

Garibaldi's Expedition: The Rise and Fall of Charismatic Leadership

Extended Abstract

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Charismatic leaders have a unique power to inspire, unite, and transform societies. They captivate their followers with promises of a brighter future, becoming enduring symbols of collective aspirations. Abraham Lincoln stands as a symbol of equality, leading the United States through the abolition of slavery. As a leader of the Reformation, Martin Luther reshaped religious thought and practice, challenging established authority and sparking a movement that transformed Christianity (Becker et al., 2020). Mahatma Gandhi is remembered as the face of India's nonviolent resistance, embodying the struggle for independence. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk redefined Turkey's national identity, forging a modern, secular republic from the remnants of an empire (Assouad, 2020). Nelson Mandela, through his fight against apartheid, became a global icon of reconciliation and justice. These leaders not only shaped the narratives of their nations and communities but also left behind legacies deeply intertwined with the hopes of their people.

However, as societies evolve, the legacies of such figures are often re-evaluated, reflecting contemporary values and addressing historical complexities. In October 2024, an Abraham Lincoln statue in Chicago's Lincoln Park was vandalized with red paint and graffiti labeling him an "executioner", drawing attention to a critical reassessment of his actions during the Dakota War of 1862 (Kaufman and Feurer, 2024). Similarly, in South Africa, Nelson Mandela's vision of a united, egalitarian society remains unrealized for many, particularly younger generations. In May 2024, the African National Congress (ANC)—Mandela's party—lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in 30 years, reflecting growing disillusionment with persistent unemployment, stark inequality, and rampant corruption (Chutel and Khan, 2023; Pilling and Mark, 2024). Younger South Africans, increasingly detached from Mandela's ideals, critique his leadership for prioritizing reconciliation at the expense of addressing entrenched economic inequities. While Mandela's global reputation endures, domestically, he is increasingly seen as a scapegoat for the nation's unfulfilled aspirations.

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These examples underscore a broader phenomenon: the re-evaluation of historical figures as societies confront the complexities of their pasts. Such reassessments reshape national identity, influence public trust in institutions, and alter collective memory. This raises pressing questions: How do societies reconcile the celebrated achievements of charismatic leaders with the more contentious aspects of their legacies? How does this process impact national cohesion and trust in governing bodies? While the emerging literature has focused on the ability of leaders to persuade and mobilize (Caillaud and Tirole, 2007; Assouad, 2020; Becker et al., 2020; Dippel and Heblich, 2021; Wang, 2021; Cagé et al., 2023), it has largely neglected their capacity to disappoint. By examining Giuseppe Garibaldi’s role in the 1860 Italian unification, this paper explores how the unfulfilled promises of charismatic leadership can influence societal trust and national identity, offering insights into the enduring challenges of nation-building.

Celebrated as the “hero of two worlds”, Garibaldi played a pivotal role in unifying Italy through his daring 1860 Expedition of the Thousand. This campaign saw Garibaldi and a small force of just over a thousand volunteers sail from Quarto, near Genoa, to Sicily, aiming to overthrow the Bourbon monarchy in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. His charismatic leadership and unwavering commitment to republican ideals galvanized widespread support for the nationalist cause (Riall, 2008). Garibaldi’s forces quickly won decisive victories, gaining momentum as local populations rallied to his side. By September, he triumphantly entered Naples, greeted as a liberator (Trevelyan, 2001). Along the way, he enacted bold reforms, including abolishing oppressive taxes and redistributing land to peasants and veterans, embodying the transformative aspirations of the Risorgimento (Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia, 1861). However, his decision to hand control of the southern territories to King Victor Emmanuel II marked a turning point, as unification under the Savoy monarchy prioritized centralized authority over Garibaldi’s social vision.

The divergence between Garibaldi’s promises and the realities of post-unification policies bred widespread disappointment, especially in Southern Italy. Economic hardships, new forms of taxation, and cultural estrangement from the northern-dominated government deepened regional divisions. This unrest found expression in widespread brigandage, reflecting the fractures within the nascent Italian state (Fortunato, 1926; Molfese, 1964; Accetturo et al., 2017; Lecce et al., 2022). Garibaldi himself lamented the erosion of public trust, observing how those who once celebrated his leadership had turned against him. By examining Garibaldi’s role, this paper demonstrates how the gap between visionary leadership and institutional realities can erode trust in government and fracture national identity, shaping the long-term trajectory of nations.

I compare municipalities Garibaldi visited during his 1860 Expedition of the Thousand with those he did not to explore how direct exposure to his campaign influenced societal and political outcomes. Understanding the impact of his presence provides valuable insight into how charismatic leadership shapes expectations and behaviors. Garibaldi’s visits likely carried significant symbolic weight, directly exposing local populations to his ideals of unity and republicanism. Such exposure may have heightened expectations for the success of Italian unification, influencing how individuals

evaluated their circumstances and the outcomes of the unification process.

This dynamic aligns with findings from Marzilli Ericson and Fuster (2011), who show that heightened expectations can act as reference points, shaping how people value and respond to outcomes. According to their framework, individuals compare their realized experiences against these elevated benchmarks, amplifying perceptions of gains or losses. In the context of Garibaldi’s campaign, his sweeping promises and reforms likely created ambitious expectations for unification in the municipalities he visited. Over time, the gap between these expectations and post-unification realities—such as economic hardships and unmet political ideals—may have fostered profound disillusionment. Focusing on municipalities exposed to Garibaldi’s campaign, this paper examines how charismatic leadership and heightened expectations interact to produce lasting societal and political effects.

Identifying a causal effect in this context presents several challenges. Once Garibaldi landed on mainland Italy, his strategic priority was to reach Naples as quickly as possible. Given the infrastructure available in 1860, he followed a primary route with only minor deviations dictated by the existing road network connecting the Southern districts with Naples. As a result, municipalities along this route inherently benefited from better connectivity and infrastructure, making it difficult to disentangle the effects of Garibaldi’s presence from these pre-existing advantages.

To address these challenges and establish causality, I exploit a significant deviation from Garibaldi’s intended expedition route. After entering Naples to a hero’s welcome in September 1860, he turned his attention to Rome, a symbolic and strategic target for completing unification (Trevelyan, 2001). However, his advance was halted in Vairano, where he met King Victor Emmanuel II in the historic Encounter of Teano. At this meeting, Garibaldi symbolically handed over the territories he had conquered, recognizing the King as the ruler of a unified Italy. This decision, driven by pragmatism and the need to avoid conflict with France, marked the end of his direct influence on the unification process.

My analysis focuses on municipalities in the ancient regions of Napoli and Terra di Lavoro, areas directly impacted by Garibaldi’s campaign before the halt. To isolate the causal impact of his presence, I leverage the quasi-random nature of his interrupted advance. Using historical diaries (Trevelyan, 2001; Forbes, 2013) and accounts of Garibaldi’s expedition (Garibaldi, 1982), I identified unavoidable strategic targets along his route, including key towns and logistical points. I reconstructed the likely path connecting these points, incorporating historical data on road networks and altitude to generate the least-cost path. This reconstructed route closely aligns with Garibaldi’s actual expedition, validating my approach. To ensure comparability, I employ overlap weights (Li et al., 2018), re-weighting treated and control municipalities so that they are similar in geography, pre-campaign economic and social development, and distance from the least-cost path.

First, I show that Garibaldi’s initial charismatic appeal successfully mitigated resistance against the newly established Kingdom of Italy. I measure support for the unification process through the absence of post-unitary brigandage, a violent insurgency driven by economic hardships, political

discontent, and resistance to the new state. Municipalities Garibaldi visited were less likely to experience brigandage, suggesting that his presence fostered initial support for the unification effort and helped reduce immediate resistance to the emerging national order. This finding underscores the short-term unifying impact of Garibaldi's charismatic leadership and its implications for consolidating the newly established kingdom.

Paradoxically, I find that Garibaldi's visits reduced political engagement once suffrage was extended to all men. Using turnout in the 1913 general elections—the first held under male-universal suffrage—as a measure, I show that visited municipalities exhibited lower voter turnout compared to those he did not visit. This suggests that while Garibaldi's presence initially inspired unity, these places later displayed weaker civic capital and a diminished sense of political involvement at the national level. These results highlight the long-term challenges of sustaining political engagement in areas where heightened expectations may have clashed with disappointing realities.

I further show that municipalities Garibaldi visited were less likely to support republicanism in the 1946 referendum, where Italians decided whether to retain the monarchy or establish a republic. This result reflects weaker political integration with Northern Italy, which had become the economic and political core of the kingdom after unification. In the North, republicanism symbolized modernization, progress, and alignment with the emerging national identity. The lower republican sentiment in Garibaldi-visited areas points to a persistent divide, likely stemming from discontent with the unmet aspirations tied to unification. It also highlights a departure from Garibaldi's own ideals. As a committed republican inspired by Mazzinian values, Garibaldi championed a democratic, egalitarian Italy rooted in popular sovereignty and civic participation. The monarchy-led unification process, however, may have distanced these municipalities from his vision, leaving them less aligned with both his ideals and the broader political values of the North.

Finally, I examine the broader implications for Garibaldi's legacy, which are intricately tied to these societal outcomes. Visited municipalities demonstrate greater reverence for Garibaldi, as evidenced by more roads and public spaces named in his honor. However, they also display lower levels of later engagement with symbols associated with him. For instance, they were less likely to volunteer for Garibaldi's army during the 1866 Third War of Independence and showed weaker support for the Fronte Democratico Party in the 1948 elections, once the party started to leverage Garibaldi's image in its campaign. This pattern suggests a complex process of scapegoating: while Garibaldi was initially celebrated, long-term dissatisfaction with unfulfilled promises likely eroded his standing as a unifying figure. This evolving perception reflects the broader tension between the high expectations charismatic leaders inspire and the realities of unmet aspirations.

I contribute to the growing literature on charismatic leadership, which highlights the profound influence of leaders on mobilization, persuasion, and institutional change. Research by Caillaud and Tirole (2007) examines how leaders build consensus and persuade groups by shaping shared goals and expectations. In contrast, Dippel and Heblich (2021) explores the role of charismatic leaders in social movements, showing how the "forty-eighters" mobilized support during the American

Civil War. These studies underscore the ability of leaders to foster collective action and achieve political or social change. Similarly, Assouad (2020) demonstrates how Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s leadership redefined Turkey’s national identity and advanced state-building by integrating diverse populations into a unified vision of modernity. Becker et al. (2020) provide a historical perspective on Martin Luther, showing how his charismatic leadership and network ties during the Reformation facilitated the diffusion of radical religious and institutional changes across Europe.

Charismatic leaders also shape societal behaviors and policy preferences on a broad scale. Wang (2021) documents how Father Coughlin, a charismatic populist in 1930s America, used media to sway public opinion and promote his political agenda. Cagé et al. (2023) show how the heroic narratives of resistance leaders during World War II influenced long-term attitudes toward authority and political collaboration in France. These studies highlight how leaders influence social norms, political engagement, and institutional trust.

The economic impact of charismatic leadership is also well-documented. Jones and Olken (2005) and Ottinger and Voigtländer (2021) explore how the traits and decisions of national leaders shape economic growth and state performance. In particular, Jones and Olken (2005) argue that leadership matters most in environments with weaker institutional constraints, where individual influence can significantly alter a nation’s trajectory.

While the existing literature emphasizes the persuasive power and transformative potential of charismatic leaders, it often neglects their capacity to disappoint. This paper fills this critical gap by examining the long-term consequences of unfulfilled promises, using Giuseppe Garibaldi’s role in the 1860 Italian unification as a case study. Garibaldi’s leadership initially mobilized widespread support, mitigating resistance and fostering enthusiasm for unification. However, over time, the areas he visited experienced reduced political engagement, weaker alignment with national political values, and diminished adherence to his republican ideals. These outcomes reflect a profound shift from early admiration to longer-term disillusionment, underscoring the risks inherent in the heightened expectations charismatic leaders create.

This study challenges the prevailing focus on the successes of charismatic leadership by demonstrating its dual nature: the same qualities that inspire unity and mobilization can ultimately lead to disillusionment when aspirations go unmet. By exploring Garibaldi’s legacy, I offer new insights into how charismatic leaders influence trust in institutions and national cohesion, not only through their achievements but also through the shadow of their failures. This paper contributes to the broader understanding of nation-building by showing how the promises of charismatic leaders can shape—yet ultimately fragment—political and social dynamics over time.

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