal techniques. Professors Philippe Jacquart and John Antonakis analysed over ninety years of US presidential nomination speeches and found that candidates employing specific strategies — such as metaphors, storytelling, expressing moral conviction, and sharing collective sentiments — were overwhelmingly successful. Their model predicted the winner in 23 of 24 US presidential elections studied, underscoring the practical importance of charisma in political communication.

However, charisma is not without its dangers. The dark chapter of history shows that charismatic leadership can also empower authoritarian regimes and cults. Haslam cautions that toxic groups often have leaders whose charisma sustains harmful dynamics.

Lisa Lu concludes on the ambivalence of charisma’s role: “It’s a tool that can be used for good or for bad … even if you can develop it in people, that doesn’t necessarily mean everybody should.” As Australia’s election campaign proceeds, analyses of candidates' charisma continue to illuminate the intricate interplay between leader identity, public perception, and electoral outcomes.

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