



## **Strategies to Form Political Cults of Personalities**

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## Introduction:

Cults of personalities are a social phenomenon most prominent in modern history. As researcher Anne-Mette Holmgård Sundahl defined, a cult of personality must meet the following parameters: political resilience, symbolic elevation, and religious parallels. In simpler terms, the political leader at the center of a cult of personality can make significant policy mistakes without being criticized, their character is symbolically elevated to represent much larger ideological notions, and they are worshiped similarly to religious idols. By meeting these three parameters, individuals achieve the status of a personality cult, and as a result, command an incredible amount of power. Historically speaking, those who possess this type of leadership have accomplished otherwise impossible feats such as voluntary mass mobilization, radical ideological advancement, and thorough societal restructuring. In some ways, this phenomenon is counterintuitive to the existing understanding of political structures. Logically speaking, leaders either derive their power from popular support or the state's bureaucratic structure. While leaders with personality cults certainly lean towards the former, they also have the unique ability to change the very perception of the people, shaping the public to their will, and completely inverting the traditional power dynamic of leadership. This paper aims to outline some specific steps that leaders can take to achieve this status, supported by analyses of historical examples and applying them using a modern lens.

So far, academic literature in political science has largely overlooked this subject. In reality, this phenomenon deserves far greater attention. A cult of personality is a rare, exceptional, and unconventional mechanic that, despite its scarcity, drastically changes the landscape of modern geopolitics significantly. On the other hand, populism has been a matter of abundant debate and research. However, not only is populism fundamentally different from cults of personality, but it is also much less politically significant in the sense that in populism, leaders still draw their legitimacy from the approval of the populace, whereas cults of personalities can actively shape the people to their will. Furthermore, while cults of personalities are ostensibly confined to 20th-century revolutionaries such as Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, their influence extends far beyond antiquity. In fact, today, cults of personalities are still a prevalent force. Leaders such as Donald Trump, Erdogan, and Javier Milei shape both social landscape and policy in their respective spheres of influence. Therefore, this matter deserves serious academic examination to gain a better understanding of the causes and effects of this phenomenon, possibly to either identify, prevent, or harness the formation of cults of personalities.

The most significant ways that cults of personalities come to be are through maintaining distance between leaders and followers, appealing to less politically aware audiences, and orchestrating a trial-and-error phase for the leader, all of which serve to fulfill one of Sundahl's three parameters.

## Symbolic Elevation

One of Sundahl's three parameters is the symbolic elevation of a leader, ideologically raising one's status higher than what is conventionally achievable as a political leader. Through this step, leaders can transcend their familiar human character and become something much bigger. They effectively become a living embodiment of a certain school of thought, undergoing

an apotheosis that transforms their name and reputation into the symbolic representation of a widespread movement (Sundahl, 2019).

### **Strategy 1: Maintaining Distance**

One strategy used to create symbolic elevation is maintaining distance between leaders and followers. This distance can be physical, emotional, or symbolic, creating a perception of the leader as an almost mythical figure. Mao Zedong is a textbook example of such a leader who achieved symbolic elevation using this method. He communicated by publishing books about himself, but never directly under his authorship. During the Chinese Civil War, Mao was interviewed by foreign journalist Edgar Snow, who subsequently published a heavily doctored biography of Mao—*Red Star over China*. This book, completely written from an outsider's point of view, paints a distant, vague, and optimistic unfinished portrait of Mao Zedong as a leader. This way, Mao inspired admiration from people inside China and outside, so much so that the participants in the Black Panther movement in the United States held up Mao's *Little Red Book* (another book of quotes from Mao) as a symbol of liberty, resistance, and equality (Chao, 2018). Furthermore, Mao physically distanced himself from people—issuing decrees from inside government buildings and reviewing parades from afar. Combined with artistic media that portrayed Mao as a legendary figure, his position was elevated far beyond that of an average politician, putting considerable symbolic distance between himself and his people. This manipulation of civil society dynamics aligns with Gellner's (1994) argument that leaders exploit the relationship between the state and civil society to enhance their perceived legitimacy and transcend ordinary political roles.

Other examples following the same model include Ho Chi Minh, Kim Il Sung, Xi Jinping, and Lenin (Sundahl, 2019). One unlikely example is Donald Trump, a leader with frequent public appearances making direct contact with his voter base. However, Trump's status as an alleged billionaire creates a significant difference in status between himself and his followers. Trump's wealth, intelligence, and status, flaunted during campaign rallies and debates, are key distinguishing features of his campaign. Thus, despite frequent public appearances, Trump follows this formula and can form a powerful cult of personality, which has generated significant political clout (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007).

By either organically or artificially maintaining distance between followers, a lapse in the people's perception of the leader forms, forcing an uninformed mass to extrapolate based on the curated available information. This tends to portray the leader as almost transcendental, allowing people to construct an idealized image of the leader (Wedeen, 2019).

### **Strategy 2: Communicating to Less Educated Audiences**

Another strategy used to create symbolic elevation is communicating to a less educated audience. Less educated crowds tend to experience lower levels of ideological debate and are more susceptible to radical ideologue's preachings (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017). Mao Zedong skillfully utilized this tactic to elevate himself symbolically, almost to the extent of apotheosis. Understanding the immense influence of China's rural peasantry and working class, who constituted the majority of the less educated population, Mao crafted his messages to resonate deeply with them. He used simple, direct language filled with revolutionary fervor, making

complex political and ideological concepts accessible and compelling (Fenby, 2008). Mao's extensive use of propaganda further reinforced this connection, portraying him as a paternal figure and a savior of the oppressed (Short, 2000). Despite the disastrous consequences of policies like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the propaganda highlighted Mao's visionary leadership and commitment to the people's welfare (Bernstein, 2006).

In contrast, more ideologically circulative populations are less receptive to such leaders as their voices are drowned by other competitive alternatives (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Mao's ability to appeal to a less educated audience through simplified, emotionally charged rhetoric, combined with relentless propaganda, allowed him to achieve a symbolic elevation of remarkable proportions (Short, 2000).

### **Political Resilience**

The second of Sundahl's three parameters for a personality cult is achieving political resilience. This means that leaders are able to commit severe political blunders without resulting in a significant shift in opinion among the people. This is an important characteristic of any leader who wishes to form and maintain a cult of personality, as this allows them to preserve their popularity while also delivering on their radical agenda without fearing the pragmatic consequences.

#### **Strategy 1**

One strategy that a leader can use to achieve political resilience is experiencing a trial-and-error process for their people. Through this process, a leader tactfully positions themselves as the underdog in a perilous situation. Using a combination of victim mentality and imagery of resistance against an oppressive foe, the defiant leader can bolster support and morale. Moreover, this seeming defeat portrays the leader as a martyr, causing widespread outrage and vengeance among their loyal followers. Overall, by undergoing this somewhat counterintuitive maneuver, a political leader builds trust within their respective communities and strengthens popular resolve, forging an almost infallible political resilience.

This phenomenon can be observed in the political journey of Donald Trump. After losing the presidency in 2020, the American public has had the chance to experience the consequences of alternative leadership under Joe Biden. This period has heightened the previous administration's profile, showcasing the differences in policies and leadership. Moreover, Trump has successfully positioned himself as the underdog, frequently expressing that he has been wronged and unjustly treated by the political system. This narrative has resonated with his base, further solidifying their support and bolstering his political resilience. As Gessen (2020) outlines, Trump's defiance and victim mentality have amplified his appeal among his supporters, making them more determined to see him return to power.

Another significant example of the trial-and-error process is the Great Leap Forward initiated by Mao Zedong. This campaign aimed to rapidly transform China from an agrarian society into a socialist society through rapid industrialization and collectivization. However, the policy led to a catastrophic famine, resulting in millions of deaths. Despite the enormity of this failure, Mao managed to retain his position and continue to command loyalty. The propaganda machine portrayed the disaster as a temporary setback in the grand scheme of revolutionary progress, and the blame was often deflected onto local officials rather than Mao himself (Li, 2015). This



period allowed the Chinese public to endure the consequences of radical policy firsthand, reinforcing Mao's image as a resilient leader who could navigate through adversity and continue to push forward his vision for the nation (Short, 2000).

In summary, a leader's trial-and-error process involves navigating through failures and setbacks in a way that reinforces their narrative of resilience and determination. By framing these experiences as temporary challenges on the path to a greater goal, leaders can maintain and even strengthen their political support, ultimately achieving a level of political resilience that allows them to pursue their agendas without significant opposition (Li, 2015).

## Conclusion

Cults of personalities are complex and multifaceted phenomena involving symbolic elevation, political resilience, and strategic manipulation. By maintaining distance between themselves and their followers, appealing to less educated audiences, and orchestrating trial-and-error processes, leaders can create and sustain their cult of personality. Historical examples, including Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung, and Donald Trump, demonstrate the effectiveness of these strategies in achieving and maintaining power.

Democracy dies in thunderous applause, and the phenomenon of personality cults stands as proof. Therefore, understanding the dynamics analyzed in the paper is crucial for understanding contemporary political landscapes and recognizing the potential risks associated with personality-driven leadership. In essence, these strategies identified in the paper provide a new lens by which voters and experts can use to examine emerging or existing politicians, help predict those who are on a trajectory toward cults of personalities, and possibly even mitigate their impact by countering these strategies.



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