

Political Leadership



At certain times, in certain places, leaders appear who inspire passion and embody the aspirations of the public. During World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's speeches rallied his country in its "darkest hour". In Argentina in the 1950s, Eva (Evita) Peron, a woman from humble roots, married President Juan Peron and attracted huge crowds of admirers, especially impoverished workers. The yearning for a new politics contributed to "Trudeaumania" in Canada in the 1960s. Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution drew millions of people into the streets of Iran's capital, topping the U.S.-backed government of Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979.

The seemingly magical power of a leader to elicit emotional commitment has been called charisma. But not all successful leaders have or need it. William Lyon Mackenzie King had, at best, a bland public image. Yet Canadians gave him almost 22 years as Prime Minister. After the traumas of World War II, Canadian voters elected the uncharismatic Louis St. Laurent, who campaigned as folksy, dependable "Uncle Louis." In the United States, a post-war yearning for normalcy led to the election of President Dwight Eisenhower, a similarly conservative elder statesman.

In Western countries such as Canada and the United States, political leaders often speak about their "vision." This suggests their particular views of their communities' potential and future direction. In the 1960s, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau spoke of a "Just Society." In the United States, President John F. Kennedy spoke of a "New Frontier." Whether a vision is attainable is another question, but projections of the future can motivate people to act in extraordinary ways.

1. List ten qualities that you believe a leader should have. Explain why you have selected these qualities.
2. Who are some of the world's greatest leaders in your mind? What makes them great leaders? How did they get to their leadership role?
3. Should it be possible for a person to use a personal fortune to bring about political change? Why or why not?
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of people power. If you felt very strongly about an issue, what form of protest would you be prepared to engage in?