

# **Authentic Moral Leadership, Attributed Charisma, and Cynicism about Change in the Context of a Presidential Election: Understanding the Moderating Role of Crisis Perceptions**

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*The current study examines authentic moral leadership in the setting of a U.S. presidential election, with the Democratic incumbent and Republican challenger in 2012. Pre and post-election data were collected yielding 432 matched responses. Perceptions of authentic moral leadership were positively related to attributions of charisma, with crisis perceptions having a moderating effect. Pre-election perceptions of the incumbent's authentic moral leadership had a negative effect on cynicism about change, and a negative indirect effect on post-election cynicism about change, through pre-election attributions of charisma. The implications of the research for understanding authentic moral leadership and attributed charisma are discussed.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Media coverage of catastrophic financial and organizational events has increased the spotlight on leaders. Heightened awareness of these events may result in crisis perceptions, compelling individuals to expect greater levels of transparency and moral decision making from their leaders. Those concerned with the potential for crisis form perceptions of leaders and their ability to lead and may attribute charismatic qualities to leaders based on the leader's words and actions. With many issues present during the past few U.S. presidential elections that could be perceived as indicating crisis or the potential for crisis, voter perceptions of crisis is an important variable to consider in studying follower responses to leadership in the context of a presidential election.

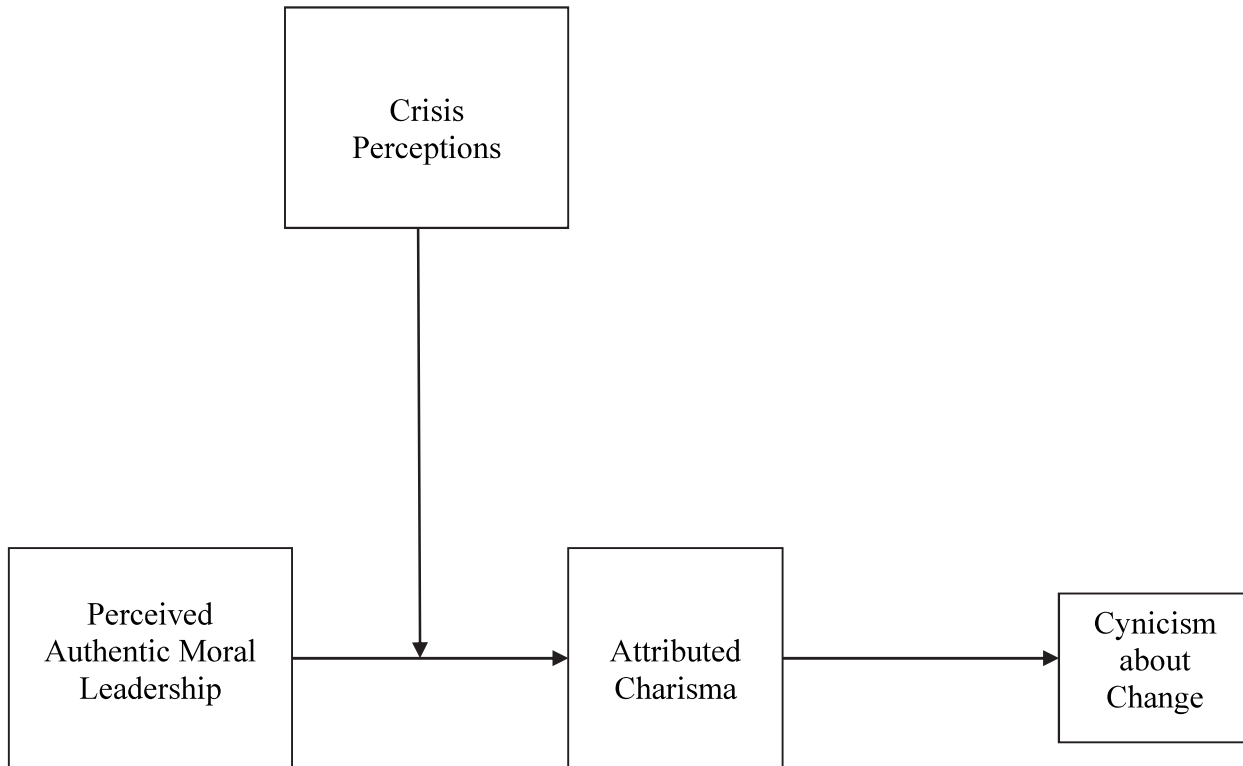
Rosenthal, Charles and t'Hart (1989) define crisis as a "serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain

circumstances necessitates making critical decisions” (p. 10). In the presence of potential crisis perceptions by followers it is likely that collective anxiety, uncertainty, and need for meaning might account for people craving strong and hopeful leaders (Vries, 1999) who they believe possess charisma. Follower attributions of charisma refer to perceptions that the leader articulates goals, projects success and self-confidence, and arouses the emotion of followers (Bass, 1985). Followers also need to know that these leaders possess moral character and have the courage and will to act morally in the interests of organizations and nations (moral leadership).

Moral leadership is broadly identified as “a leader’s behavior that demonstrates superior personal virtues, self-discipline, and unselfishness” (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004: 91). Hannah, Lester, and Vogelsang (2005) define authentic moral leadership as “the exercise of altruistic, virtuous leadership by a highly developed moral leader who acts in concert with his or her self-concept to achieve agency over the moral aspects of his or her leadership domain” (p. 44). Research on the moral person component of ethical leadership has been largely underdeveloped in the leadership literature but it has been gaining the attention of leadership scholars who see it as being a distinct element in charismatic leadership and ethical leadership (Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). This moral perspective is inherent in conceptualizations of charismatic and ethical leadership because of the associated responsibility of developing a compelling vision and effecting change for the better (Schuh, Zhang, & Tian, 2013). In authentic leadership, the internalized moral perspective guides decision making (Hannah et al., 2005; Sendajaya, Pekerti, Hartel, Hirst, & Butarbutar, 2016). We single out the element of moral character, evidenced in authentic moral leadership, in this study because it highlights the role of perceptions of leader morality in follower attributions of charisma and resulting attitudes such as cynicism about change. Cynicism about change is an attitude characterized by the assumption that institutional processes operate based on self-interested behavior and that the current leadership will not change its approach (Andersson, 1996). Attributions drive leader selection decisions, attitude formation, and summary evaluations, especially in the context of a presidential election. The main research questions guiding our research are: How do follower perceptions of authentic moral leadership influence attributions of charisma and cynicism about change? What role does ‘crisis perceptions’ play within these relationships?

Gini (1997), notes that all leadership is value-laden. U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt identified that the U.S. presidency is “preeminently a place for moral leadership” (as cited in Shogan, 2000). U.S. presidential elections have been shown to be effective means of assessing leadership (Simonton, 2006); for example, in examining attributed charismatic leadership, authentic leadership, and cynicism about change (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004; Davis & Gardner, 2012; Williams, Pillai, Lowe, Jung, & Herst, 2009). Set in the context of the 2012 U.S. presidential election, this study investigates the influence that crisis perceptions have on the association between authentic moral leadership, attributions of charisma, and cynicism about change. The purpose of the current study is to provide insight into the process through which perceptions of authentic moral leadership - based on perceptions of the leader’s internalized moral perspective - influences post-election (post leader selection) attitudes of cynicism about change, through attributions of charisma. Political leaders invariably use the platform of change to win elections, see for example Bush in 2000 (Williams et al., 2009), and then face the reality of governing with all the checks and balances of government sometimes including a determined and powerful opposition with a very different value system. Thus leadership perceptions and attributions surrounding leader selection, influence the potential cynicism about change among voters following leader selection.

**FIGURE 1**  
**THEORETICAL MODEL**



## **BACKGROUND**

The office of the president is symbolic for the embodiment of truthfulness, trust, self-control, empathy, and fairness (Brown & Treviño, 2006b; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Followers' perceptions are affected when leaders are believed to be responsible for, or associated with, immoral actions (Hannah, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2011). Problematically for Obama, nearly 50% of Americans incorrectly believed he signed the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) into legislation (Pew Research, 2010) – this became a symbol of an economic system driven by leaders of low morality. Analyzing results for both presidential candidates allows us to make comparisons and discuss the potential role of leader incumbency. These insights have implications for future studies such as the 2020 U.S. presidential election in which there will likely be an incumbent who entered on a change mandate (Williams et al., 2018). With extensive media coverage of the future potential incumbent's, Trump, leadership, and narcissism, punctuated by accusations of unethical behavior and the pursuit of self-interest (Williams et al., 2018), the study of moral character will continue to merit investigation.

Research by Lord, Phillips, and Rush (1980) shows that perceiver-based effects explain a great deal of perceived leader behavior, sometimes just as much as the variance explained by leader characteristics (Jordan, Brown, Treviño & Finkelstein, 2013). Hannah et al. (2005) highlight that as the leader exemplifies moral behavior during leadership episodes, followers make attributions that result in positive outcomes. In understanding the attribution process, Kelley (1972a) concludes that individuals have biases in perceiving the causes of individual behavior in an attempt to control outcomes that might result from that behavior. In drawing attributional conclusions perceivers apply schemata for interpreting information to make sense of phenomena (Kelley 1972b). Thus, voters are

likely to evaluate the candidates based on how they interpret their moral behavior seen through a charismatic lens that amplifies perceptions.

### **Authentic Moral Leadership and Attributions of Charisma**

Moral leadership entails that leaders possess a strong personal moral code, and the conviction to use their positional power to moral ends (Hannah, et al., 2005). Charisma and character of a leader are theoretically linked (Brown & Treviño, 2006a; 2006b). Charismatic leadership has a clear logic for investigation through the context of a presidential election due to access that the public has to information and appearances through the media. Charismatic leadership is as described by House and colleagues, involves the leader exercising influence over followers by the nature of their exceptional qualities and inspirational behavior (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991). The crises that have been observed in organizations have led to discussions about the leader's character, vision, and ethics; with questions about the importance of character versus charisma (Sankar, 2003). Charisma focuses on the use of power (Shamir, 1995) while the character of the leader is based on core values (Fromm, 1985). Bligh, et al. (2004) emphasize that followers are drawn to leaders' values and moral qualities. Authentic moral leadership might influence attributions of charisma in leaders because followers identify with the leader when observing the actions that the leader demonstrates. We, therefore, expect that the values of moral leaders will lead to higher attributions of charisma.

**Hypothesis 1:** Authentic moral leadership perceptions will be positively associated with attributions of charisma.

### **The Effects of Perceptions of Crisis**

In a study on perceptions of charisma, Williams et al., (2009) highlighted the role that crisis perceptions have played in the attributions of charisma for incumbent versus non-incumbent leaders through the lens of the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Their study positively linked attributed charisma to voter behavior. Research suggests that candidates running again as incumbents have better performance in election results than candidates not holding that status (Snyder, Jr., 2002). The importance that the office of 'president' holds ensures that many individuals will have a vested interest in the outcome of an election, and the pervasiveness of presidential campaigns ensures that most individuals will have some knowledge and opinion of the presidential candidates (with ever increasing media attention). In fact, the reach of presidential nominees pervades social media, news outlets, local campaigns, and even popular television shows such as Saturday Night Live and the Late Night Show (Hoffman & Young, 2011). Research suggests that crisis perceptions might lead to the emergence of charismatic leaders in groups (Pillai, 1996). Crisis perceptions are expected to moderate the effects of authentic moral leadership on attributions of charisma for both the incumbent leader and the potential challenger. When there are high perceptions of crisis, followers identify with the leaders with and yearn more for a charismatic leader (Eilam & Shamir, 2005) that shares their values. Hall and Lord (1995) emphasized that schema-driven categorization may determine how we evaluate others; in the attribution process individuals take account of the joint contribution of multiple factors in making evaluations (Kelley, 1973). Kelley and Michela (1980) note that attributions affect our feelings about past events and reactions to information gathered. We, therefore, expect that while expressed values of moral leaders will lead to attributions of charisma, these attributions will be stronger where there are higher levels of crisis perceptions. This is highlighted by the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** The relationship between authentic moral leadership and attributed charisma is moderated by crisis perceptions such that the relationship is more strongly positive when high crisis perceptions are high.

### **Attributions of Charisma and Cynicism about Change**

The U.S. public's level of confidence in social institutions including Congress, the presidency, the news media, and the federal government has been critically low (Bligh & Kohles, 2009; Cappella & Jamieson, 1996), which has caused cynicism and mistrust to be widespread. Trust in senior management has been shown to be a significant determinant of employees' cynicism towards change (Albrecht, 2002). Andersson (1996) defines cynicism as a general and specific attitude, characterized by frustration, hopelessness, and disillusionment, as well as contempt toward and distrust of a person, group, ideology, social convention, or institution. Even the most sincere and skillful attempts at organizational change will be halted by the prevailing cynicism (Wanous et al., 2000) unless there is trust in the change leader as well as follower buy-in to his or her vision. Cynical attitudes are birthed from the expectancy that the individuals responsible for change will be unable to achieve it successfully.

Kelley and Michela (1980) discuss how individuals process information and note that attributions affect our feelings about future events. Attitudes of cynicism about change are particularly important in the context of presidential elections because individuals actually have a stake in how leaders are elected through the voting process. Because charismatic leadership influences followers through connections with emotions and involves the values, behavior, and personal example of the leader (House et al., 1991), this process should involve attributions based on observation of candidates during the political process. If the charisma attributed to a leader increases follower confidence in that leader, then general cynicism about change should decrease. Williams et al. (2012) found that cynicism about change (pre-election) was negatively associated with leader attributed charisma (pre-election) in the 2008 presidential election. In order to understand the influence process, it is important to study the effects of leadership perceptions on attitudes over time, and we, therefore, examine post-election cynicism about change in the current study.

As noted by Anderson & Glomm (1992), incumbents often have the higher probability of being elected than challengers because of their visibility and an established record. The incumbency effect refers to the advantage that has been found in studies of voter choice with the incumbent having a much higher probability of selection than the non-incumbent (Petrocik & Desposato, 2004). Change is more likely to be viewed in a positive manner when it is concordant with an individual's leadership schemas and identification with the leader (Eilam & Shamir, 2005). Likewise, positive perceptions of a leader are therefore likely to reduce cynical attitudes about change. When there is a positive view of a leader by loyal party followers (party loyal) in terms of an incumbent who wins the mandate of the electorate, then leadership attributions may have a negative association with cynical attitudes about change held by those loyal party followers. The losing challenger who has not earned a mandate for leadership may be associated with more cynical attitudes about change held by those loyal party followers. Post-election ratings of leadership provided on the leaders in the incumbent versus challenger roles are likely to yield different results (Williams et al., 2009). With respect to cynicism about change, the winner of the election is likely to produce more positive results in terms of the possibility for effecting change, potentially in part due to the incumbency effect on pre-election leadership evaluations.

Because post-election follower cynicism about change is the focus of this study, it is important to consider the role of party affiliation in assessing the influence of pre-election leadership evaluations on post-election attitudes of followers for the successful and failed leader. We, therefore, limit the study to understand attitudes for followers who identified as Democrats in examining the post-election outcome of pre-election leadership perceptions of Obama, and the attitudes for followers who identified as Republicans in examining the post-election outcome of pre-election leadership perceptions of Romney.

**Hypothesis 3a:** Attributed charisma of a leadership candidate is negatively associated with post-election cynicism about change of party followers (Democratic respondents) following a candidate success.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Attributed charisma of a leadership candidate is positively associated with post-election cynicism about change of party followers (Republican respondents) following a candidate loss.

The effects of authentic moral leadership cannot be discounted in understanding the process through which attributions of charisma influence cynicism about change reported by followers. Research by Wu, Niebert, and Yi (2007) for example, examined the relationship between leadership and cynicism about change and noted the mediating effects of justice perceptions. Given that authentic moral leadership creates a positive view of the character of a leader, this elevates the identification with the charismatic leader. These heightened perceptions of charisma increase the meaningfulness of goals and likely increase the degree of influence on cynicism about change. The authenticity of leaders should activate the moral perspective of followers (Cianci, Hannah, Roberts, & Tsakumis, 2014) and Fehr, Yam, and Dang, (2015) observed that charismatic leadership aligns very well with two moral foundations: providing care/preventing harm through the development of leadership skills, and promoting loyalty/preventing betrayal through instilling follower pride in the organization. Thus, the process of perceiving authentic moral leadership that increases perceptions of charisma is expected to influence the development of follower attitudes of cynicism about change.

**Hypothesis 4:** Authentic moral leadership has an indirect effect on post-election cynicism about change reported by party followers through attributions of charisma.

## METHODS

### Participants

We recruited seven hundred and twenty-nine undergraduate and graduate students from universities in Southeastern and Western United States who were attending core business classes at 3 universities in the southern and western United States to participate in a pre-election survey. Two hundred and fifty-six online participants were recruited via generally broadcast invitations on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Invitations were also sent via the official election accounts on these sites for the presidential and vice presidential candidates. Online respondents resided in over 24 states across the United States from Washington to Massachusetts. The pre-election survey was administered two weeks before the 2012 U.S. presidential election to capture demographic measures, crisis perceptions, and leadership evaluations, and the post-election questionnaire was administered two weeks after the election to capture voter choice and cynicism about change.

Five hundred and seventy matched responses were obtained for university students. Online participants were asked to provide an email address in order to receive the post-election survey and we obtained 244 matched responses. We conducted analyses on data from respondents who were *registered* voters with matched pre and post-election data and this resulted in 328 responses from university students and 104 responses from online participants. In order to address effects of the source of the data, we ran t-tests to compare the variables of interest. No differences were found between the groups for cynicism about change and perceptions of crisis. Online respondents rated Obama higher on charisma and rated Romney lower on authentic moral leadership. Respondents also differed in age, with the university students reporting a mean age of 25.23 and online respondents reporting a mean age of 43.61.

### Sample

Over fifty percent of the sample was male (50.2%) with an average age of 29.7 years (ranging from 18 to 85 years, 68% of the sample was 18-29 years old, over 21% were between 30 and 50 years, and over 9% were over 50 years). Racial demographics were 64.7% Caucasian, 13.9% Hispanic, 11.4% African American, 7.7% Asian, and 2.3% other. The sample indicated that 77.4% were employed. Republicans represented 28.2% of the sample (n=122), Democrats about 37.7% (n=163), Independents 26.9%, while

“other” accounted for 7.2%. In our sample, 51.4% indicated they had voted for Barack Obama, 36.3% for Mitt Romney, 2.5% for “other”, and 9.7% did not vote. A review of the statistics in the U.S. Census report indicated that 19% percent of all voters were in the 18-29 years age group (Roper center, 2012). The Census Bureau reports show 51% of the votes going to Barack Obama while 47 went to Mitt Romney (ropercenter).

## Measures

### *Perceptions of Crisis*

We employed the validated four-item of measure of crisis, on a five-point scale, from Williams et al. (2009; 2012). The coefficient alpha of reliability was .75.

### *Attributed Charisma*

The attributed charisma scale from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire was employed (Bass & Avolio, 1991). The eight-item measure, on a seven-point scale, captures follower’s attributions. The reliability coefficients were .92 for Obama and .90 for Romney.

### *Authentic Moral Leadership*

The measure of authentic moral leadership was a four-item subscale taken from the sixteen item measure of authentic leadership developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008). These four items were developed to represent the authentic leader’s internalized moral perspective (Hannah et al., 2005). We employ the anchors established by the authors of the scale with a 5 point scale ranging from 0 “not at all” to 4 “frequently if not always.” The coefficient alpha of reliability for the authentic moral leadership scale in the study was .82 for Obama and .77 for Romney.

### *Cynicism about Change*

An eight-item measure of cynicism about change employed, on a five-point scale, in Williams et al. (2012) that was adapted from Wanous et al. (2000) was used. This measure was administered post-election and was not leader focused, rather, the referent focused on a general attitude about national problems. The coefficient alpha of reliability for the scale in this study .84.

## Background Variables

The background characteristics of *party affiliation* and *involvement/participation* in following the election process were included as covariates in our analyses to capture the role of party identification and overall participation. For party affiliation, two variables were created “Affiliation (*Democrat* or *Republican*)” was coded 1 and 0 for “all others.” *Participation* captured overall interest in the political process using 3 items that reflected accessing information from a variety of sources such as the internet, news stories, and debates Driskell, Embry, & Lyon, 2008). We also controlled for participant *source* (“university students” coded as 1 and “online” coded as “2”), and social desirability. We also measured *social desirability* in responding (Hays, Hayashi, & Anita, 1989). The coefficient alpha of reliability in the study was .60. *Age* and *sex* (coded as 1 for “female and 2 for “male”) were also included as covariates because we expected the large turnout of younger and female voters to play a role in the outcomes of interest.

## RESULTS

Table 1 outlines the means, correlations, coefficient alphas for reliabilities and standard deviations for our study variables for Obama, while Table 2 outlines these measures for Romney. Authentic moral leadership and attributed charisma were correlated above .60.

**TABLE 1**  
**MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND INTERCORRELATIONS FOR OBAMA**

Measures	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
OBAMA											
1. Age	29.68	12.22									
2. Sex	1.50	.50	-.03								
3. Participation	3.80	1.00	.22**	.16**							
4. <i>Party:</i> <i>Democrat</i>	.38	.49	.14**	-.14**	.03						
5. Source	1.24	.43	.65**	-.02	.19**	.09					
6. Social Desirability	3.76	.63	.08	-.02	.15**	.01	.02				
7. <i>Authentic</i> <i>Moral</i> <i>Leadership</i>	2.62	.97	.09	-.11*	-.01	.43**	.06	.11*			
8. <i>Attributed</i> <i>Charisma</i>	4.96	1.41	.15**	-.10*	-.01	.50**	.22**	.07	.69**		
9. Crisis Perceptions	3.81	.76	.04	.01	.21**	-.13**	.01	.07	-.22**	-.23**	
10. Cynicism about Change	2.73	.75	-.01	.05	-.01	-.35**	-.04	-.06	-.48**	-.47**	.19**

Note: N = 428. Values presented for our main variables of interest in *italics* have Obama as the referent.

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01 (two tailed)

**TABLE 2**  
**MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND INTERCORRELATIONS FOR ROMNEY**

Measures	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
ROMNEY											
1. Age	29.68	12.22									
2. Sex	1.50	.50	-.03								
3. Participation	3.80	1.00	.22**	.16**							
4. <i>Party:</i> <i>Republican</i>	.29	.45	-.12*	-.06	.00						
5. Source	1.24	.43	.65**	-.02	.19**	-.12*					
6. Social desirability	3.76	.63	.08	-.02	.15**	-.03	.02				
7. <i>Authentic</i> <i>Moral</i> <i>Leadership</i>	2.23	1.03	-.10*	.08	-.00	.39**	-.18**	.01			
8. <i>Attributed</i> <i>Charisma</i>	4.40	1.26	.05	.08	.14**	.43**	.00	.09	.64**		
9. Crisis Perceptions	3.81	.76	.04	.01	.21**	.21**	.01	.07	.23**	.32**	
10. Cynicism about Change	2.73	.75	-.01	.05	-.01	.32**	-.04	-.06	.28**	.29**	.19**

Note: N = 427. Values presented for our main variables of interest in *italics* have Romney as the referent

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01 (two tailed)



Hypotheses 1 through 4 were tested using hierarchical linear regression. In order to examine problems of multicollinearity among the independent variables, we performed regression diagnostics. The results revealed that the variance inflation factor values were above 1.9 for the main study variables these values are lower than the recommended cutoff threshold of 10 (Hair, et al., 1992) suggesting that the results reported here are not artifacts of multicollinearity.

Tables 3 and 4 present the results of our hypothesis tests. The results of the test of regression supported the first hypothesis for both Obama and Romney (Table 3). Follower perceptions of authentic moral leadership were positively related to attributions of leader charisma.

When followers had high or low crisis perceptions, but the relationship was more positive under conditions of high crisis perceptions (simple slope at +1 SD:  $\gamma = .82$   $p < .001$  for Obama; and  $\gamma = .81$   $p < .001$  for Romney) than under conditions of low crisis perceptions (simple slope at -1 SD:  $\gamma = .81$ ,  $p < .001$  for Obama and  $\gamma = .54$ ,  $p < .001$  for Romney). While the total moderated effect was reported at  $p < .10$  for Obama and  $p < .01$  for Romney, these results lend support to Hypothesis 2.

**TABLE 3**  
**RESULTS OF REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR HYPOTHESES 1 AND 2**

Variables	Obama		Romney	
	Attributed Charisma (B)	SE	Attributed Charisma (B)	SE
<i>Variables entered at Step 1:</i>				
Age	-.00	.01	.01	.01
Sex	-.04	.12	.12	.11
Participation	-.09	.06	.11†	.06
Party Affiliation:				
Democrat (Republican)	1.41**	.12	1.22**	.12
Source	.65**	.18	-.09	.17
Social desirability	.13	.10	1.67†	.09
Overall R <sup>2</sup> (F)	.29 (27.42**)		.22 (18.66**)	
<i>H1</i>				
<i>Variable added at Step 2:</i>				
Authentic Moral Leadership	.85**	.05	.71**	.05
Overall R <sup>2</sup> (F Change)	.56 (259.11**)		.50 (226.60**)	
<i>Variable added at Step 3:</i>				
Crisis Perceptions	-.14*	.06	.21**	.06
Overall R <sup>2</sup> (F Change)	.57 (4.40*)		.51 (11.54**)	
<i>H2</i>				
<i>Variable added at Step 4:</i>				
Authentic Moral Leadership * Crisis	.12†	.06	.18**	.06
Overall R <sup>2</sup> (F Change)	.57 (3.32†)		.52 (10.66**)	

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

Hypothesis 3a asserted that attributed charisma for the winning incumbent Obama will be negatively related to cynicism about change reported by Democrat respondents, and Hypothesis 3b asserted that attributed charisma for the losing challenger Romney will be positively related with attitudes of cynicism about change for Republican respondents. As outlined in Table 4, this hypothesis is supported for leadership perceptions of Obama.

**TABLE 4**  
**RESULTS OF REGRESSION ANALYSES FOR HYPOTHESIS 3 AND 4**

Variables	Cynicism about Change - Democrats		Cynicism about change - Republicans	
	(B)	SE	(B)	SE
<i>Variables entered at Step 1:</i>				
Age	.00	.00	.01	.01
Sex	-.03	.10	-.18	.15
Participation	-.09	.05	-.03	.09
Source	.02	.13	-.13	.26
Crisis Perceptions	.12	.07	.16	.12
Social desirability	-.17	.07	.03	.12
Overall R <sup>2</sup> (F)	.09 (2.37*)		.07 (1.44)	
 <i>H3</i>				
<i>Variable added at Step 2:</i>				
Attributed Charisma:				
Obama (Romney)	-.24**	.06	(.09)	(.08)
Overall R <sup>2</sup> (F Change)	.18 (17.22**)		.08 (1.12)	
 <i>H4</i>				
<i>Variable added at Step 2:</i>				
Authentic Moral Leadership:				
Obama (Romney)	-.27**	.09	(-.07)	(.05)
Attributed Charisma:				
Obama (Romney)	-.14*	.07	(.13)	(.10)
Overall R <sup>2</sup> (F Change)	.23 (26.83*)		.11 (1.58)	

† p < .10; \* p < .05; \*\*p < .01

Hypothesis 4 predicted that there would be an indirect relationship between perceptions of authentic moral leadership and cynicism about change, through follower attributions of charisma. We tested the significance of this indirect effect using bootstrapping procedures and employed the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) in SPSS version 22. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of 10,000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles. For Obama's leadership, the bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was -.09, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from -.209, -.002. Thus, the indirect effect was statistically significant. As shown in Table 4, there was a partial mediation effect. No support was found for an indirect relationship between perceptions of authentic moral leadership of Romney and follower cynicism about change through follower attributions of charisma. Hypothesis 4 was, therefore, supported for Obama's leadership evaluations influencing cynicism about change reported by followers.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to understand the influence of follower perceptions of authentic moral leadership on attributed charisma and cynicism about change and to consider the role of crisis perceptions during a presidential election campaign. Voter responses and attitudes were measured

both before and after the election, providing longitudinal support for our findings. While research has theoretically linked moral leadership and charisma (e.g., Treviño et al., 2000), these studies only present conceptual arguments that perceptions of moral leadership will make a leader appear to possess more charisma. This research contributes to the field of moral leadership by highlighting that a foundation of morality is important for leaders aspiring to motivate their followers using charisma. This is not only important in the context of presidential leadership but also in business organizations where there is an increasing demand for leadership that incorporates morality (e.g., authentic, servant, and charismatic leadership).

The results for Hypothesis 1 provide an empirical link between perceptions of authentic moral leadership and attributed charisma. Thus, authentic moral leadership is an important factor in enhancing attributed charisma and potentially other types of leadership

The very nature of crises entails leaders having to make difficult decisions. These decisions are often linked with moral outcomes. Some leaders will fail to rise to the challenge of difficult moral decisions in perceived crisis situations. The results for Hypothesis 2 suggest that being perceived to lead based on one's moral values influences perceptions of charisma, and this relationship is strengthened when there are perceptions of crisis. This is an encouraging finding because it reveals that the relationship holds for both the incumbent and challenger. Thus, it is generally important for all candidates who are aiming to lead the most 'powerful nation on earth,' to be viewed as moral leaders.

The result for Hypothesis 3 extends the research regarding charisma and cynicism about change. These results offer an important contribution to better understanding of cynicism about change and the factors that affect it. The results for the incumbent and winner of the election, President Obama, aligned with extant theory, suggesting that attributions of charisma lower attitudes of cynicism, especially for followers (Democrats) of a successful leader.

It is important to note, that authentic moral leadership of Obama (not Romney) had an indirect effect on cynicism about change (Hypothesis 4). Authentic moral leadership and charisma of Obama appeared to have independent effects on cynicism about change reported by Democratic followers. Romney's leadership appeared to have no effect on cynicism about change for Republican followers – in effect, his leadership was no longer relevant. The results of this study highlight the process through which authentic moral leadership influences attitudes of cynicism about change, through attributions of charisma for a successful leader.

### **Theoretical Implications**

One clear implication for research derived from this study is the empirical link between authentic moral leadership and charisma, a relationship thus far only speculated on in theoretical research (e.g., Sankar, 2003). This is promising in building the literature on charismatic leadership because charisma and character do not have to be antithetical to one another but can complement one another (Sankar, 2003). Authentic moral leadership manifested by leaders can drive perceptions of charisma which augurs well for bringing about positive change. It might be worthwhile to distinguish between "good" charisma and the dark side of charisma (Sankar, 2003) because moral leadership may be positively related to the former and negatively related to the latter.

The importance of crisis perceptions in studying leadership is highlighted with the finding that there were stronger positive effects of authentic moral leadership on attributions of charisma when crisis perceptions were high. This research reinforces that crisis can be measured in terms of follower perceptions (Pillai & Meindl, 1998) in order to understand how followers reactions to a situation frame their attributions and attitudes. As noted by Davis and Gardner (2012) when leaders use crisis rhetoric they provide legitimacy to the situation as crisis-driven; values-driven leadership such as authentic moral leadership appears to be an important foundation in understanding how attributions of charisma are magnified during perceived crisis.

This research sought to shed insight on what factors can influence cynical attitudes. We found that cynicism about change was lower when party identified followers rated the incumbent and eventual winner higher on attributed charisma and authentic moral leadership. Research on leadership succession suggests that affective reactions based on perceptions of ability pre-selection determine the level of trust that is reported for leaders post-selection (Ballinger et al., 2009). Leadership battles are common in organizations, and the implications of these struggles for power need to be understood further. Such leadership conflicts can be either overt or covert, and the resulting attitudes toward the organization need to be assessed after leaders win or lose these leadership conflicts, especially given the likelihood that they might join the contest for future leadership positions.

### **Practical Implications**

One of the strongest practical implications of this study is the importance of authentic moral leadership for aspiring political and business leaders (especially in the aftermath of the corporate scandals of the last few years and the financial meltdown around the globe). This is an important message to relay and is related to the values of the leader. Given the importance of follower perceptions of leaders during leadership succession (Ballinger et al., 2009), it appears that a focus on leader values expressed in political and business arenas might result in higher perceptions of charisma, especially when follower perceive a crisis.

Crisis perceptions heightened the importance of authentic moral leadership for attributions of charisma in our study. This has important practical implications; leaders might be able to connect with followers more by highlighting their moral values especially when facing crisis situations- this might help followers draw closer to the charismatic vision. Trust in the leader's authentic moral leadership may be a driving force that increases confidence in the leader and reducing cynicism about the leader's motives for proposing a certain course of action. As complexity and dynamic change are likely to shape future presidential campaigns (as observed in recent and ongoing campaigns) and leadership success in business organizations, it is important for all leaders to develop a strong moral core from which they lead.

### **Limitations, Strengths, and Directions for Future Research**

The data collected for this research represented responses from primarily undergraduate and graduate university students enrolled in colleges of business. The students were predominantly in the 18 to 29-year-old age range, representing about 19% of all voters (ropercenter); however, about 31% of the final sample was comprised of respondents to online invitations to complete the survey, their average age was over 43 years - which resulted in a mean sample age of about 30 years. Future research should extend the population samples to capture a wider range of voter demographics.

While our results have limited generalizability given the single source nature of the data collected, we hope that the sampling of registered voters in a university setting and non-university setting extend our understanding of follower perceptions of leadership and the role that crisis plays in evaluations of leadership. We accounted for social desirability in responding as a control variable for our analyses, and the measure had a coefficient alpha of reliability that was lower than ideal thresholds. Given the hypotheses examined, we suggest that the presence of common source bias might have been mitigated by the use of a moderator variable given the statistically significant interaction terms we report (Kotabe, Martin, & Domoto, 2003) as well as by the employment of longitudinal data.

The longitudinal nature of our data allowed for an examination of responses to leader selection for those involved in the voting process, and reactions to the final selection. It might also be worthwhile to study whether there are certain contexts in which such leadership is ineffective or if

authentic moral leadership is not only useful but also strongly expected of leaders in all areas of public life because of its relationship to effective outcomes.

Future research might expand the domains examined in this study. We conducted the research in the context of a U.S. presidential election. It is also likely that followers use moral leader prototypes to attribute charisma to a variety of political leaders and this may be particularly important in the climate following the great recession which was partly precipitated by moral lapses on Wall Street; future research should consider the climate leading up to future presidential elections. Scholars could also investigate these constructs within different political systems and organization settings (e.g., during and after a merger situation). For example, it would be interesting to study if these effects hold in political systems that rely upon democratic coalitions, such as Germany or Israel. Elections that do not provide as much access to media coverage could also be investigated as a context for authentic moral leadership, charisma, crisis, and cynicism about change.

Our research suggests that crisis perceptions might serve to accentuate the importance of moral leadership, not to diminish their effects, for both incumbents and challengers. We do not suggest, however, that crisis perception is the only moderator of the relationship between authentic moral leadership and charisma. Other potential moderators, such as leader personality, organizational embeddedness of leader/follower, and the perceived moral standing of competing leaders should be studied to further clarify this relationship in the literature.

Continued research on moral leadership is warranted given the challenges facing the nation and modern organizations. Research in this area has focused on moral behavior and moral character (Fehr et al., 2015) and identified that values reflected in moral foundations and charisma include caring and loyalty. Research on charisma has focused on the morality inherent in attributions about the leader, however, charismatic behaviors might not be bound by normative ethical behaviors given the non-normative nature of 'exceptional' or 'nontraditional' practices (House et al., 1991). We hope that future research will explore the role of leader narcissism and morality in political and organizational leadership contexts. For example, it would be useful to explore how perceptions of leader narcissism of the incumbent versus the challenger interact with perceived morality (Williams et al., 2018) in the U.S. presidential elections in 2020. Thus the replication and extension of our findings also hold promise for future research in the political context and beyond.

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