Charismatic Leadership in Foreign Policy

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Charismatic leadership in foreign policy
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The crisis in the so-called liberal international order has accentuated the importance of foreign policy leadership.¹ Since the end of the Cold War, this order has provided a strong narrative for liberal democracies backed up by the overwhelming capabilities of the United States. It helped foreign policy decision-makers and their electorates to make sense of a world freed from the stranglehold of bipolarity, and provided a platform for foreign policy decisions and strategies. With the ‘abdication’ of the United States from global leadership,² liberal democracies struggle to navigate a foreign policy terrain where the internal and the external are ‘intimately connected’ and ‘any issue’ has the potential to blow up into ‘a high-level international conflict’.³ As illustrated by successive international crises over the past

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decade in areas including trade, finance, disarmament, climate, migration, information technology and health, foreign policy decision-makers now face a ‘fluid’ international environment in which the constraints of vested interest groups, standard operating procedures and bureaucratic inertia are likely to matter less, and leadership is likely to matter more.\textsuperscript{4} How are foreign policy decision-makers in liberal democracies to meet this challenge? We argue that charismatic leadership in foreign policy is a potent, yet under-studied, response to the challenges currently facing foreign policy decision-makers in liberal democracies. Combining insights from recent developments on charismatic leadership in organization and management studies with literature on foreign policy, we construct a novel theoretical framework for understanding how foreign policy leaders exercise charismatic leadership. We argue that charismatic leadership makes sense of who ‘we’ are and where we are going. By doing so, it paves the way for the foreign policy executive to navigate a political terrain characterized by demands for increased engagement with the concerns of domestic audiences and a foreign policy agenda less dominated by ‘wars of necessity’ and more influenced by issues such as trade, migration and climate change that affect the everyday lives of electorates. Consequently, charismatic leadership is not an exception to normal foreign policy-making, but a necessary if not sufficient component of its successful practice in liberal democracies. We illustrate the points in a comparative case-study of the leadership practices of Donald Trump (a most likely case for charismatic leadership in liberal democracies) and Angela Merkel (a least likely case for charismatic leadership in liberal democracies).

We understand leadership as ‘the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to achieve shared objectives’.\textsuperscript{5} We add ‘charismatic’ to leadership to denote a leadership style that offers to make sense of the world and who ‘we’ are as a community by visionary, emotional and symbolic bonding with followers. This sense-making move ascribes meaning to foreign policy, making some actions appear legitimate and rational and others illegitimate and irrational. While this helps to secure or even expand the foreign policy action space of the leader, it also reduces flexibility and the ability to pursue options outside or in contrast with the sense-making discourse. Following Nye, we view leadership styles as


\textsuperscript{5} Gary A. Yukl, \textit{Leadership in organizations} (Bangalore: Pearson Education India, 2013), p. 23.
independent from specific leadership objectives. Thus, charismatic foreign policy leaders’ objectives may range from transforming the world order to defending the status quo position of their own countries on a particular subject, and the political context may range from authoritarian to liberal democratic.

The article proceeds by discussing why charismatic leadership is important in foreign policy analysis, what it is, and how and why sense-making matters for a charismatic leadership style. We then operationalize our theoretical approach by analysing the charismatic leadership of, respectively, Donald Trump and Angela Merkel, showing how both use charismatic leadership practices and thereby illustrating the strength of our initial proposition. Finally, we discuss our findings and reconnect with foreign policy analysis to discuss how those findings can enrich analysis of foreign policy in the future.

The challenge to rational legal foreign policy leadership
Charismatic leadership has played only a marginal role in foreign policy analysis. As noted by Valerie Hudson, ‘the academy’ has been ‘tentative about the value of leader analysis’ in

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6 Nye, ‘Transformational and transactional presidents’, p. 120. Nye refrains from using the term ‘charismatic’ because of its connotations, but we find that using the term allows us to draw on the rich literature on the subject.

7 In focusing on charismatic leadership as a leadership style, we differ from the literature on charismatic leadership, which tends to define it either on the basis of its substantive content or on the basis of its perception by followers, i.e. the effect. See John P. Campbell, ‘Leadership, the old, the new, and the timeless: a commentary’, in Michael G. Rumsey, ed., *The Oxford handbook of leadership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 414; Nye, ‘Transformational and transactional presidents’, pp. 119–20.

8 The article on leadership and foreign policy analysis in *The Oxford research encyclopedia of international studies* makes only two passing references to charismatic leadership: see John Thomas Preston, ‘Leadership and foreign policy analysis’, in *The Oxford research encyclopedia of international studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press and International Studies Association, 2010), https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-255. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 26 Nov. 2020.)
general, even though leaders and leadership are by no means absent from the study of foreign policy. Harold Lasswell’s work on political leadership was instrumental in bringing political psychology into the study of foreign policy, while Robert Jervis’s work on perceptions and misperceptions, and that of Janice Gross Stein, Deborah Larson and others on leader images, pointed to the importance of cognitive filters and the personal beliefs and experiences of foreign policy decision-makers. Even so, ‘much FPA theorization has in reality dealt with delineating the bounds or constraints upon agency imposed by structural factors’, rather than with leadership or the individual leader.

To the extent that foreign policy analysis is concerned with the individual, the focus in this field is often on the domestic constraints, perceptions, roles and images of the foreign policy ‘decision-maker’ navigating the multiple complexities of domestic and international politics. Analyses of the characteristics and personalities of leaders, operational code analyses of the cognitive and affective influences on foreign policy decisions, and analyses of the use and importance of analogies and of risk-taking propensities have all provided important insights.

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10 For a rare example of a foreign policy analysis textbook that emphasizes the role of leaders and how they navigate international and domestic constraints, see Marijke Breuning, *Foreign policy analysis: a comparative introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). However, Breuning does not discuss charismatic leadership.


into this figure of the decision-maker. However, these studies rarely move from leader analysis to leadership analysis, that is, the styles and communicative practices by which leaders engage with their audiences. This is the case even for leadership trait analysis, which succeeds in pointing to the importance of charisma as a leadership trait and emphasizes the importance of context for the action space and effect of leadership. However, these analyses do not explore in detail the logics and implementation of charismatic leadership in foreign policy. Paradoxically, while the leadership of, in particular, Churchill and Hitler in the Second World War spurred a wave of scholarship on charismatic leadership in public administration and leadership theory, it had little impact on the study of foreign policy. This is unfortunate, because charismatic leadership in foreign policy (like charismatic leadership in general) is a phenomenon that cuts across time and space and spans the foreign policy–domestic politics divide. Napoleon, Hitler, Churchill, JFK, Castro, Mandela and Thatcher are just a few of the better-known political leaders who exercised charismatic leadership in foreign policy as well as in domestic politics. One reason for the lack of attention to this topic is that charismatic leadership has conventionally been understood as an exception to normal foreign policy, following from the actions of extraordinary individuals. We depart from this understanding by focusing on charismatic leadership as a style rather than an individual quality. We build on management and organization literature to fill the lacuna identified by Margaret Hermann more than 30 years ago: in order to understand leadership in foreign policy, we must understand how leaders work to manage the relationship with their followers. A second reason for the omission is that charismatic

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17 Hermann, ‘Ingredients of leadership’, p. 169. For an interesting analysis of leadership in EU foreign policy starting from a relational understanding, see Lisbeth Aggestam and
leadership was for decades viewed as a past stage in the development of long-established societies.\textsuperscript{18} To Henry Kissinger, charismatic leadership was intrinsically tied to revolutionary leadership. Writing in the time of Cold War decolonization, he viewed charismatic leadership as a characteristic typical of newly independent states searching for identity and tempted by quick fixes, in contrast to the long-term developments characteristic of the rational legal leadership of the West.\textsuperscript{19}

A widening gap between the demand for foreign policy leadership that makes sense of the world and the foreign policy leadership actually supplied in liberal democracies challenges this assumption. Examples of this gap include the 2010–11 ‘Occupy’ movement for social and economic equality; the climate movement since 2009; and protests against immigration in the late 2010s. Despite their deep-rooted political differences, these movements all question the legitimacy and priorities of foreign policy elites and their ability to come up with meaningful answers to the challenges of globalization. They demand that foreign policy be embedded in national (and occasionally transnational) communities; that it take seriously the concerns of ordinary citizens and recognize the intertwined nature of domestic and foreign policy. The articulation of a gap between foreign policy leaders and domestic constituencies, occasionally associated with populism, dates back at least to the early twentieth century, for example in the criticism of political and military leaders in the First World War. This type of criticism intensified in the latter half of the twentieth century, with mass protests such as the anti-war marches of the 1960s and 1970s and a more general questioning of the raison d’être of foreign policy establishments.\textsuperscript{20} Foreign policy, as Christopher Hill noted almost 20 years

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ago, is viewed by ‘too many citizens’ as ‘an occult affair, doomed to be the preserve of disingenuous politicians and arrogant, unaccountable officials’.21 Foreign policy leaders in liberal democracies have had a hard time responding to this challenge. The separation of foreign and domestic policy in the eighteenth century was in itself a reactionary response seeking to preserve the core privileges of monarchy and government in the face of calls for democratization in Europe—that is, a move to detach foreign policy-making from the interests and sentiments of domestic society.22 This move was legitimized by the need for secrecy and special competencies and knowledge related to foreign affairs. The prevalent thinking about the aims and tools of foreign policy in the two hundred years that followed stressed its importance for the security and prosperity of the state and the risks of disaster should it ever fall ‘into inexpert hands’.23 Consequently, foreign policy leadership came to be based on expert analysis but offered few narratives supporting sense-making, that is, a clear emotional sense of belonging. It is a ‘transactional’ type of leadership in the sense that it offers to protect the national community against outside dangers in return for the grant of power, but at the same time decouples its decisions from the concerns of this community. Foreign policies are directed at convincing followers outside the state—primarily the diplomats and foreign policy leaders of other states—of the rationale behind those policies, while largely ignoring the concerns of the inexpert domestic audience. The result is foreign policy leadership close to the Weberian ideal-type of rational legal authority, that is, ‘a belief in the “legality” of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands’.24 With increasing expectations and demands among domestic audiences that foreign policy should be subject to democratic control, and increasing calls for a values-based foreign policy that takes advantage of the increased action space since the end of the Cold War, leaders in liberal democracies face an ever more pressing challenge to identify what those values should be and create a viable relationship with their domestic followers.

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23 Hill, ‘What is to be done?’, p. 234.
**Charismatic leadership in foreign policy**

Charismatic leadership offers an answer to this challenge. This type of leadership is ‘transformational’ and ‘inspirational’ rather than purely transactional.\(^25\) It offers a higher purpose, a vision converting the leader into a moral agent creating or restoring the purpose and role of the national community in international society. By doing so, it provides followers with a clear narrative, which can help them understand the complexities they face.\(^26\) It makes sense of who ‘we’ are and where we are going. As noted by Robert Tucker more than 50 years ago, charismatic political leadership makes ‘national identity meaningful’ for followers, provides them with a ‘sense of belonging’ and ‘help[s] them find their way’.\(^27\)

While this is in itself an important heuristic insight, the challenge, as argued by Tucker, is to make charismatic leadership ‘sufficiently operational to serve as a guide for further research’.\(^28\) We answer this challenge by introducing the concept of sense-making, prominent in the writings of social psychologist and organization theorist Karl Weick, to foreign policy. Weick takes as his point of departure psychological insights into the cognitive capacity of individuals, noting that individuals are constantly confronted with more information than they can process according to any rational decision-making process. Consequently, individuals—and organizations—engage in a post-hoc justification process in which they ascribe meaning to events that have already occurred. This sense-making takes its point of departure in previous experiences and interpretations, including normative and symbolic processes, and at any given point in time a number of interpretations are possible. In that sense, ‘reality is an ongoing accomplishment’,\(^29\) with meaning constantly created and recreated to provide individuals with some kind of continuing sense of order.

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By placing sense-making at the centre of our understanding of charismatic leadership, we emphasize the importance of historical and social contexts. From Plato’s writing on leadership as the duty of philosopher kings in the fifth century BCE up to Max Weber’s sociological reformulation of leadership in the early twentieth century, debate on leadership centred on the individual leader.\(^{30}\) Weber pointed to the importance of the structures—bureaucracy—which could justify the domination of a leader over a group of followers, but also introduced the notion of the charismatic leader who bases his or her claim to high position on personal capacity.\(^{31}\) Since the 1980s, students of management and leadership have rediscovered charismatic leadership.\(^{32}\) Neo-charismatic approaches reject the notion of a ‘universal “charismatic personality’’,\(^{33}\) including the understanding of previous scholars (Weber among them) that charismatic leadership followed from ‘some unknown quality or miraculous ability’ of the leader.\(^{34}\) These newer approaches understand charismatic leadership as a response to what Nye terms a ‘fluid’ social situation—or, in the vivid language of Tucker, a ‘charisma hungry’ audience ‘not knowing just who or what they are’.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{31}\) Weber, *Economy and society*.


\(^{33}\) Conger, ‘Charismatic leadership’, p. 377.


\(^{35}\) Nye, ‘Transformational and transactional presidents’, p. 120; Tucker, ‘The theory of charismatic leadership’, p. 745.
In essence, charismatic leadership establishes community and order in what appears to be anarchy and chaos.

The need for order is central to Weick’s theory. He argues that while (social) structures are to be understood as in constant flux, the way individuals—and, in particular, organizations—justify their actions creates stability in the social world. By justifying their actions with reference to certain norms or social structures, leaders reify these norms and structures, thereby increasing the commitment of their followers to make sense of a disorderly world with reference to these particular social structures. These commitments in turn, especially if they are communicated to larger audiences, reify social structures and underpin their stability.

As Weick argues, ‘sense-making is an attempt to produce micro stability amidst continuing change. People produce micro stabilities by social commitment, which mean that interacts [interactions] become meaningful and that both the interacts and the meanings will be repeated.’ 36 We argue that the prominent position of political leaders gives them a privileged opportunity to reify certain interpretations of the world, which in turn can affect the sense-making processes of individual citizens. For individuals seeking stability, the challenges posed by complexity, change and the disruption of old orders increase the demand for interpretations of the world that will provide cognitive stability and create a sense of order. In a situation where traditional ways of ‘making sense of the world’, e.g. by a rational legal logic, are under pressure, the demand for narratives which can be used for sense-making purposes increases.

Sense-making plays out differently in different organizations and policy areas. As noted by Christopher Hill, ‘foreign policy is far from the only way in which a given community copes with the outside world, but it is the principal way in which collective coping takes place’. 37 Charismatic leadership enables collective coping by constructing a distinct place and purpose for the national community in the international environment. Stability is created in complexity by making sense of who we are as a nation, how we matter to the world and where we are going in the future. It presents a vision, that is, a narrative about an attractive community that distinguishes self from other and provides a framework which can be used by followers to create stable interpretations of a complex world. However, for charismatic leadership to affect followers, leaders must build acceptance among them. This is done through three communicative practices:

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37 Hill, ‘What is to be done?’, pp. 238–9.
“(a) justifying the mission by appealing to values that distinguish right from wrong; (b) communicating in symbolic ways to make the message clear and vivid, and also symbolizing and embodying the moral unity of the collective per se; and (c) demonstrating conviction and passion for the mission via emotional displays.”

By using these three processes, the charismatic leader signals his or her vision and activates emotions and symbols that promote further bonding with the followers. To signal values and emotions, leaders tap into value-based distinctions between right and wrong using symbolic means of communication such as metaphors and storytelling in order to illustrate the collective’s status as a moral community and emphasize their own emotional engagement in and importance to this community. This does not guarantee success. When performing charismatic leadership, a leader may become more popular among those sharing the value base that is activated, but at the same time become less popular among those who see themselves as outsiders to a given moral community. Hence, charismatic leadership cannot be expected to lead to universal popularity and entails the risk of polarization.

Research design: how do we know charismatic leadership in foreign policy when we see it?
We are interested in understanding how leaders perform charismatic leadership and the narratives they offer their followers by privileging certain moral communities over others, and seek to comprehend the ‘contextually sensitive nature of the leadership phenomenon’ through qualitative analysis. We present a plausibility probe—a preliminary comparative case-study probing the validity of our theoretical propositions—that charismatic leadership

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38 Antonakis et al., ‘Charisma’, p. 304.
39 Antonakis et al., ‘Can charisma be taught?’, p. 375; see also Tucker, ‘The theory of charismatic leadership’, p. 736.
41 Harry Eckstein, ‘Case study and theory in political science’, in Fred I. Greenstein and
is an important tool in the foreign policy toolbox of heads of state. We do so by studying the communications of US President Donald Trump in relation to the creation of a wall on the Mexican–American border and the subsequent shutdown of the federal government in 2018–19, and the communications of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in relation to the European migration crisis of 2015–16. We chose the United States and Germany because they are liberal democracies, where we would expect rational legal authority to form the basis of foreign policy. Both countries have for decades anchored the rational legal order, Germany regionally, in its European epicentre, and the United States globally. Thus, if we find charismatic leadership here, we are likely to find it in less solid and committed liberal democracies as well (e.g. in central and eastern Europe and east Asia). We chose Trump and Merkel because they allow us to explore the contemporary use of charismatic leadership, and because one of these individuals (Trump) has been characterized as a charismatic leader, whereas the other (Merkel) is generally viewed as an example of rational legal leadership. Whereas Trump can be seen as a most likely case for charismatic leadership in liberal democratic societies, Merkel is a least likely case. Consequently, comparison produces two analytical benefits. First, finding charismatic leadership in both cases will illustrate the general relevance of charismatic foreign policy leadership across liberal democratic societies and the sense-making practices associated with this leadership style. Second, our comparative case design allows us also to identify differences within charismatic leadership and to discuss the sources of these differences.

Agreeing with Oltman and Renshon that ‘immigration is exactly the type of issue that is well suited for a foreign policy analysis’ and yet is under-studied, we focus on the recent US and European ‘migration crises’. Mass migration puts ‘the national interest in question’ by potentially reshaping the social, cultural and economic fabric of society, not only by the

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migration process, but also by the political response to it.\textsuperscript{44} The political answers to migration crises may vary from social liberal to xenophobic, depending on how leaders’ sense-making moves ascribe meaning and make some actions appear legitimate and rational, others illegitimate and irrational. The recent migration crises are useful for the article’s aim of developing and making operational a theoretical understanding of charismatic leadership in foreign policy because they provide us with data-rich cases on sense-making, allowing us to explore the communicative practices of charismatic leadership in practice.\textsuperscript{45} We do not discuss the nature of the crises, or assess their magnitude or wider implications; we focus on them exclusively as venues for charismatic foreign policy leadership.

To underpin systematic comparison of the two cases, we use the method of structured focused comparison.\textsuperscript{46} Our analysis is focused in the sense that it deals selectively with certain aspects of the case: not the migration crises as such but only the use of a charismatic leadership style by the two leaders in relation to the crises. It is structured in the sense that it employs the same criteria for data collection and analysis in both cases: that is, we analyse Trump’s and Merkel’s charismatic communication through speeches drawn from official websites. Our aim is to understand charismatic leadership style. We show that this style is pertinent to both Trump and Merkel. We do not provide a systematic analysis or assessment of audience response. To do that would have required access to video footage of audiences, detailed polling results and interviews on how target audiences received the leaders’ communicative practices; ideally, it would also have entailed combining our case-study approach with ethnographic methods. Our analysis represents a first step in understanding charismatic leadership in the foreign policy of liberal democracies, focusing on the communicative practices of the leaders. Zooming in on responses from and effects on audiences would be the logical next step. As noted above, our source material is speeches by the two leaders during the two migration crises. We do not include tweets, because Angela

\textsuperscript{44} Christopher Hill, \textit{The national interest in question: foreign policy in multicultural societies} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).


Merkel is not active on Twitter. However, in order to probe the reliability of our results, we identified and analysed 115 tweets by Trump using the same criteria as for the speeches. The tweets showed communicative practices similar to those used in the speeches, but adjusted to Twitter’s limit of 280 characters per message. The dataset is summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Summary of data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trump</th>
<th>Merkel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Wall, immigration</td>
<td>Reden (speeches), manual sorting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of speeches coded</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>Whitehouse.gov²</td>
<td>Bundeskanzlerin.de</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

¹ All speeches have been coded using Nvivo software (please see our online appendix for a full list of sources: https://polsci.ku.dk/ansatte/vip/?pure=da%2Fpublications%2Fappendix-to-charismatic-leadership-in-foreign-policy-international-affairs-972-march-2021-speeches-included-in-the-analysis(effc7c97-fad3-48f4-a68a-fe0b6f21b5da).html).

² Speeches from whitehouse.gov have been supplemented by a search on factba.se, an independent repository of Trump speeches, to ensure full coverage.
Previous literature has studied the use of metaphors, storytelling, and value and ideology statements. We follow Jacquart and Antonakis, who distinguish nine different communicative practices, but refine their research strategy by further distinguishing between first- and second-order leadership practices. First-order practices include (1) expressing moral conviction, i.e. justifying certain decisions with reference to a particular value-system; (2) expressing sentiments of the collective, i.e. pointing to leader–follower similarities and emphasizing a particular collective; and (3) setting high and ambitious goals and creating confidence that goals can be achieved. Second-order practices include communicative devices such as the use of metaphors, rhetorical questions, stories and anecdotes, the use of contrasts and comparisons, and finally the use of three-part lists as rhetorical tools in order to support first-order practices. The two levels are closely connected, but distinguishing between them is analytically useful for highlighting the difference between the abstract content of the communication (such as expressing moral conviction) and the more specific communicative practices (such as making three-part lists).

In seeking to identify the patterns of charismatic communicative practices in foreign policy leadership, we used NVivo, a software tool for transparent and systematic qualitative analysis. We coded all speeches in their original language, applying the first- and second-order practices as our codebook. When coding, we included the immediate context of a given quotation in the quotation to ensure validity when writing up the analysis. As we were looking for patterns, we did not analyse individual speeches, or their particular context, or the way in which they were received by audiences. Consequently, our results are less context-sensitive than in-depth analysis of single speeches. However, facing a trade-off between depth and breadth we opted for this research strategy as it serves our ambition to understand

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49 Shamir et al., ‘The motivational effects’.

charismatic foreign policy leadership in liberal democracies by enabling us to identify and compare patterns across our two cases.

**Charisma in practice: Trump and Merkel**

The presidency of Donald Trump has accentuated the importance of charismatic leadership in foreign policy, not least because he has actively tweeted himself a ‘superhero anti-politician celebrity’ brand.\(^{51}\) In contrast, the leadership of Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel, the most prominent political leader in Europe over the past decade, has been characterized as ‘calm’, ‘quiet’, ‘patient’,\(^{52}\) and epitomizing rationality in politics.\(^{53}\) However, like Trump, Merkel has proved herself an effective agenda-setter in national and international politics. Both have enjoyed a considerable following in their respective home country electorates and have shown their willingness to take the lead internationally.

**Donald Trump: making America great again**

The overarching goal of Donald Trump’s presidency was to ‘make America great again’, the slogan of his successful 2016 presidential campaign. However, according to Trump, a migrant ‘invasion’ from Mexico threatened ‘the safety, security and financial well-being of all Americans’.\(^{54}\) Facing this threat, ordinary citizens, ‘the invisible people’,\(^{55}\) received little


\(^{52}\) Alice H. Eagly, ‘Some leaders come from nowhere: their success is uneven’, *Journal of Social Issues* 74: 1, 2018, pp. 184–96 at pp. 185, 189.


\(^{55}\) Trump, 8 May 2019.
attention or protection from the ‘swamp of Washington, DC’, who ‘call themselves the elite’, but are in the President’s words ‘a radical left’, allied with ‘fake-news media’. According to Trump, this radical left, represented by Democrats in Washington, met the challenge of migration with proposals of ‘open borders, lower wages, and, frankly, lawless chaos’. President Trump compared this Washington approach with his own solution: ‘An immigration plan that puts the jobs, wages, and safety of American workers first. [It] is pro-American, pro-immigrant, and pro-worker. It’s just common sense.’ He presented the cornerstone of his plan—building a wall to keep immigrants out—as a contrast to the approach of the detached, radicalized elite in Washington, and as a commonsense solution building on the practical experience of people working with the US Border Patrol:

“Walls should not be controversial. Our country has built 654 miles of barrier over the last 15 years, and every career Border Patrol agent I have spoken with has told me that walls work . . . They keep criminals out . . . They keep drugs out, and they dramatically increase efficiency by allowing us to patrol far larger areas with far fewer people. It’s just common sense. Walls work.”

The President repeatedly used contrasts and comparisons to express moral convictions and the sentiments of the collective he represented. The content of the convictions remained vague—anti-elite and pro-‘American dream’. The collective was defined primarily in negative terms, as not the Washington elites and not the Democrats, and its membership was fluid and changed with context, including for example the people of Grand Rapids, Republicans in Florida or border patrol officers, occasionally extended to cover everyone who was neither a member of the Washington elite nor a criminal illegal immigrant. He

56 Trump, 3 March 2019.
57 Trump, 8 May 2019.
60 Trump, 16 May 2019.
61 Trump, 16 May 2019.
contrasted his own moral conviction—‘I’m doing it because it’s right’—with that of a US Congress held hostage by the Democrats: ‘They think it’s good politically.’

Wealthy politicians and donors push for open borders while living their lives behind walls and gates and guards. Meanwhile, working-class Americans are left to pay the price for mass illegal migration—reduced jobs, lower wages, overburdened schools and hospitals, increased crime, and a depleted social safety net.

In communicating his moral convictions and expressing the sentiments of the collective, Trump relied heavily on anecdotes and stories. He mixed summaries of news reports on violent crimes with his own observations from visiting the border, and related stories of members of the community (typically called by their first names), often while they were present in the audience, including spouses and relatives of US citizens killed by illegal immigrants, along with law enforcement officers and members of the border patrol. The anecdotes illustrate both the dangers to the community and his own role as its protector. Following the characterization of migration as an ‘invasion’, Trump draws metaphorically on the language of war. Barbarians at the gate are waiting to destroy not only national security but also the individual security of US citizens. Consequently, the President asks the people of the United States ‘to defend our very dangerous southern border out of love and devotion to our fellow citizens and to our country’. Americans are engaged in a ‘battle against the vicious drug traffickers and criminal cartels violating our sovereignty and infiltrating our southern border’. Acknowledging 23 murders on the US side of the border, the President notes that that there are ‘close to 2,000 murders right on the other side of the wall’. He reminds his followers that they are right to be fearful:

65 Trump, 5 Feb 2019.
“As we speak, large, organized caravans are on the march to the United States. We have just heard that Mexican cities, in order to remove the illegal immigrants from their communities, are getting trucks and buses to bring them up to our country in areas where there is little border protection. I have ordered another 3,750 troops to our Southern Border to prepare for the tremendous onslaught.69”

Trump’s charismatic leadership was based primarily on the use of comparisons and contrasts (himself and US citizens vs the Washington elite), stories and anecdotes (typically personalized) and the use of metaphors ( likening the challenge of migration to war). His expression of moral convictions and sentiments of the collective remained vague and fluid, defined in opposition to the elite. While the communication of his leadership was charismatic, the content was populist: that is, he considered ‘society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,”’ and claimed ‘that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people’.70 This is not surprising, given that ‘most students of populism stress the relationship between political populism and charismatic leadership’.71 Moreover, the President’s thin-centred arguments, relying more on second-order rhetoric than first-order substance and on the identification of an external other threatening the collective of the people, have a close fit with both research on populism and Trump’s leadership in other foreign policy issue areas such as trade policy.72 However, as the next section will show, there is no necessary or intrinsic link between charismatic leadership and political populism. In contrast, charismatic leadership may be used as a vehicle for liberalism and rational legal authority.

Angela Merkel: activating rational legal authority in charismatic practice


During the 2015–16 European migration crisis, Angela Merkel—under her trademark expression ‘Wir schaffen das’ (‘We can do it’/ ‘We can manage this’) — emphasized that the crisis was solvable within normal politics. However, at the same time ‘Wir schaffen das’ was in itself a charismatic practice expressing moral conviction about what was the right thing to do and positioning herself (and Germany) as the moral leader of Europe. In doing so she contrasted the community she represents with the dehumanizing regime of Nazi Germany, in effect portraying any critique or attempt to promote an alternative approach to the crisis as xenophobic. Throughout the crisis, Merkel presented a strong moral conviction to her followers. Discussing the large numbers of refugees, she reminded her followers of the moral imperative of the crisis: behind the numbers were the fates of human beings.73 This was in evidence when she pointed out:

“‘Human dignity shall be inviolable’—these are the first words of our basic law. This is our most important rule. Human dignity is the moral orientation preceding all other fundamental rights. It is the focus of all government action. From this follows a responsibility to protect the dignity of individuals and their freedom.”

Merkel stressed the gravity of the crisis, often comparing the number of refugees with the situation in Europe after the Second World War. However, she also emphasized her belief in the ability of the German state—and the EU—to handle such challenges. The refugee crisis was a huge responsibility, but the German community had a moral duty to assume this responsibility, and German history showed that it could be done. She drew on comparisons with and contrasts to the Second World War, German reunification and the more recent financial and economic crisis to point out that Germans have shown that they can manage whatever comes their way.75 The task now facing them, she argued, required both European solidarity and national strength, but also willingness to acknowledge the work done at

73 Merkel, 9 Sept. 2015. All quotations translated from German by the authors. (For full references to this and the following speeches, see our online appendix: https://polsci.ku.dk/ansatte/vip/?pure=da%2Fpublications%2Fappendix-to-charismatic-leadership-in-foreign-policy-international-affairs-972-march-2021-speeches-included-in-the-analysis(ef7c97-fad3-48f4-a68a-fe0b6f21b5da).html.)

74 Merkel, 12 Dec. 2015.

75 Merkel, 1 Oct. 2015.
regional and local levels within Germany. Activating the memory of Germany’s successful recovery from the financial crisis of 2009, and expressing her moral conviction that government needed to come to the rescue not just of economic and political elites but also of ordinary citizens around Germany, Merkel noted:

“We know we were fast when it came to saving banks. And I think we now have to be just as fast when it comes to taking the necessary measures so that local and regional authorities are relieved and the right framework conditions are in place to meet this challenge.”

The German community is strong and based on freedom, tolerance and the rule of law, but the problem facing Germany was not only a German problem. It was a problem with both European and global implications (a recurring three-point list), and one that called for a strong European community with strong German engagement. In contrast to Donald Trump, Merkel rarely identified members of society as excluded from this community, although on a few occasions racists or xenophobes are identified as incompatible with the German community. The existential threat against German and European society stemmed not from migrants at the border, but from the loss of civilization and human dignity that would be incurred if Germans failed to pay asylum-seekers the respect owed to any human being. She drew explicit parallels here with the *Zivilisationsbruchs der Shoah*, the breakdown of civilization during the Holocaust.

Merkel used anecdotes and stories to a lesser extent than Trump. They were rarely personalized, and when they were, they referred to herself and other state leaders. In contrast to the US president’s, the German chancellor’s charismatic practice activated rational legal authority as a cornerstone of German and European community. However, in her speeches she used that authority not as a functional tool for problem-solving, but as an integral and


77 Merkel, 1 Oct. 2015.

78 Merkel, 9 Sept. 2015.

79 Merkel, 2 Dec. 2015.
necessary component of German (and European) community and how to make sense of that community. ‘We’ (Germany, Europe) are the civilized proponents of rational legal policies at home and abroad, and (populist) arguments against this type of authority are illegitimate and furthermore risk undermining the community that we have built over the past 75 years. Thus, it is xenophobic and populist responses to migration, not migration itself, that are excluded from the national and European community. In expressing sentiments of the collective, Merkel was ambiguous regarding whether the wir (‘we’) in ‘Wir schaffen das’ referred to herself, Germany or the EU, or maybe even global humankind. She spoke not only as German chancellor, but also as the de facto leader of the EU and, more generally, as a moral leader embedded in a European tradition of liberalism and the rule of law. Consequently, Merkel’s Germany is the antithesis of Germany before 1945, as she so often points out in her speeches.

The ambitious goals set out by Merkel were designed to manage not only the refugee crisis but also the existential threat posed to the identity of the EU by the reinstatement of national borders, and to create confidence that not only the German but also the European community would still be intact after the crisis. Hence, ‘Wir schaffen das’ refers not only to the handling of the refugee crisis but also to meeting more fundamental threats against the liberal tradition of the EU and, even more broadly, the West.

**Analytical, normative and policy implications**

Our structured, focused comparison of the charismatic leadership practices of Trump and Merkel has analytical, normative and policy implications for the theory and practice of foreign policy in liberal democratic states.

To take the analytical implications first, this comparison illustrates that charismatic leadership is not restricted to populist leaders.
As summarized in table 2, both Merkel and Trump consistently communicate charismatically, creating a community bond between themselves and their followers: that is, they use visionary, emotional and symbolic bonding with followers in a way that creates stability and community and thereby expands their political action space. They both justify their policies by appealing to values, making a clear distinction between right and wrong; and they both symbolize, even embody, the moral unity of the collective per se by demonstrating their convictions. However, there are two notable differences between their respective practices of charismatic communication. First, Merkel’s charismatic communication is ‘thicker’ than Trump’s. Merkel more often than Trump expressed moral convictions and sentiments of the collective (first-order practices), whereas Trump preferred to communicate via anecdotes, contrasts and comparisons (second-order practices). Second, Trump painted rational legal authority as the tool of an aloof elite disconnected from the ‘real’ American community, whereas Merkel communicated rational legal authority as an integral and indispensable
element of German community. She emphasizes values rather than people, although few are left in any doubt about who the bad guys are (xenophobes). Merkel’s emphasis on rational legal authority may at first appear to be the antithesis to charismatic leadership. However, her leadership style is charismatic: she communicates rational legal authority not merely as an effective functional tool for problem-solving, but as an integral and necessary part of German (and European) community, encouraging us to distinguish this community from, and contrast it with, both Nazi Germany and those opposing mass migration today.

We turn now to the normative implications of our analysis. Expressing moral convictions and collective sentiments by contrasting one’s own solutions with past and present alternatives runs a constant risk of reifying an ‘imagined community’ of a distinct and coherent nation acting as a force for good in the world. It is no coincidence that charismatic leadership in foreign policy has conventionally been associated with populist or even autocratic leadership. How do we reap the rewards of charismatic leadership in foreign policy without endangering the virtues of liberal democracy? Bass and Steidlmeier argue that, to be considered true transformational leadership, charismatic leadership should be accompanied by a sense of ‘civic virtue’ on the part of the leader. In the language of Weber, charismatic leadership needs to be checked by rational legal authority, embodying what Hans Morgenthau termed ‘moral law’: absolute principles rooted in the idea that ‘the test of a morally good action is the degree to which it is capable of treating others not as means to the actor’s ends but as ends in themselves’. Our analysis of Merkel illustrates how charismatic leadership can be a vehicle for the principles of liberal rational legal authority in foreign policy, when emphasized as an integral element in a community of human dignity.

Finally, our analysis has policy implications for liberal democratic foreign policy leaders, and also for their advisers. Charismatic leadership is far too powerful a tool to be left to the populists. The crisis of the liberal international order is also a crisis of sense-making:


knowing who we are, where we are going and how we can get there. Our analysis of Angela Merkel’s charismatic leadership style illustrates how liberal democratic leaders can answer these challenges by emphasizing legal rationality not just as a tool for problem-solving but as an indispensable element in moral community.

**Contribution to foreign policy analysis**

Our theory of charismatic leadership has the potential to complement existing understandings of foreign policy. We see at least two potential avenues for cross-fertilization between the theory of charismatic leadership and other theoretical perspectives. First, our analysis of Trump and Merkel illustrates how charismatic leadership is embedded in historical experiences and institutions. Using the language of role theory, these experiences and institutions help structure role expectations of charismatic leaders. Thus, one way of understanding the differences in charismatic communication practices between Trump and Merkel would be to identify the spectrum of potentially legitimate charismatic roles in each national setting. This would help identify the charismatic role(s) most likely to succeed in connecting with followers. It would also allow us to explore cases in which foreign policy leaders seek to connect to different and even incompatible types of domestic communities, and thereby to add a new dimension to the growing literature on domestic role contestation, providing a starting-point for more systematic analyses of foreign policy followership. By taking these steps, charismatic leadership analysis would add to role theory in foreign policy analysis in two ways: by specifying the links between leadership practices and foreign policy roles, and by deepening our understanding of both (charismatic) role communication to domestic audiences and the feedback mechanisms from these audiences back to the leaders. Second, charismatic leadership analysis potentially adds to our understanding of the importance and role of gender in foreign policy. The literature on management documents the different role expectations faced by male and female leaders. Men are expected to show more

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86 For the general argument on how historical experiences and institutions shape role expectations and an empirical application to EU foreign policy leadership, see Aggestam and Johansson, ‘The leadership paradox’.

agency, women more communality. These expectations match our findings well. Merkel’s leadership in the European migration crisis is an almost ideal-type example of how ‘the conduct of ethical foreign policy builds on a commitment to transformative change of global politics through the pursuit of good international citizenship, which requires sensitivity to the needs and wants of “others” in foreign policy practice’, in an approach associated with a feminist foreign policy agenda. Recognizing the need to take care to avoid ‘stereotypical notions of female passivity, consensus-seeking, and conflict avoidance’, a next step in understanding the role of gender in charismatic foreign policy leadership would be studies comparing more female leaders working from different ideological platforms across different issue areas.

**Conclusions**

Charismatic leadership in foreign policy is an important but under-studied phenomenon. This article explains how and why it is important by outlining and probing a theory of charismatic leadership. We show how two (very) different leaders, Chancellor Merkel and President Trump, have used charismatic leadership, and unpack the similarities and differences in their charismatic practices. We agree with critics of charismatic leadership that it is a potentially dangerous practice, but argue at the same time that it is a necessary if insufficient element of foreign policy leadership in liberal democratic societies seeking to connect to domestic audiences when responding to the challenges of globalization. Consequently, identifying strategies for reconciling charismatic practices with rational legal authority and the norms of liberal democracy is of crucial importance.

Our study probes rather than proves the empirical relevance of charismatic leadership. The case-studies illustrate our theoretical argument, but do not test it. However, our two selected cases have intrinsic value in showing the charismatic leadership of, respectively, the most powerful state in the world and the leading power in Europe. Moreover, by including the counter-intuitive case of Merkel’s leadership, we show that charismatic leadership is not an

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exclusively populist phenomenon. Moderate liberals can be subject to charismatic leadership just as much as right-wing populists.

Future studies of charismatic leadership would benefit from cross-fertilization with the foreign policy analysis literature, most importantly role theory and studies on the role of gender in foreign policy. In addition, charismatic leadership analysis should move beyond liberal democratic responses to the challenges of globalization. This can be done in at least two ways. First, the theory presented here can be applied to foreign policy leadership in hybrid regimes and autocracies in order to probe the generalizability of the theory beyond liberal democracies. Second, the theory can be applied to policy areas such as security and defence policy in order to understand the dynamics of charismatic foreign policy leadership in the policy areas where norms of special expertise and secrecy have traditionally been the strongest, and yet where demands for more openness and stronger links to the values of domestic society have also been persistently voiced for more than a century.