

# Garibaldi's Expedition: The Rise and Fallof Charismatic Leadership

*Abstract*

Andrea Tizzani\*

October 6, 2024

Charismatic leaders captivate their followers with the promise of a brighter future, often becoming symbols of the transformative aspirations they champion. Figures like Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi are celebrated worldwide for their dedication to ideals of freedom, equality and nonviolent resistance. However, what happens when these grand visions falter? Do leaders take the blame?

History suggests that people may re-assess a leader's legacy over time, sometimes casting them as scapegoats for unmet expectations. Recent political developments in South Africa highlight this trend. In May 2024, the African National Congress (ANC), Nelson Mandela's party, lost its electoral majority for the first time in 30 years. This reflects widespread disillusionment with the ANC, driven by high unemployment, persistent economic inequalities and rampant corruption (Patta, 2024). Among younger South Africans, there is also growing resentment toward Mandela himself. Some believe that his reconciliation efforts did not go far enough to address enduring economic disparities (Chutel and Khan, 2023). Despite his global legacy, many now view his approach as a missed opportunity, where the promise of freedom fell short of delivering economic equity.

Charismatic leaders are celebrated for their ability to inspire and unite large groups, often driving significant social and political changes. Studies show that these leaders can shape group identities, rally support and even bring about substantial institutional transformations (Assouad, 2020; Becker et al., 2020; Cagé et al., 2023). Despite these insights, a gap exists in understanding how leaders' unmet promises affect their legacies and broader society. This gap is crucial because failing to deliver on grand promises can erode trust in institutions, reshape collective memories and influence future political engagement. This paper seeks to bridge

---

\*European University Institute, Department of Economics. andrea.tizzani@eui.eu

that gap by exploring how the discrepancies between visionary promises and actual outcomes influence societal dynamics over time.

This study examines Garibaldi’s influential role through his 1860 Expedition of the Thousand, comparing municipalities he visited to those he did not. Despite his promises of sweeping social reforms, the misalignment between his ambitious vision and subsequent governmental actions led to widespread disenchantment in Southern Italy. This scenario provides a unique setting to investigate the enduring effects of unmet expectations, highlighting the long-term impacts on societal and political dynamics.

To establish causality, I exploit a significant deviation in his journey: when King Victor Emmanuel II halted Garibaldi’s march near Teano, preventing him from reaching Rome. This event creates a natural experiment, allowing me to compare the municipalities Garibaldi visited with those he intended to visit but did not, based on their proximity to his planned path.

Findings reveal that Garibaldi’s initial charismatic appeal successfully mitigated resistance against the newly established kingdom, yet paradoxically led to reduced political engagement and a departure from his republican values. This reversal marks a significant shift from unity to disillusionment across generations. This pattern of initial admiration followed by longer-term aversion mirrors the evolving public perception of Garibaldi’s legacy, which was celebrated initially but contested over time. This dual nature underscores the complex legacy of charismatic leaders, whose initial successes may give way to negative historical evaluations over time.

## References

- Assouad, L. (2020). Charismatic leaders and nation building. Working paper, PSE.
- Becker, S. O., Y. Hsiao, S. Pfaff, and J. Rubin (2020). Multiplex network ties and the spatial diffusion of radical innovations: Martin Luther’s leadership in the early reformation. *American Sociological Review* 85(5), 857–894.
- Cagé, J., A. Dagorret, P. Grosjean, and S. Jha (2023). Heroes and villains: The effects of heroism on autocratic values and Nazi collaboration in France. *American Economic Review* 113(7), 1888–1932.
- Chutel, L. and G. Khan (2023). Mandela Goes From Hero to Scapegoat as South Africa Struggles. *The New York Times*.
- Patta, D. (2024). Why did Nelson Mandela’s ANC lose its majority in South Africa’s elections, and what comes next? *CBS News*.