

Julia Sonnevend, **Charm: How Magnetic Personalities Shape Global Politics**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024, 230 pp., \$35.99 (hardcover).

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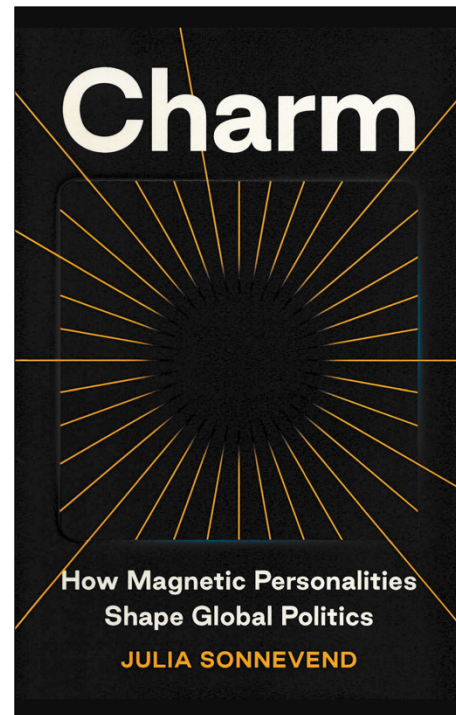
Julia Sonnevend's **Charm: How Magnetic Personalities Shape Global Politics** invites us to rethink a central paradox in international affairs: How can a smile, a handshake, or a well-timed speech shift the direction of nations? Sonnevend asserts that charm employed in mass media is a deliberate tool for legitimation and securing power, a subtle means for political actors to justify authority and gain public allegiance. Like a sorcerer weaving illusions, political leaders charm a world hungry for authenticity yet wary of power.

The power of political performances is not a new field of study in politics and mass media, but Sonnevend breathes new life into it by dissecting the subtle, often invisible performances that shape our perceptions of authority, power, and the quest for legitimacy. Charm is the subtle force that transforms influence into loyalty and persuasion into action without ever raising a hand. Is this enchantment sustainable? What are the risks when global politics becomes less about policy and more about a media personality?

Sonnevend posits five key techniques politicians use to charm their audiences and shape public perception in mass media. Those techniques are performing authenticity, demasking to reveal vulnerability, breaking from routine to draw attention, restaging settings for polished images, and equalizing to foster inclusivity.

At its core, Sonnevend's *Charm* explores a question central to international politics: how do nonrational factors, such as personal magnetism in mass media, influence decisions supposedly grounded in realpolitik? Her case studies, ranging from Jacinda Ardern's empathetic "liberal charm" to Viktor Orbán's strategic, nationalistic charm, illustrate this tension. Through the author's lens, charm becomes more than a personality trait, it is a political tool, wielded in mass media with precision and intent. The leaders she examines understand that charm is not merely a pleasant veneer but an essential aspect of their political arsenal, capable of disarming critics, consolidating power, and sometimes rewriting the rules of engagement.

Consider New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's case. Sonnevend paints Ardern as the emblem of performing authenticity, but not just any authenticity—an authenticity curated and carefully performed through the filter of social media. The prime minister's charm is disarmingly relatable. Her politics of kindness and empathy serve as tools of legitimation. By embodying these values, Ardern's charm becomes



a political weapon consolidating her power, securing an emotional buy-in, and presenting her leadership as a necessary glue for national unity. Ardern's rise was fueled by her accessibility, making her a politician the public felt they knew. Charm, Sonnevend argues, turns the leader into a mirror of their people. Ardern masters that reflection, becoming the face of a new kind of global leadership that seeks to humanize power by making it approachable.

In contrast, Viktor Orbán's charm is far more calculating. Sonnevend deftly shows how he cloaks illiberalism in charm's seductive robes, using his image to embody Hungarian identity and forge an emotional connection with his citizens. Orbán's charm, rooted in nostalgia and nationalism, legitimizes his authoritarianism. Through the careful cultivation of his persona as a symbol of Hungarian identity, he employs his charm as a vehicle for consolidating power, presenting his leadership as the embodiment of national values and, therefore, indispensable. He does not seduce his audience with promises of progress or openness; instead, he charms by anchoring his authority in a carefully crafted persona that speaks to Hungary's cultural past. In this way, Orbán illustrates that charm is neither inherently liberal nor democratic. It is a flexible, almost morally neutral tool that can be wielded in mass media by anyone who understands its power.

Sonnevend's analysis shines when she moves from the personal to the geopolitical, showing how charm can be weaponized in what she terms "charm offensives." The chapters on Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un are particularly compelling. Zarif, for instance, masterfully used charm to thaw relations between Iran and the West during the 2015 nuclear negotiations. His charm was not incidental; it was part of a deliberate charm offensive meant to soften Iran's image, using his calm demeanor, his smile, and his carefully measured responses to momentarily shift decades of entrenched hostility. Zarif did not just negotiate; he charmed, and in doing so reframed a national narrative. His ability to blend sincerity with diplomatic savvy allowed him to bridge the seemingly insurmountable divide between Iran and the West. For Sonnevend, Zarif's charm was not just a diplomatic technique—it was a geopolitical strategy that temporarily redefined Iran's role on the global stage.

In contrast, Kim Jong-un used charm as camouflage. Sonnevend's analysis of Kim's 2018 charm offensive—timed perfectly with the Korean Winter Olympics—shows how charm can be used to mislead. Kim's carefully staged photo-ops with South Korean officials and his media-savvy gestures of goodwill were designed not to foster genuine peace but to distract the global audience from North Korea's human rights abuses and nuclear ambitions. Here, Sonnevend strikes at the core of charm's dual nature: It seduces, but it also deceives. Kim used charm in mass media not to build trust but to manufacture an illusion. The temporary thaw in relations between North and South Korea that Kim engineered was a performance carefully calculated to shift the news media's attention away from the more disturbing realities of his regime.

But what happens when the magic fades? Sonnevend touches on this in her analysis of Angela Merkel, who, unlike the others, seemed to wield no charm at all on the public stage. Merkel's steady, often boring persona stood in stark contrast to the theatrics of her peers. Yet Sonnevend argues that Merkel's authenticity—her refusal to play the charm game—became a different kind of charm. In a world where political leaders are expected to be larger-than-life figures, Merkel's insistence on being competent, predictable, and almost anticharismatic was, paradoxically, her most charming trait. Merkel and Kim Jong-un's contrast raises a question: Is charm essential for success, or does competence suffice? Merkel's career suggests the latter.

What makes Sonnevend's book particularly engaging is its broader reflection on the consequences of relying on charm in politics. She invites us to grapple with a deeper question: What are the long-term effects of charm when it becomes a political strategy? She is cautious not to present charm as a panacea for political challenges. Charm can build bridges, but it can also obscure deeper problems. When leaders rely too heavily on charm, they risk overshadowing substantive policy. The ephemeral nature of charm poses a danger: What happens when a leader's charm fades, or when the public grows tired of the performance? Sonnevend opens the door to these questions but wisely avoids definitive answers, leaving the reader to ponder the consequences of a media world where charm dominates politics.

Sonnevend's exploration of how social media has altered the landscape of political charm is particularly sharp. She argues that today's politicians must perform charm continuously, projecting authenticity across a fragmented media landscape. Gone are the days of distant, untouchable leaders; today's charm must be accessible, immediate, and personal. It is a performance in which the line between reality and illusion blurs. Politicians must be both larger than life and just like us—a balancing act that Sonnevend shows is difficult to maintain but essential for survival in the digital age. In an era where media dominates perception, politicians' charm is no longer reserved for grand speeches or high-level diplomatic meetings. Instead, it seeps into every aspect of their lives, from Instagram posts to casual interviews, creating a 24/7 performance of authenticity.

Yet, Sonnevend is careful to remind us that charm's power is not without risk. In her exploration of charm's ability to create "tribal loyalties," she hints at the darker side of this emotional bond between leader and audience. The ability of charm to foster a sense of belonging in what Sonnevend calls "equalizing" can unite a nation or sow the seeds of division. We see "equalizing" in the populist movements that have swept across the globe, where charm has often been used to create an "us versus them" narrative, pulling at the emotional strings of identity politics. In this sense, charm is a double-edged sword, capable of building consensus but equally adept at fostering polarization.

Ultimately, *Charm: How Magnetic Personalities Shape Global Politics* is a powerful reminder that in international politics, the personal is still political. When wielded correctly, charm can shift alliances, build trust, and even momentarily rewrite history. But Sonnevend's caution is clear: Charm's magic comes at a price. Leaders who rely too heavily on it risk becoming prisoners of their performance. The book makes us consider whether we have become too enchanted by performers, losing sight of the policies behind the magic. For anyone interested in understanding the intersection of personality and power in mass media on the global stage, Sonnevend's *Charm* offers a compelling, nuanced exploration of the forces that shape our media world today. It reminds us that the allure of charm may captivate us, but it is up to us to decide whether the performance is worth the price.