

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

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Charismatic leaders have long captivated societies with their ability to inspire, unite, and drive transformative change. They often become enduring symbols of collective aspirations, shaping the narratives of their nations and communities. Figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther, Mahatma Gandhi, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and Nelson Mandela exemplify this archetype. Each played a critical role in defining their respective societies through movements ranging from equality and religious reform to nonviolent resistance and national identity formation (Becker et al., 2020; Assouad, 2020). However, these leaders' legacies are not static; they evolve as societies reassess their histories, often revealing a complex interplay between celebrated achievements and unfulfilled promises.

Reassessments of such figures are becoming increasingly prominent. For example, Abraham Lincoln's legacy has come under scrutiny for his actions during the Dakota War of 1862 (Kaufman and Feurer, 2024), and Nelson Mandela's vision of an egalitarian South Africa is increasingly critiqued by younger generations disillusioned with ongoing inequalities and corruption (Chutel and Khan, 2023; Pilling and Mark, 2024). These examples raise critical questions about the enduring legacies of charismatic leadership: How do societies reconcile the successes of such leaders with their failures? How do their unfulfilled promises impact trust in institutions, national cohesion, and the collective memory of their achievements? This paper addresses these questions by examining Giuseppe Garibaldi's leadership during the 1860 Italian unification.

Celebrated as the "hero of two worlds", Garibaldi was instrumental in unifying Italy through his 1860 Expedition of the Thousand. His charismatic leadership and commitment to republican ideals galvanized widespread support for the nationalist cause (Riall, 2008). Garibaldi's swift victories in Sicily and Southern Italy culminated in his triumphant entry

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into Naples, where he enacted bold reforms, including the abolition of oppressive taxes and land redistribution ([Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia, 1861](#); [Trevelyan, 2001](#)). However, the decision to transfer control of the southern territories to King Victor Emmanuel II, prioritizing centralized authority under the Savoy monarchy, marked a turning point. This outcome achieved political unity but left unresolved tensions between Garibaldi’s republican ideals and the realities of monarchical rule.

In the years following unification, the divergence between Garibaldi’s promises and the realities of state policies bred widespread disappointment, particularly in Southern Italy. Economic hardships, cultural estrangement from the northern-dominated government, and new forms of taxation exacerbated regional divisions ([Fortunato, 1926](#); [Molfese, 1964](#); [Accetturo et al., 2017](#); [Lecce et al., 2022](#)). Resistance manifested in widespread social unrest, eroding public trust in the nascent Italian state. By examining the long-term effects of Garibaldi’s leadership, this paper sheds light on how the gap between visionary leadership and institutional realities can fracture national identity and undermine political cohesion.

Using novel historical data, I compare municipalities Garibaldi visited during his campaign with those he did not. I explore how direct exposure to his leadership influenced long-term societal and political outcomes. Garibaldi’s visits likely carried significant symbolic weight, exposing local populations to his ideals of unity and republicanism. However, these visits may have elevated expectations for unification, creating benchmarks against which post-unification realities were evaluated. This dynamic aligns with findings from [Marzilli Ericson and Fuster \(2011\)](#), who show that heightened expectations amplify perceptions of gains or losses, shaping individual responses to outcomes. In Garibaldi’s case, the unmet aspirations tied to unification may have fostered profound disillusionment in the municipalities he visited.

Identifying a causal effect in this context is challenging due to potential confounders, such as the pre-existing advantages of municipalities along Garibaldi’s route. After landing in Calabria, Garibaldi’s primary objective was to reach Naples quickly. His route primarily followed the main road network, which inherently benefited municipalities with better infrastructure, connectivity, and access to trade and ideas. These factors could influence the development of national identity, complicating efforts to isolate the causal effect of Garibaldi’s visits. To address this, I exploit the quasi-random interruption of Garibaldi’s advance at Vairano, where he met King Victor Emmanuel II in the historic Encounter of Teano. This meeting marked the symbolic handover of southern territories and the end of Garibaldi’s direct influence on the unification process ([Trevelyan, 2001](#); [Forbes, 2013](#)). Therefore, I compare municipalities Garibaldi visited with those he intended to reach but did not, due to the halt at Vairano.

The empirical strategy leverages this quasi-random interruption, combining historical diaries, road network data, and geospatial analysis to reconstruct the least-cost path of Garibaldi’s

campaign. To ensure comparability between treated and control municipalities, I employ overlap weights (Li et al., 2018), balancing pre-campaign characteristics such as geography, economic development, and distance from the reconstructed route. I also conduct robustness checks, including sample restrictions, alternative specifications for the least-cost path, and an assessment of omitted variable bias using Oster (2019)’s methodology. These tests confirm that confounding factors do not drive the observed effects.

The results reveal four main findings. First, Garibaldi’s visits mitigated resistance to the newly established Kingdom of Italy, as evidenced by lower levels of post-unitary brigandage, a violent insurgency driven by economic discontent and resistance to the new state (Lecce et al., 2022). This highlights the short-term unifying impact of Garibaldi’s charismatic leadership.

Second, Garibaldi’s visits reduced political engagement over the long term. Using voter turnout in the 1913 general election—the first held under male-universal suffrage—as a measure, I find that municipalities he visited exhibited significantly lower turnout compared to unvisited areas. This suggests that while Garibaldi initially inspired unity, the heightened expectations he fostered may have led to long-term disillusionment, weakening civic capital and political involvement.

Third, Garibaldi-visited municipalities were less likely to support republicanism in the 1946 referendum, where Italians decided between a monarchy and a republic. Republicanism, associated with modernization and alignment with Northern Italy’s political values, symbolized a vision closer to Garibaldi’s ideals. The lower republican sentiment in visited areas reflects a persistent divide between Garibaldi’s promises and the realities of unification.

Finally, Garibaldi’s legacy shows a complex interplay of reverence and disillusionment. While visited municipalities demonstrate greater short-term admiration, as evidenced by more roads and public spaces named after him, they display weaker long-term engagement with symbols associated with his ideals. For example, these municipalities 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, when the party leveraged Garibaldi’s image during its campaign.

This paper contributes to two key strands of literature. First, it engages with the growing body of research on charismatic leadership, which explores how leaders influence mobilization, persuasion, and institutional change (Caillaud and Tirole, 2007; Assouad, 2020; Becker et al., 2020; Dippel and Heblich, 2021; Wang, 2021; Cagé et al., 2023). While much of this literature focuses on leaders’ capacity to inspire and transform, this study highlights their potential to disappoint when promises remain unfulfilled. By examining Garibaldi’s campaign, the paper underscores the dual nature of charismatic leadership: its power to unite and its capacity to generate lasting disillusionment.

Second, the study contributes to the literature on nation-building and state formation, drawing on Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983). Nation-building tools, such as public education (Bandiera et al., 2019; Alesina et al., 2021) and propaganda (Blouin and Mukand, 2019), are instrumental in fostering shared national identity. However, their success often depends on local contexts (Bazzi et al., 2019; Panza and Zylberberg, 2024). By linking Anderson’s framework to the role of expectations, this paper reveals how charismatic leaders shape aspirations for national unity. When these aspirations go unmet, the imagined unity fractures, eroding trust in the national project.

The findings have significant implications for understanding nation-building dynamics and charismatic leadership’s legacies. They highlight the risks inherent in relying on charismatic leaders to unify fragmented societies. Modern policymakers and leaders navigating nation-building or reform efforts must balance ambitious visions with tangible outcomes to sustain public trust and cohesion over time. By examining the dual nature of Garibaldi’s leadership, this study offers historical insights into the delicate interplay between inspiration, expectation, and disillusionment in shaping the trajectory of nations.

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