

## The Survival of Charismatic Attachments

The previous chapter demonstrated the process through which the founder of a charismatic movement fosters powerful, direct, and emotional attachments with his followers. To so demonstrate, I indicated that the leader fulfills three conditions: He directly recognizes the people's suffering, implements bold policies to demonstrate his ability to resolve their suffering, and crafts a symbolic narrative that praises his leadership as heroic, portrays opponents as malevolent, and proclaims his sacred mission to transform society.

Existing studies confirm the importance of these conditions for the initial cultivation of charismatic attachments (e.g., Eisenstadt 1968; Madsen and Snow 1991; Pappas 2012; Shils 1965; Weber 1922/1978; Willner and Willner 1965). Yet, in line with the routinization thesis, these studies claim that the *survival* of the attachments depends on the physical presence of the leader. Consequently, when charismatic leaders die, the literature concludes that citizens' attachments fade away. Studies of Peronism and Chavismo reflect this assumption. In Argentina, scholars and strategists from across the political spectrum argue that citizens' affective attachments to Peronism have long since vanished.<sup>1</sup> In Venezuela, though Chávez died much more recently, scholars – citing the disastrous performance of Chávez's hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro – have concluded that citizens' deep, emotional ties to Chavismo are fading away (López Maya 2014, 2016; Denis 2015).<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, this chapter argues that citizens' charismatic attachments can outlive the founder by *sustaining*, rather than discarding, their affective nature.

<sup>1</sup> Several academics and political advisers voiced this opinion in interviews with the author, including three advisers from the Cristina Kirchner administration, two Peronist analysts unaffiliated with Kirchner, and one adviser from the Mauricio Macri administration.

<sup>2</sup> See Cyr (2013) for an important exception.

The symbolic narrative underlying charismatic bonds causes the followers to develop a resilient political identity that shapes their worldview, perpetuates the cleavage between the followers and their opponents, and reaffirms the followers' faith in the founder's mission of transcendence. When the leader dies and can no longer physically maintain his personal connection with the followers, this narrative serves as a scripture, which, like the New Testament for many Christians, upholds the followers' identification with the movement. Whereas routinization scholars would suggest that the emotional power of this narrative grows weaker over time, I contend that the followers keep the narrative alive by recounting their cherished, personal experiences living under the founder's rule, passing those stories to younger generations, and preserving symbols that commemorate the founder's valiant leadership.

The followers' stories and symbols safeguard their emotional connections to the movement and its righteous community of followers by reinforcing the key elements of the founder's narrative: a worldview that worships the founder as their ultimate savior, a stark pro/anti-movement cleavage, and a profound faith in the founder's mission of salvation. Consequently, the movement can persist in a leaderless state for a strikingly long period of time without undergoing routinization. Moreover, because the personalistic nature of the followers' attachments shapes their expectations of future politicians, it incentivizes future leaders to portray themselves as new saviors capable of picking up the founder's baton and resuming his mission to rescue society. As I will demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 6, leaders who respond to these incentives when conditions are favorable can reactivate citizens' attachments and restore the movement to power under their own charismatic authority.

The present chapter investigates the survival of charismatic attachments in two stages. I begin by analyzing how the founder's narrative helps the attachments develop into an enduring political identity. Next, I explore the mechanism through which the followers perpetuate this identity after the founder's death. I illustrate this process using evidence from focus groups conducted with the followers of Peronism and Chavismo after the deaths of Juan Perón and Hugo Chávez, respectively.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the findings reveal that the followers' deeply personal, affective identification with the movement and its founder persists. Furthermore, the focus group discussions illustrate how the preservation of cherished stories and symbols at the level of the individual follower has sustained the narrative and, by extension, the followers' personalistic attachments to the movement. These results underscore the resilience and centrality of the followers' attachments for upholding the charismatic nature of the movement after the founder's death.

<sup>3</sup> Internal Review Board Approval was obtained from the University of Texas at Austin to conduct these focus groups (IRB 2013-03-0046).

#### 4.1 A THEORY OF CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT SURVIVAL

##### 4.1.1 The Symbolic Narrative and the Establishment of a Resilient Political Identity

I claim that the followers' charismatic attachments help perpetuate the movement by cultivating an enduring political identity. This identity is important because, as suggested by political psychologists, it influences citizens' attitudes, behaviors, and sense of purpose in several ways. For one, it provides citizens with a "lens to interpret their world" (Cramer 2016, 6, 20). This "worldview" shapes identifiers' understanding of their surroundings, including the mundane activities of daily life, major events, and the motives and behaviors of other people. Second, the identity causes the followers, who are members of the "in-group," to distinguish themselves from non-identifiers, the "out-group." This division is important because in-group members often struggle to sympathize with and can even alienate their out-group counterparts, who maintain a fundamentally different worldview (Tajfel 1974). Likewise, members of the out-group develop an "anti-identity" and corresponding feelings of aversion toward the followers, thereby increasing the affective polarization of society and strengthening the personalistic cleavage (Cyr and Meléndez 2015; Iyengar et al. 2019; Meléndez 2019). Third, while generating antipathy between in- and out-groups, the identity increases cohesion among fellow in-group members by providing them with a shared sense of meaning in their lives and faith in a common purpose (Huddy 2013, 18; Zúquete 2013, 266–67). In short, citizens' identity can influence politics by shaping their worldview, antagonizing outsiders, and infusing the followers with a shared sense of purpose.

The charismatic founder's symbolic narrative plays a crucial role in the construction of the followers' identification with the movement because it reinforces each of the abovementioned elements. First, the narrative's glorification of the founder forms the basis of the followers' worldview. More than merely viewing the founder as an inspirational leader, the narrative endows him with "quasi-divine status," such that the followers feel his symbolic presence in their daily lives (Zúquete 2008, 107). Even after the founder has died or disappeared, the followers continue to praise him in a Christ-like fashion and even search for manifestations of the founder's spirit in their world. This ongoing hero worship impacts the followers' understanding of politics. In particular, it sustains their collective faith in the leader's mission to provide the followers with salvation. Moreover, the followers come to believe that the mission cannot succeed without a heroic leader at the helm. This, in turn, shapes their expectations of future politicians: Who, they ask, will embody the spirit of the founder and revive his quest to rescue the people?

In addition to anchoring the followers' understanding of the world in the immortal and heroic vision of the founder, the narrative's portrayal of

opponents as threats to the people's well-being strengthens the followers' identity. The perception that followers are constantly under attack generates feelings of fear and anxiety, which bolsters "in-group unity" while "inflaming out-group hostilities" (Huddy 2013, 44). Additionally, the narrative causes supporters to feel resentful toward those who oppose the movement. This makes reconciliation between the two groups more difficult after the founder has gone, and it incentivizes subsequent leaders to deepen, rather than soften, the divide between the followers for political gain (Cramer 2016, 14–15).

Third, the narrative helps turn charismatic attachments into a resilient identity by upholding the founder's mission of societal transformation and spiritual transcendence. Whereas the attacks on opponents distinguish the followers from their "enemies," this mission provides the followers with a *positive* reason for belonging to the group: the promise of societal transformation and, ultimately, salvation (Zúquete 2013, 267). Even after the death of the founder, their continued faith in his mission strengthens feelings of warmth, pride, and closeness with one another, as it reaffirms their sense of purpose and provides "a sense of symbolic common fate" (Huddy 2013, 24).

Together, the three abovementioned elements contribute to the persistence of the followers' attachments and corresponding identity by strengthening the "simultaneously individual and social" nature of the identity (Huddy 2001, 146). At the individual level, the followers perceive themselves as having unmediated, personal connections to the founder. This perception holds tremendous emotional significance for the followers and impacts their attitudes and behaviors. At the group level, the followers' shared belief in and commitment to the founder's mission to transform society makes them part of a "moral community," which transcends the individual level by providing the followers with the powerful feeling that they belong to the group (Zúquete 2013, 263–34). This collective dimension of the followers' identity gives them a common purpose and holds the movement together over time, lending it coherence despite ideological heterogeneity, programmatic volatility, and factionalism.

In sum, the charismatic founder's symbolic narrative plays a crucial role in constructing a stable, deeply personalistic identity among the followers that has strong individual and collective dimensions. First, the narrative's sanctification of the founder perpetuates his symbolic influence in the followers' lives and establishes an enduring worldview. Second, the portrayal of opponents as enemies strengthens the identity by deepening the cleavage between the founder's disciples and opponents, generating affective polarization, and promoting cohesion among the followers. Third, faith in the founder's mission of holistic transformation provides the followers with positive affirmation and a deep sense of purpose that transcends the self. The combination of these aspects of the symbolic narrative turns citizens' attachments to the leader into a profound, quasi-spiritual identity that cannot be easily transformed when the founder disappears.

#### 4.1.2 The Perpetuation of the Charismatic Identity after the Death of the Founder

As described earlier, the cultivation of a charismatic identity helps solidify citizens' attachments to the founder during his lifetime. Even so, his death generates a crisis because he can no longer personally sustain his deep, emotional bonds with the followers. To recover from this situation, the routinization thesis indicates that, similar to more conventional parties, the movement must develop an organizational network through which to reach supporters and maintain their loyalty (Madsen and Snow 1991). Samuels and Zucco's important study of the Workers' Party in Brazil illustrates this mechanism of creating and sustaining attachments. As the authors state, the party mobilizes "pre-existing organizational networks" and sets up local offices to "cultivate extensive and lasting affective partisan attachments" (Samuels and Zucco 2015, 755).

In contrast, I argue that, in charismatic movements, it is the followers' personal preservation of their identity, rather than the mobilization of an organizational network, that sustains the movement in the wake of the founder's death. The followers, who are distraught due to their founder's departure, cling to his symbolic narrative to preserve their sense of identity and reassure themselves of his ongoing spiritual presence. This sentiment carries the movement forward until a new leader rises and assumes the founder's mantle.

During such leaderless periods, I claim that the followers engage in two activities to sustain the founder's narrative and, by extension, their affective identification with the movement. First, the followers preserve and recount cherished memories of their personal experiences, or their loved ones' personal experiences, during the founder's rule. These stories describe the followers' interactions with the founder and depict how he single-handedly improved the lives of the followers and their loved ones. The focus of these stories on the relationship between individual followers and the founder, as well as on the leader's heroic gestures, reflect and sustain the unmediated emotional nature of the followers' relationship to the movement. Moreover, as parents and grandparents regale their children with these stories, younger generations of the followers develop their own affective ties to the movement, even without personally experiencing the founder's rule. The retelling of these stories, thus, establishes a pattern of "continuous ritualization and symbolism" that helps preserve the identity over time (Zúquete 2013, 267).

In addition to these stories, the followers save physical objects and other symbols that memorialize the founder and his mission of transcendence. For example, some keep items such as clothing, flags, and "gifts" from the founder ranging from marbles to books to sewing machines. They also bequeath these sacred objects to their children, helping perpetuate the identity over time. Other supporters change their physical appearance, donning tattoos of the founder's face or changing their hairstyle to mimic the founder's (e.g., Auyero 2001, 120).

These symbols maintain the followers' sentimental connections to the movement because, as suggested by political psychologists, they evoke overwhelming, positive emotions among members of the group (Citrin and Sears 2009, 162; Huddy 2013, 19; Sears 2001, 14). The symbols also provide physical markers that differentiate members of the group from outsiders, reinforcing the cleavage between the followers and their opponents (Sears 2001, 15). Finally, similar to the crucifix in Christianity, the symbols remind the followers of the reason they belong to the movement: namely, their belief in the founder's mission of salvation (*ibid.*, 16).

#### 4.1.3 Charismatic Movements "In Abeyance"

To recapitulate, the symbolic narrative is crucial for the survival of citizens' charismatic attachments to the movement after the death of the founder. The followers sustain the narrative through individual-level stories and symbols, which reinforce their attachments and solidify their personalistic identification with the movement. Importantly, the personalistic nature of the followers' identity becomes remarkably stable (Huddy 2001, 131; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019, 3). Thus, even as the political relevance of the identity rises and falls over time, its charismatic core resists change (Huddy 2001, 149).

This deeply entrenched identity forms the foundation for the survival of charismatic movements. Its role is especially important when the movement finds itself in leaderless situations. During such junctures, the symbolic image of the founder and his promise to deliver salvation maintain the followers' feelings of hope and loyalty which, in turn, preserve the movement "in abeyance,"<sup>4</sup> helping it cohere for a significant period of time (Taylor 1989).<sup>5</sup> Although the absence of a strong leader during these stretches of time can cause citizens to become politically disengaged, the personalistic nature of their identity sustains their sense of belonging to the founder's righteous community and provides them with hope that a new leader will eventually rise and take the founder's place. Thus, when conditions become more favorable, a new leader can politically *reactivate* the followers' identity and restore the movement to power (Cramer 2016, 15; Huddy 2001, 148; Huddy 2013, 12; Klar 2013, 1108; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019, 3). The next section turns to focus groups with the followers of Peronism and Chavismo to illustrate the process through which citizens' charismatic attachments to the founder develop into a resilient identity that sustains the movement after the founder's death.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase is adopted from Taylor's article, "Social movement continuity: the women's movement in abeyance" (1989). I am grateful to Cathy Schneider for suggesting this reference.

<sup>5</sup> Specifically, a charismatic movement can survive in the absence of a leader as long as the generations of followers who personally experienced the founder's rule, and who sustain a powerful identification with the movement, remain alive.

## 4.2 RESILIENT IDENTITIES AND THE SURVIVAL OF CHARISMATIC MOVEMENTS: EVIDENCE FROM FOCUS GROUPS

### 4.2.1 Research Design

To investigate the survival of charismatic movements from the followers' perspective, I conducted thirteen focus groups – six in Venezuela and seven in Argentina – with self-identified the followers of Chavismo and Peronism, respectively.<sup>6</sup> In both countries, the focus groups took place in 2016 – 3 years after the death of Hugo Chávez and 42 years after the death of Juan Perón. This timing allowed me to assess the extent to which the followers have maintained charismatic attachments during two important junctures after the disappearance of the founders: in the direct aftermath of the founder's death, in Venezuela, and decades later, in Argentina. In both cases, the results demonstrate that the founder and his narrative remain central to the followers' loyalty to the movement. In addition, the Argentine case reveals how the followers can update and even strengthen their personalistic identity based on positive experiences under subsequent movement leaders, whom the followers view as genuine heirs of the founder.

I designed the focus groups with two objectives in mind. First, I sought to probe the nature of the followers' identification with the movement. Therefore, participants discussed why they considered themselves to be “Chavista” or “Peronist”; what, if anything, continued to inspire them about the movement's founder; and what characteristics they generally looked for in political leaders. Considering the collective and subjectively understood nature of identities, this portion of the analysis focused on the *group* as the unit of analysis (Cyr 2016, 234–35; Huddy 2001, 131). Unlike in-depth interviews or surveys, which investigate individual perspectives, the social environment of focus groups enabled participants to collectively contemplate the nature of their shared identity. This approach also revealed key insights about how participants “piece the world together for themselves,” considering not only *what* constitutes their identity, but also *why* the identity matters to them (Cramer 2016, 20). A third advantage of the focus group method was that it encouraged participants to reflect on the complex and nuanced nature of their shared identity in a relaxed setting, with the help of fellow group members and the guidance of an expert moderator, rather than undertaking this cognitively difficult task alone (Cyr 2016, 235).

My second reason for conducting focus groups was to explore how followers sustain their identity to the movement in the absence of the founder.

<sup>6</sup> Because my study focuses on the survival of followers' preexisting attachments to the movement, I narrowed the scope of this analysis to self-identified followers of the movement rather than recruiting subjects from the general population.

I gathered participants' accounts of their experiences under the founder as well as under subsequent leaders. I also listened to participants describe the symbols they had preserved over the years to commemorate the movement's leaders and mission of transcendence. This portion of the study focused on the *individual* followers as the unit of analysis rather than the group. As Cyr indicates, focus groups can be useful for gathering "rapid, individual-level feedback" from a relatively large number of individuals – a larger number than can be achieved through in-depth interviews (Cyr 2016, 234). By capturing group dynamics as well as participants' individual perspectives, I assessed both the individual and collective aspects of followers' identification with the movement (Huddy 2001, 146).

To carry out the focus groups, I recruited self-identified followers of the movement from the lower and lower-middle classes in both countries. I selected these citizens as participants because my theory suggests that, having experienced greater socioeconomic marginalization, these individuals constitute the most crucial and consistent support base for both movements.<sup>7</sup> To obtain a range of perspectives, the focus groups were divided between followers who do and do not support the most recent leader of the movement (Cristina Kirchner in Argentina and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela). To the extent possible, focus groups were also divided by age to explore how different generations of followers perceive their attachments to the movement, its founder(s), and subsequent successor(s). All groups were balanced in terms of gender.

I partnered with professional public opinion firms in each country to conduct the focus groups. Trained staff members recruited participants using a quota sampling method and contact lists from each firm's database. Participants who met the criteria for age, gender, socioeconomic status, movement identification, and geographical location were included.<sup>8</sup> The latter criterion required that participants come from a range of neighborhoods in each city where the focus groups were held. (See more detailed information in the country-specific descriptions presented subsequently.) In selecting participants, the staff ensured that the subjects did not know each other prior to participating in the focus group. Given the non-random method of recruiting participants, the sample cannot be considered as representative of the broader population of followers in either country. Nevertheless, the focus groups revealed valuable information from the perspective of the followers regarding

<sup>7</sup> Because I focus on the survival of pre-existing followers' attachments to the movement, only self-identified followers – as opposed to non-identifiers or opponents of the movement – were recruited as participants. In both countries, public opinion specialists estimate that self-identified followers constituted about one-third of the population at the time the focus groups were conducted, in 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Per the suggestions of public opinion specialists in both countries, education was used as a proxy for socioeconomic status. The highest education level for all participants was less than a college degree.



the nature of their identity with the movement, their personal experiences as movement followers, and their impressions of the founder and subsequent leaders.

Experienced local moderators led all focus group discussions. Participants were served light refreshments and received modest monetary compensation for their time. The moderator reassured participants of the confidentiality of the session, encouraged them to express their honest opinions, and guided conversation based on a predesigned script. The scripts for both countries asked participants to reflect on and share why they identify with the movement; specific experiences that drew them toward the movement; positive and negative feelings toward the movement and its different leaders, both past and present; feelings toward the movement's opponents; thoughts and feelings about the movement's future; and what activities, objects, or events, if any, have made them feel closer to the movement since the founder's death (sample questions from each script are listed in online Appendix B).<sup>9</sup>

In Venezuela, six focus groups with eight to ten participants each were conducted in partnership with Consultores 21, a renowned, local public opinion firm with ample experience. Due to logistical limitations, participants in all groups were recruited from the capital city of Caracas and its outskirts. Two groups were conducted with adults aged 18 to 25, two groups were conducted with adults aged 26 to 40, and two groups were conducted with adults aged 41 to 55. Participants in three groups (one from each age range) were supportive of Chávez's current successor, Nicolás Maduro, while participants in the three remaining groups were opposed to Maduro.

In Argentina, seven focus groups with seven to ten participants each were conducted in partnership with Trespuntozero, a local public opinion firm that specializes in political campaigns throughout the country. The focus groups were conducted in three different provinces to obtain a more geographically diverse sample of followers than if the focus groups had been conducted exclusively in the Federal Capital of Buenos Aires. Three groups were held in the Federal Capital, incorporating participants from the city and its outskirts, where many popular sector Peronists reside; two groups were held in Córdoba, the country's second largest city and a traditionally anti-Peronist stronghold; and two groups were held in La Rioja, a rural, traditionally Peronist region and Menem's home base, which shares a border with Chile. Six of the seven groups were conducted with adults aged 25 to 55, while one (the third held in Buenos Aires) was conducted with young adults aged 18 to 24.<sup>10</sup> Four groups (one per

<sup>9</sup> All focus groups were conducted in Spanish. I analyzed and translated excerpts from the focus group discussions into English using audio and video recordings and transcripts. Original wording in Spanish is available upon request.

<sup>10</sup> The seventh group was conducted with youth in Argentina to explore how the Peronist identity transfers to new generations decades after the disappearance of the founder. This seventh group was excluded from the design in Venezuela due to the recent nature of Hugo Chávez's death.

region plus the young adult group in Buenos Aires) were sympathetic to the current Peronist leader, Cristina Kirchner, while three groups (one per region) were opposed to Kirchner.

#### 4.2.2 Results: The Establishment of a Resilient Charismatic Identity

##### 4.2.2.1 *Venezuela*

GLORIFICATION OF THE FOUNDER. The focus group discussions in Venezuela underscored the central role of the symbolic narrative in solidifying citizens' charismatic identification with the movement. First, consistent with the narrative, participants praised Chávez not simply as a past leader, but as an immortal hero whose spirit continues to watch over them and offer them protection. One participant stated, "What we have is an affective connection. What other leaders could have done will stay in the past. But with Chávez the connection will live on in each person." A second proclaimed:

For me, Chávez was, and will always be, my hero. Not because he fought for one person, but because he fought for an entire nation. He was the hero of all those who needed him and even those who didn't, because for him there was no distinction. He didn't see who was rich and who was poor, he helped everyone . . . for me he was a hero, everything about him. He gave all of himself to the country, he died for the country. Because even in his sickness he continued to fight for us. For me, that's what a hero is.

A third stated, "I am Chavista because I believe in Chávez. Because I believe in what he says . . . that's the way it is and the way it will be. I believe in him and that's why I'm Chavista." A fourth participant noted, "I am Chavista because I am committed to the revolution, Chávez and Bolívar." Speaking about the future, another participant said, "I am Chavista because I am convinced that, in every way, we are going to move forward." Another replied, "I am with the future, and it's with Chavismo that we're going to get it." As illustrated by these statements, participants demonstrated an understanding of the world that revolved around Chávez. Their perception of the founder as an everlasting savior also indicates that he remains the central protagonist of the movement, even in death. The participants' use of the present and future tenses to describe Chávez further attest to his ongoing influence on their worldview and suggest the potential of their personalistic identity to survive in the future.

Interestingly, participants shielded Chávez's sanctified image from the regime's poor performance under his handpicked successor, Nicolás Maduro. For example, participants critical of Maduro isolated the successor from Chávez's heroic reputation. As one stated, "When you heard [Chávez] speak, at least when he gave announcements, you always stopped everything to watch his announcement. Maduro, in contrast . . . I don't agree with him, it's a shame that he's the one that represents Chavismo now." Another participant sadly expressed, "Maduro hasn't followed Chávez's legacy, he hasn't been able to." Additionally, while praising Chávez as a beloved hero, participants

did not hesitate to disparage Maduro with titles such as “donkey,” “rag doll,” and “puppet.”<sup>11</sup>

Crucially, these participants clarified that their disappointment in Maduro did not compromise their commitment to the movement or their faith in the founder. One said, “Like I told you, I am Chavista, I was Chavista, and I will continue being Chavista but I am not with Maduro.” Two participants further explained, “Maduro is a bad Chavista”; “we are more Chavista than Maduro is.” Participants across the three anti-Maduro focus groups agreed with this phrasing, as reflected in the following exchange:

MODERATOR: Just so I can understand, let me be the devil’s advocate. Maduro is Chavista. Is he a bad Chavista?

ALL: He’s a bad Chavista.

MODERATOR: He is the son of Chávez, I recall. Didn’t Chávez say that?

PARTICIPANT 1: All of us are children of Chávez. Here, we are all children of Chávez.

While claiming ongoing attachments to Chávez, these participants denied that Maduro held a special place as Chávez’s successor.

In contrast to anti-Maduro participants, their pro-Maduro counterparts did not openly decry the successor’s performance. Nevertheless, participants supportive of Maduro acknowledged his weaknesses and admitted he was incapable of replacing the founder. For example, when the moderator asked what participants thought about the popular refrain, “Maduro isn’t Chávez,” one participant responded, “Well, it’s the truth. He isn’t Chávez but, I’m telling you, he’s following [Chávez’s] legacy. Obviously, he’s a different person and he’s not going to be equal to Chávez, because nobody ever will.” A second stated, “I feel that something is lacking [in Maduro], he lacks that extra urge to make things advance, the capacity that [Chávez] had ... it’s one of the things that has emboldened the opposition, that Maduro isn’t Chávez, nobody will be like Chávez, it will be difficult for anyone to equal him.” A third explained, “[Maduro] isn’t a leader as such. But he was the person that Chávez confided in enough to leave in his place, and that gives [Maduro] a vote of confidence above and beyond. He’s charismatic, not as much as Chávez obviously, but then again, there is no comparison.” A fourth declared, “Maduro, as president, I don’t see him ... not like Chávez, because he’s never going to be like Chávez. But he’s learned some things from Chávez. What I see is that he wants to be strong but he has a heart that’s too soft. He isn’t like Chávez.” While these participants spoke of Maduro in more favorable terms, they struggled to compare him to Chávez and, to varying degrees, also expressed disappointment with his leadership.

Most importantly, regardless of their feelings toward Maduro, all participants stressed that their loyalty to the movement remains rooted in Chávez.

<sup>11</sup> Several participants called the successor “Maburro,” which is an insult commonly used by Maduro’s critics that combines his name with the Spanish word for “donkey” (*burro*).

As one stated, “There is a misunderstanding. You know that when Maduro comes to power . . . he comes to power with Chávez, as the son of Chávez, and that’s why we call him Chavista . . . I defend [Maduro] but we aren’t Maduristas . . . we are Chavistas.” Another declared, “It’s like this. If we are waiting in line to buy food or medicine . . . the name you hear is Chávez, not Maduro. Of course, if I had to vote another time, I would vote for Maduro, [but it would be] a vote of faith because Chávez supported him. When we’re in the street, we speak in terms of Chávez.” These individuals’ resolute defense of the founder demonstrates that his charisma continues to protect him from the decline of his own performance during his lifetime as well as the disastrous performance of his successor, whom he personally entrusted with the people’s well-being. Moreover, the followers’ ongoing support for the movement, independent of their feelings toward Maduro, underscores the resilience of their devotion and suggests the capacity of the movement to sustain itself during periods of weakness.

**THE CLEAVAGE BETWEEN CHAVISTAS AND ANTI-CHAVISTAS.** In addition to declaring their commitment to the everlasting spirit of Chávez, participants across the six focus groups expressed strong aversion toward opponents of Chavismo, revealing the continued importance of the second aspect of the symbolic narrative: the demarcation of in- and out-groups. Indeed, participants depicted the world as divided into two discrete categories: the poor, virtuous people of Chávez, on the one hand, and the privileged, selfish enemies of his movement, on the other. To illustrate this divide, the participants referred to the former group (with which they all identified) using labels such as “poor,” “people,” and “family.” In contrast, they used terms including “rich,” “squalid ones,” “liars,” and “agents of the right,” to describe Chávez’s critics.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, participants in all focus groups – including those critical of Maduro – viewed the opposition as complicit in the economic crisis, which many referred to as an “economic war.” For example, in one focus group, participants discussed how “private companies and the opposition” intentionally hoard products in order to undermine Chavismo’s mission to help the people:

**PARTICIPANT 1:** [The private companies and the opposition] have the products, but they hoard them.

**PARTICIPANT 2:** I don’t know how they do it. I bought baby formula last Wednesday and already there isn’t any more.

**PARTICIPANT 1:** Well, they’ve hoarded it. That’s the economic war.

**PARTICIPANT 3:** In a video clip, I don’t know if you all saw it on channel 8, it lasted about 5 or 10 minutes . . . it showed a label in the background, “Empresas Polar, Secretary,” and I don’t know what else. It turns out that the company lowers its

<sup>12</sup> “Escuálidos,” or “squalid ones,” is a term that Chávez frequently invoked in reference to members of the opposition. Similarly, he used the term “right” in reference to the political right – the group he accused of conspiring to sabotage his mission to rescue the people.

production levels on important dates, like when there are protests and elections. Why? So that people think [the scarcity of goods] is the government's fault and the people suffer more.<sup>13</sup>

A participant from a different focus group depicted a similar understanding of the world as divided into two groups waging an all-out battle: victimized Chavistas versus greedy, powerful enemies:

Well, at work I know a lot of people with money, with resources, and even they say that the big companies are part of this economic war. Those same people with money, they are the ones who run things and it's always going to be like that, that's why they've gotten together to form a group. Very powerful people that want to oust Maduro, they got together and they're going to try to do away with him.

In addition to large companies and their executives, participants described members of the opposition in daily, personal interactions as selfish and hostile. To illustrate the difference between the two groups, one participant explained, "If you are rich and I am poor, who says that you should be able to have air conditioning, but not me? That's what Chávez was about." A second described the ongoing division between Chavistas and anti-Chavistas in her neighborhood. She said, "I used to live in Llanito, where they were very Chavista and spontaneous. Where I moved, everyone is squalid. I keep quiet but you know, because they are suspicious."

Interestingly, a set of pro-Maduro participants spoke bitterly of self-proclaimed Chavistas who had abandoned Maduro, accusing these individuals of being opposition members who were "disguised as Chavistas." One such participant stated, "These [disguised Chavistas] are the ones who have the most." Another condemned this group for "going down the path of the [political] Right." As these statements suggest, the stark division between virtuous followers and selfish opponents emphasized by Chávez's narrative became an intrinsic component of the followers' identification with his movement.

FAITH IN THE MISSION OF TRANSCENDENCE. Finally, participants exuberantly proclaimed their commitment to Chávez's mission to "free" his righteous community of followers from the malevolent opposition. One participant stated, "Chávez awakened his people, who were in darkness and gloom." Another said, "Chávez gifted us a country that he wanted to be free. Where am I? I am here with him and his people. We are the country, we are his people." Another declared, "As the people, we have to awaken and we have to maintain a vision of everything Hugo Chávez Frías did . . . He was a national leader, a global leader. And why do I say he is still a leader today? Because even though he isn't with us physically, his legacy continues, just like he thought it would, with us as his people giving the movement continuity."

<sup>13</sup> Channel 8, "Venezolana de Televisión," is a television channel with state-run programming. Empresas Polar is the largest brewery and food processing plant in Venezuela.

Participants further expressed their belief in Chávez's mission of salvation when asked to draw a picture of what Chavismo meant to them. In fact, in all focus groups, participants drew images to express their love for the movement and their sincere belief that Chávez would bring them a better future. As one participant described, "I drew a map of Venezuela covered in a heart, which represents the unity of all of us. For me Chávez is the country, all of us, with health, family, independence, [and] riches." Another drew a staircase climbing toward paradise. Describing her illustration, she claimed, "We are advancing, although the other side doesn't want to see it, we are advancing." The participants' effusiveness toward Chávez and his community of followers show that in-group cohesion remains strong even in his absence. Moreover, the drawings depicting a transcendent future suggested that the followers remain committed to Chávez's mission of transcendence and are optimistic that a new leader – one who is "charismatic," "strong," "extraordinarily capable," "incorruptible," and "100 percent Chavista" – will eventually take his place.

#### 4.2.2.2 *Argentina*

In Argentina, focus group discussions with self-identified Peronists suggested that the symbolic narrative underlying these citizens' charismatic attachments continues to uphold their identification with the movement. Indeed, despite the passage of more than four decades since Perón's death, the focus group participants indicated that they sustain genuine, emotional attachments to the founder and his movement. Furthermore, regardless of whether or not participants supported Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, the most recent leaders of Peronism, they expressed their relationship to the movement in terms consistent with the founder's narrative, indicating its central role in the perpetuation of their attachments and identity.

**THE GLORIFICATION OF THE FOUNDER.** To begin, participants praised the charismatic founder and his captivating second wife, Eva, as archetypal leaders. When asked to describe ideal characteristics of a leader, participants in all seven focus groups quickly referenced (Juan) Perón – and often Eva – by name. Moreover, when asked to evaluate contemporary leaders, participants consistently categorized the leaders from best to worst on a scale from "most" to "least" Peronist, always placing Perón and Eva at the top. These gestures indicate that participants' understanding of politics and, in particular, their evaluations of politicians, remained anchored in the glorified image of the charismatic founders.

In addition, while acknowledging that Perón ruled long ago, participants insisted that his heroic legacy remained fundamental to the movement's contemporary identity. For instance, when asked to explain what Peronism is, one stated, "Everything is Perón, Perón, Perón ... the point is Perón, always reflecting all [socioeconomic] classes. Perón is immense." Another said, "The first thing that comes to mind is Perón and Evita." A third answered, "Peronism refers to Perón." A fourth declared, "Let's get to the point, we are talking about

Perón.” When the moderator prompted, “Is Peronism alive today?” another participant explained that, even when Argentina is governed by non-Peronists (such as Mauricio Macri, the President of Argentina at the time the focus groups were conducted), “Perón is there. He’s dormant, but he’s out there.” In short, regardless of participants’ opinions of subsequent leaders of the movement, an enthusiastic consensus emerged across the focus groups regarding the sacred status of Perón and Eva, suggesting that the followers’ identity remains anchored in the sanctified image of the founding couple.

Notably, disagreements emerged between pro- and anti-Kirchner participants regarding whether different successors of Perón qualified as “true Peronists.” Pro-Kirchner participants perceived Néstor and Cristina Kirchner as heroes and genuine successors of Perón and Eva, and thus claimed fervent attachments to the contemporary leading couple. As one pro-Kirchner participant stated, “Néstor embodies Perón and Cristina embodies Evita.” Another described, “To this very day, Perón and Eva are present, Cristina [and Néstor] too.” When the moderator asked if Cristina tried to copy Eva, one group of pro-Kirchner participants responded:

PARTICIPANT 1: Yes, but [Eva and Cristina] are part of the same base.

PARTICIPANT 2: I think Eva and Perón were the masters, and through that [the Kirchners] made their own project, but using the same base, in different time periods and with a different situation for the people.

PARTICIPANT 3: I think that Cristina, being a woman, followed Evita as an example. But Evita always had Perón at her side; Perón was in politics and Evita was with the people. Cristina had to do it all by herself [after Néstor died], at one time she did it all with Néstor, but then she had to go it alone.<sup>14</sup>

Participants in other pro-Kirchner focus groups echoed these sentiments, stating that the Kirchners “represented a new expression of Peronism,” “drew inspiration” from Peronism, and “wrote another chapter of the same [Peronist] guidebook.”

Remarkably, the pro-Kirchner youth, who had only inherited memories of Juan and Eva Perón indirectly from older generations, also described the founders as directly influencing the Kirchners’ leadership. One youth stated, “The two leading couples that are here for the youth and the adults today are Perón and Evita, Néstor and Cristina.” Another explained, “The thing is, we grew up with the [Kirchner] model. We know that Kirchnerismo comes from Peronism, but it is an updated Peronism, one that is with the people, that is more combative.” A third replied, “We are living Peronism through Kirchnerismo.”

Conversely, anti-Kirchner participants expressed disappointment in Cristina and her husband and thus felt no attachment to these successors. These

<sup>14</sup> Néstor died of a heart attack in October 2010, during the third year of Cristina’s first presidential term.

participants felt deeply offended that the Kirchners had the nerve to call themselves “Peronist.” Referring to the Kirchners, one such participant stated, “there are many fake Peronists, who hang onto the Peronist label, who carry the Peronist flag.” Another explained:

I think that [the legacy of Perón and Eva] . . . is a virtuous path and that it could come to manifest itself once again. But what makes me furious is . . . seeing pictures where Perón and Evita are next to Néstor and Cristina (whom I hate), comparing the pictures . . . crazy, no, why would you dirty [the founders’ image] like that?

Likewise, when asked what Kirchnerismo and Peronism have in common, another group of anti-Kirchner participants responded as follows:

PARTICIPANT 1: Nothing

PARTICIPANT 2: Nothing

PARTICIPANT 3: The little picture [of Juan and Eva] in the background

PARTICIPANT 4: There are a lot of thieves in Kirchnerismo

PARTICIPANT 5: They take advantage of Peronism and the ideal of social equality to make themselves look good, but the way they operate is very different. Peronism prioritized the worker’s rights. Kirchnerismo only takes money away from the worker.

Furthermore, whereas pro-Kirchner participants applauded Cristina for drawing inspiration from Eva, anti-Kirchner participants viewed this behavior as a horrific and unsuccessful attempt to mimic their beloved Eva. Indeed, when asked if Cristina attempted to copy Eva, participants replied, “Yeah, she tried, but she didn’t succeed by a long shot”; “She tried to dress and speak like [Eva], but she didn’t actually imitate her”; “Cristina wanted to be like Eva, but she doesn’t have a single hair in common with Eva. [Cristina] is an old walking idiot.”

Due to their extreme disappointment in contemporary, “so-called” Peronist leaders, many anti-Kirchner participants referred to themselves as “Peronists of Perón,” emphasizing that they drew inspiration from and claimed attachments to the movement’s founders rather than from subsequent leaders, whom they labeled “false,” “fraudulent,” and “disguised” Peronists. For example, one participant stated, “Perón is the motor that keeps the country going.” Another said, “I feel Peronist, of the *original* Peronism. If I had been born earlier [during Perón’s era], I would be ultra-Peronist.” Crucially, these disillusioned participants sustained their personal identification with Peronism in spite of their disappointment with the movement’s subsequent leaders. Thus, while describing themselves as genuine Peronists, the participants referred to successors – including Carlos Menem and the Kirchners – as traitors of the movement.

However, despite disagreements between pro- and anti-Kirchner Peronists regarding the status of Peronist successors, similarities across the two sets of participants prevailed. For example, both sets of participants labeled leaders with no claim to Peronism, such as Elisa Carrió and Mauricio Macri, as



anti-Peronist and expressed uniform disgust toward such politicians. As described earlier, pro- and anti-Kirchner participants also held the original founders – Juan and Eva – in the highest regard, demonstrating that the charismatic duo continues to serve as a moral compass and a lens through which to interpret politics for pro- and anti-Kirchner followers alike.

THE CLEAVAGE BETWEEN PERONISTS AND ANTI-PERONISTS. Next, similar to Chavistas in Venezuela, participants across the seven focus groups described their world as divided into two categories: the virtuous yet excluded “people” (*pueblo*) whom Peronism defends, on the one hand, and the enemies of the people, on the other. Participants, who all identified themselves as part of the former group, referred to fellow Peronists as “comrades” (*compañeros*).<sup>15</sup> In contrast, they associated non-Peronist sectors with conspiratorial elites seeking to further marginalize the poor, and frequently referred to opposition members as “gorillas” (*gorilas*), “rich,” and “oligarchs.”<sup>16</sup> As one group of participants said:

MODERATOR: If I say “gorillas,” whom am I talking about?

PARTICIPANT 1: Anti-Peronism

PARTICIPANT 2: The Right

PARTICIPANT 3: Gorilla is like River if Peronist is Boca.<sup>17</sup>

PARTICIPANT 4: It reminds me of something that affected me deeply, what happened with the cadaver of Eva Perón. I never understood why [the opposition] would be so bitter about a woman who did so much good for the country.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to ordinary citizens, participants in several focus groups demonized leaders whom they felt had directly attacked or betrayed the legacy of Perón. For example, several participants referred to leaders whom they disliked – ranging from Menem and the Kirchners to Macri, the current president – as “unmentionables,” “weaklings,” and “puppets.” When asked what feelings these leaders evoked, participants offered labels including “darkness,” “horror,” “poverty,” and “shame.” As described earlier, anti-Kirchner Peronists described Néstor and Cristina using these terms. But even pro-Kirchner Peronists categorized “good” (Peronist) and “bad” (anti-Peronist) leaders in similarly polarized terms. For example, pro-Kirchner participants depicted Cristina (like Eva) as a hero and defender of “true Argentines” fighting against selfish, anti-patriotic elites. These participants further applauded

<sup>15</sup> In the Peronist tradition, the term “compañero,” which originates from the Communist term “comrade,” refers to fellow movement supporters.

<sup>16</sup> The term “gorilla” (*gorila*) is a traditional, pejorative term referring to anti-Peronists.

<sup>17</sup> River and Boca are historic rival soccer teams; the former is associated with anti-Peronists, while the latter is the team of Peronism.

<sup>18</sup> In 1955, three years after her death, the Argentine military removed Eva’s embalmed corpse from the country, quietly interring it in a crypt under a different name in Milan. Her husband recovered her corpse in Spain in 1971, and it was finally returned to Argentina and housed in its final resting place, the Recoleta Cemetery of Buenos Aires, in 1976 (Page 1981).

“Cristina’s confrontation” with her critics, whom they perceived as existential threats to the well-being of the people. In short, regardless of their opinions about the Kirchners, all focus group participants described their world as divided into two groups – Peronists and anti-Peronists – suggesting that this cleavage continues to drive their identification with the movement.

**FAITH IN THE MISSION OF TRANSCENDENCE.** Finally, consistent with the symbolic narrative, focus group participants described Peronist leaders as responsible for transforming society and delivering a prosperous future. This sentiment was particularly fresh for pro-Kirchner participants, who felt that Néstor and Cristina, with Perón and Eva’s blessing, were fulfilling this redemptive mission. “With Néstor and Cristina, we had a future!” cried one participant. While anti-Kirchner individuals had a more cynical view of contemporary politics, they described the period when Perón and Eva governed as a golden age. “Perón kept this country afloat,” one participant remarked; another explained that, under Perón, the people had “food and options. The people always had something to eat, and if you wanted to work, you could do it, you had the possibility of becoming something more.” While both sets of participants felt that Argentina had fallen from grace – either long ago (for anti-Kirchner groups) or recently with Macri’s electoral victory (for pro-Kirchner groups) – they expressed the common belief that *true* leaders are devoted to carrying out the mission of Perón: to rescue the followers from their misery and provide material and spiritual transcendence. One pro-Kirchner participant even said, in earnest, “the other day I ran into to a girl at church, and she said a prophet had told her that a new Néstor was going to come save the country.” And although participants agreed that no such leader was in power during the time that the focus groups were conducted, they expressed hope that such a leader would eventually appear, reunite the movement, and don their beloved founder’s mantle.

In sum, the focus group conversations in both Venezuela and Argentina revealed that the symbolic narrative cultivated by Perón and Chávez, respectively, has continued to shape citizens’ identification with the movement. First, in both countries, participants indicated that they still claim attachments to the founder and worship him as their ultimate savior. Though opinions of subsequent leaders of the movement varied – especially in Argentina, where Cristina Kirchner has had a particularly polarizing effect – participants across the board agreed that the founder represents the archetypal charismatic leader and savior of the people. Second, participants in both countries described the world as separated into two groups: one consisting of virtuous movement supporters and a second made up of privileged, out-of-touch, and nefarious opponents. Participants consistently identified with the former group while expressing distrust of the latter, indicating that these in- and out-groups remain intrinsic to their identity. Third, participants expressed faith in the founder’s mission of societal transformation and hoped that a new leader would rise and pick up the founder’s mantle. Importantly, even anti-Kirchner participants, who expressed disillusionment with contemporary politics

and politicians, expressed longing for a new leader to appear and carry out the founder's mission to provide a better future.

### 4.3 RESULTS: THE PERSONALISTIC MECHANISM OF IDENTITY PERPETUATION

The previous section described the crucial role of the symbolic narrative for turning citizens' deep, emotional attachments to the charismatic founder into a resilient political identity. The present section uses evidence from participants' individual accounts to illustrate the mechanism through which the followers perpetuate this narrative and identity once the founder has died. Specifically, I show that, by retelling stories about personal experiences under the founder's rule (and, in some cases, telling stories about experiences under the rule of successors) and preserving sacred objects to commemorate the founder's heroic leadership, the followers sustain direct ties to the founder and maintain their faith in his redemptive mission.

#### 4.3.1 Venezuela

Participants in the Venezuelan focus groups shared cherished memories of their lives during Chávez's presidency. In particular, their accounts highlighted the deeply personal and unmediated nature of their connections to the leader. For example, one participant recounted:

When I was little, I remember in my house they always spoke a lot about Chávez, and I remember when I was 5 or 6 years old, he was in the neighborhood where I lived, out on the soccer field . . . I said, "I want you to take me, I want you to take me," until my family took me and I had the honor of holding Chávez's hand. I was so little and I gave him my hand . . . I remember clearly, I was little and they held me up and I had Chávez in front of me and he gave me a bag of toys and I will never forget it.

A second participant recalled meeting Chávez in similar circumstances, when the founder passed through the participant's neighborhood. Describing the encounter, the participant said:

I liked having him in front of me, I admired him as a person, for everything he was and for everything he had become. And really, when I see him it makes me proud, to know Chávez . . . he is the one supporting me in practically everything, he is the one who is lifting my foot out of the mud.

Notably, this participant switched to present tense when talking about Chávez, suggesting the ongoing spiritual presence of the leader in his life.

Several other participants across the six focus groups shared stories about their personal encounters with Chávez. They consistently reported these events as sentimental and even transformative experiences, as reflected in the following exchange:

PARTICIPANT 1: When I saw Chávez for the first time, I was an opponent of his movement, 100%. But I happened to go to an event . . . and people said, “Here comes Chávez!” and I saw him riding in on a truck. He was already sick at the time, greeting the people, and it gave me goose bumps. It was really something . . . I mean, he was such an extraordinary human being, and when he passed in front of you, your hair stood on end . . . it was something strange.

MODERATOR: Is that the moment when you became Chavista?

PARTICIPANT 1: Listen. In that moment he got my attention . . . He stepped out of the presidential protocol, came to the streets and put himself in a poor neighborhood. There, he spoke with the little old ladies and the people . . . so he got my attention and I said, “this guy is a leader, that is how you govern!” And from that moment on I have been Chavista.

PARTICIPANT 2: The same thing happened to me. He came to my neighborhood and I got goose bumps. He came really close to me because I was pressed up against the railings. He was so close . . . I felt a really good vibe and my hair stood on end.

In addition to stressing their personal closeness with Chávez, the participants’ stories also emphasized the founder’s extraordinary capacity to resolve their suffering. For example, two participants in separate focus groups said they had written letters to Chávez pleading him to help their sick family members. Both participants claimed that Chávez personally returned their phone calls to arrange treatments for their loved ones. Several others discussed receiving health, nutritional, and educational benefits *directly* from Chávez, as illustrated in the following conversation:

MODERATOR: Did you know anyone that Chávez helped directly?

ALL: Yes.

MODERATOR: Tell me, whom did you know, whom Chávez helped directly?

PARTICIPANT 1: The pensioners, my grandma. He gave her a pension even though she never worked. That was direct assistance.

PARTICIPANT 2: He gave spine surgery to an aunt of mine. He gave her money for the operation.

PARTICIPANT 3: He gave to my sister, thank God. Today she has a home, thanks to the housing mission. And my brother-in-law is in the army and has a job.

PARTICIPANT 4: One of my neighbors too, she has a daughter who is special needs and he helped her directly, taking her out of the society we lived in, and he gave her another house and medical services that she needed.

PARTICIPANT 5: My godfather, for example, he had cancer and there was a time when he was very delicate and he got a wheelchair, a stretcher and all kinds of things, through a mission.

MODERATOR: And did Chávez give these things, or did he simply establish the mission, which made it possible for your godfather to exercise his right to get the things?

PARTICIPANT 5: Well, ok, healthcare is a right, but my mom tells me that before [Chávez] the government didn’t do that kind of thing for the needy, even though it was a right . . . no other president would go through the trouble of helping you, unlike Chávez. For Chávez, it was a duty, and he followed through with that duty.

These statements show that participants perceived Chávez as single-handedly responsible for tangibly improving their loved ones' lives. Even if their family members received help from missions he established rather than from Chávez himself, the participants viewed the assistance as a personal gift from their beloved leader.

As the participants told these stories, their deep affection for Chávez seemed to reignite itself. Indeed, as described earlier, many spoke of "getting goose bumps" and "good vibes." Some participants even began to cry as they expressed their love for Chávez, especially when sharing stories about his death. One emotionally described, "It's incredible, because when he died . . . it was awe-inspiring to see how the people cried. And when his body passed by [during the funeral procession] I also cried. And you saw all the people there, so many people, and it's not like the opposition says, that they were paid. They never gave me anything." Another said, "When Chávez died . . . you asked how Chávez's death affected the people . . . I felt it in my heart. I cried." Though Chávez died several years before the focus groups were conducted, these sentimental expressions made clear that the participants' cherished memories of the founder perpetuated their unmediated, personalistic, and profoundly affective bonds with the leader and his movement.

In addition to personal stories, the Venezuelan participants mentioned keeping various objects that symbolized their personal connections to Chávez. Several claimed to own T-shirts embossed with an image of the founder. One explained that wearing the shirt made her feel "a respect, an admiration . . . he is like a brand, for me. Instead of saying Adidas or Columbia, it says Chávez." Others described hanging up photographs and posters to commemorate the founder. Still others claimed to keep maps and flags of Venezuela as a reminder of how Chávez had liberated the country. In each of these cases, participants reported displaying the objects with great pride – especially in the face of the movement's critics – as symbols of their continued loyalty to Chávez's movement.

### **4.3.2 Argentina**

In contrast to Venezuela, where Chávez recently passed away, the focus groups in Argentina were conducted decades after Perón's death. Nevertheless, the resulting discussions suggested that, as in Venezuela, personal stories and symbols play an essential role in the perpetuation of followers' personalistic identification with Peronism.

Crucially, Argentine participants' stories emphasized personal interactions that their loved ones – namely, parents and grandparents – had had with Perón and Eva during Perón's original rule, suggesting those individuals had profound attachments to the founder and his wife. In particular, participants highlighted

the direct, miraculous impact of the founders' deeds on their relatives' lives. One participant described, "I have been Peronist since I was in my mother's belly. My grandmother was a cook for Perón." For this participant, the grandmother's role as a cook for Perón seemed reason enough to justify his own loyalty to the movement decades later. Another participant explained, "Ever since I met my spouse, Perón was burned onto my brain; I listened to all of Evita's speeches." Another told a heartfelt story of how she became Peronist through her parents' experience:

I am Peronist because . . . I came from working parents, they built their house themselves and had six daughters . . . I am Peronist because of all of the benefits my father had. We were born in private clinics, like it should be – born in private clinics and not [public] maternity wards. We studied. The benefits my father had, for example, to be able to go on vacations during the summer, to go camping . . . my father was Peronist, my mother even more so. She told us about different things, about neighbors who received sewing machines and other things from Evita. Even if my parents didn't receive a house paid for by the government, [Perón and Eva] made it possible for them to build a house for themselves. So, when you have grown up with that kind of foundation, at least for me, I am Peronist.

Another participant explained:

I am Peronist because my grandma and my mom lived during that time [of Perón and Eva] and they speak to me of miracles. I decided to investigate for myself in books and I concluded that I agreed with the social and economic ideals of Peronism. For example, in the economic sphere, they took care of the peon, let's call it. And in the social sphere, because Perón was a very charismatic leader and his charisma brought him closer to the people.

While this participant claimed to be Peronist due to "social and economic ideals," his description of those ideals reflected Perón's unmediated, charismatic – rather than programmatic – relationship with the poor. Several other participants told similarly vivid, emotional stories of grandparents who personally met and received things from Perón and Eva, such as a small toy "that had been made for the rich," a sewing machine, and a job as a nurse in Eva's first hospital. While they did not directly experience the founders' heroic acts, the participants appeared to cultivate affectionate connections to Perón and Eva vicariously, through stories passed down by their loved ones.

In addition to celebrating the founders as saviors, participants told stories of their interactions with subsequent leaders whom they considered to be genuine heirs of Perón and Eva. These participants noted that they personally benefited from the successors, and therefore considered the leaders to be "true Peronists." For example, one participant stated, "I am Peronist because Perón gave my grandfather his first job, Menem gave my father his first car, and Néstor gave me my first job." Another participant claimed to be Peronist because of the benefits she received from Menem and Cristina:

PARTICIPANT: I am Kirchnerista, but I think that you can't separate Kirchnerismo and Peronism. It's just that I am living today and Peronism . . . when I was a child . . .

MODERATOR: You weren't even alive yet . . . you must have been born the year that Perón died.

PARTICIPANT: I got married when I was young, so we experienced Peronism with Menem. During those years we were doing really well. And with Cristina too . . . My husband collects bicycles, and in the age of Menem we had five bicycles, with Cristina we had three, and now [under Macri] we don't have any.

Another participant who prospered during Menem's presidency painted a romantic vision of Menem riding on horseback to save the country during the 1988 electoral campaign – an image not unlike those described by Venezuelan participants of Chávez riding into their neighborhoods atop a truck. Similarly, a third participant shed tears when he recalled how he got a job that saved him after the 2001 crisis “thanks to Néstor.” A fourth emotionally exclaimed that she supported the Kirchners due to their similarities with Perón and Eva. After listing various material goods that she and her family had received “thanks to Cristina,” ranging from medicine to food to DVD players, she stated, “I am Kirchnerista because [Néstor and Cristina] help the people from below, the poor people, and this is very similar to what my mother experienced in the time of Perón and Evita.”

In short, though participants disagreed with each other regarding whether Menem, Néstor Kirchner, and Cristina Kirchner deserved the label of “true Peronist,” they appeared to judge the three successors based on the same criterion: the leader's personal provision of material benefits to the participants (or their relatives). The participants suggested that stories of each leader's largesse served as proof of the leader's love for the people and, correspondingly, his/her ability to fulfill the Peróns' legacy. These cherished memories of the leaders – which, notably, were shared after all three successors had fallen from power – clearly played a central role in sustaining the participants' identification with the movement.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to recounting stories of their interactions with the movement's heroic leaders, many participants reported safekeeping symbols that reminded them of these leaders and their mission of salvation. One participant proudly declared that he still had the sewing machine that Eva gave to his grandmother. Another claimed she saved the toy scale – a “rich people's toy” – that Perón had given to her grandfather during a campaign visit to La Rioja. Other participants saved objects in homage to subsequent movement leaders. For example, several kept T-shirts they had worn when attending rallies with Cristina Kirchner. Some participants in every focus group also reported that they kept photographs of

<sup>19</sup> The following Peronist successors governed Argentina: Carlos Menem (1989–99), Néstor Kirchner (2003–7), Cristina Kirchner (2007–15), and Alberto Fernández (2019–present). The focus groups took place in 2016, less than two years after Cristina Kirchner stepped down from power and was replaced by Mauricio Macri, a non-Peronist.

movement leaders – from Juan and Eva Perón to Néstor and Cristina Kirchner – in their homes. The participants noted that they kept these pictures in important places, such as beside their beds or on shelves with portraits of their family members. As indicated in the subsequent discussion, participants suggested that they cherished their photographs of Peronist leaders and considered the leaders to be members of their inner circles:

PARTICIPANT 1: I have a photograph of Perón and Eva that was given to me. It's in my bedroom.

MODERATOR: Do you keep the photo with other pictures? If so, of whom?

PARTICIPANT 1: I keep it with pictures of my kids and grandparents, my parents, and my godchildren. That's where I keep a picture of Perón and Eva, together.

MODERATOR: Who gave the photo to you?

PARTICIPANT 1: My grandfather, just before he died.

PARTICIPANT 2: In my house, my parents live upstairs and they have a big picture of Perón. It's been there for as long as I can remember . . . it's next to the image of Christ in my mom's room.

In a different focus group, a participant further explained the perceived connection between Peronist leaders and family members as follows:

The leader loves his people. He isn't going to rob them; he is going to work for his people so that they're ok. It's like family. One loves his family and does everything to make sure his family is ok. The same thing happens with the government. If the leader loves his people and wants his people to be well, if he values and respects them, he is going to give them even more than they expect.

For many participants, material objects ranging from toys to T-shirts to portraits symbolized the powerful, emotional, and intimate connections they – and, importantly, their parents and grandparents – maintained with their beloved leaders. As indicated by these examples, even decades after Perón's death, symbols have continued to play an important role in perpetuating Peronist followers' affective and unmediated identification with the movement and profound attachments to its leaders.

#### 4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated that the survival of charismatic attachments depends primarily on the followers' adherence to the symbolic narrative. Specifically, the movement's superhuman portrayal of the founder, demonization of opponents, and mission of societal transformation form the core of followers' resilient identification with the movement. After the founder's death, the followers sustain this identity through stories and symbols that celebrate the narrative and preserve the affective power and directness of the followers' connections to the founder (and, in the case of Argentina, to subsequent leaders). This finding contrasts markedly with the logic of routinization, which



suggests that charismatic movements must renounce their personalistic nature and transform into sophisticated party organizations to survive after the death of the founder.

Evidence from thirteen focus groups conducted with the followers of Chavismo and Peronism, respectively, indicate the relevance of the personalistic mechanism to movement survival. In Venezuela, participants enthusiastically demonstrated the vitality and emotional intensity of their attachments to Chávez and his movement three years after the death of the founder. Their ongoing devotion – and their ability to shield it from the deplorable performance of Chávez's handpicked successor, Nicolás Maduro – is a testament to the power and resilience of their loyalty to the movement. In Argentina, participants' profoundly sentimental attachments to Juan and Eva Perón are equally impressive, given that the founding couple has been dead for decades. Participants' tendency to compare subsequent leaders to Juan and Eva Perón – whether to praise the successors or to disparage them – further indicates that these citizens still use their Peronist identity as a lens for understanding the world and judging politicians.

As suggested by the results in Argentina, while followers' personalistic identification with the movement can survive for years or even decades, the political salience of their identity can fade with the prolonged absence of a charismatic leader. While sustaining loyalty to the movement and founder, followers can become increasingly disillusioned with politics during periods in which no leader seems capable of fulfilling the founder's mission to deliver them prosperity. However, because these individuals continue to interpret the world through the lens of their personalistic identity, they maintain hope that a strong leader will eventually appear, pick up the founder's baton, and rescue society once more. As I will show in the next chapter, leaders who appear to embody the founder's charismatic qualities are capable of reactivating the followers' attachments and restoring the movement to power in their own name.