

Followers First: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Political Leadership

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Abstract

The study of political leadership has traditionally focused on leaders, often overlooking how followers actively shape legitimacy through attribution and contestation. In this thematic issue, the focus shifts from leaders to followership and legitimacy, examining how citizens construct and challenge political authority. The first set of articles explores the role of leadership attribution, populism, and negative personalisation, showing how charismatic appeal, ideological predispositions, social identification, and emotional biases influence how citizens evaluate leaders. The second group of articles focuses on different dimensions of legitimacy and investigates how leadership distance, representation styles, and visual de-demonisation affect followers’ assessment of leaders. The final set extends the discussion from the democratic to the autocratic context and shows how legitimacy and followership also play an essential role in autocratic politics. By using different and novel methodologies, introducing conceptual innovations, and applying these to a wide variety of cases and contexts, the contributions collectively advance the relational approach to political leadership and legitimacy. Ultimately, it lays the groundwork for a new research agenda that redefines leader-follower dynamics, highlighting the contested and evolving nature of political legitimacy across democratic and non-democratic contexts.

Keywords

autocracy; democracy; distance; followership; leadership; legitimacy; personalisation; populism; representation; visual de-demonisation

1. Introduction

Issues of legitimacy and followership have long been central to the study of political leadership (Weber, 1958), but recent developments—such as declining trust in elites and the rise of populist, illiberal, and authoritarian leaders—have renewed their urgency. While a growing body of research critiques over-romanticised notions of strong leadership (Brown, 2014) and addresses its darker aspects (Helms, 2012; Kaarbo, 2021), much of the literature remains leader-centric, often overlooking the role of followers in constructing political authority (Bennister et al., 2017; Elgie, 2011; cf. Kellerman, 2008; Metz, 2024; van Esch, 2017). This thematic issue builds on a relational approach that understands leadership as an interactive process shaped by followers' perceptions, emotions, and attributions (Garzia, 2011; Müller & van Esch, 2020). It advances this literature by presenting three sets of studies: The first focuses on followership through the lens of populism, party leadership styles, and negative personalisation. The second examines the relevance of different dimensions of legitimacy and investigates how factors like distance, representational style, and visual de-demonisation affect leader evaluations. The third extends the analysis to autocratic contexts, highlighting that leadership, legitimacy, and followership are equally salient in non-democratic regimes. Together, the contributions offer a multidimensional and context-sensitive understanding of leadership legitimacy as attributed by followers and lay the foundation for a new research agenda that captures its evolving and contested nature in both democratic and autocratic settings.

2. Followership: Leadership Attribution, Populism, and Negative Personalisation

One of the most striking areas where followership shapes the views of leadership is in populist politics (Metz & Plesz, 2023; Seijts & de Clercy, 2020). Research suggests that leader evaluation is particularly central for populist radical-right voters, as these parties leverage positive leader perceptions to build support (Angelucci et al., 2024; Michel et al., 2020). However, evidence remains inconclusive. Studies often oversimplify the leader–follower dynamic, treating populist followership as equivalent to radical-right voting and reducing charisma to mere likability (Donovan, 2021; Michel et al., 2020; van der Brug & Mughan, 2007). Further research has examined how charisma is attributed to widely recognised populist leaders, underlining the need for a more nuanced understanding of this relationship (Andrews-Lee, 2021; Eberhardt & Merolla, 2017; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2011).

In this thematic issue, Metz and Plesz (2025) argue that while populist attitudes fuel the demand for charismatic leadership, perceptions of charisma are shaped by partisan identity. Their findings show that shared identity influences whether a leader's charisma is perceived positively or negatively, thereby deepening affective polarisation. This highlights charisma as a socially constructed, context-dependent perception, not an inherent trait—underscoring the relational nature of populist leadership. Similarly, de Clercy et al. (2025) find that right-wing populist female voters assess leaders differently than men. They place greater emphasis on moral integrity, authenticity, and adherence to traditional values, rather than on traits like strength or decisiveness. These voters are particularly critical of ethical inconsistencies, especially when leaders fail to embody the ideals they profess to uphold. Their study underscores that leadership legitimacy in populist contexts is shaped by followers' gendered expectations, reinforcing the relational and morally negotiated nature of leadership.

Beyond populist contexts, followership also shapes the leadership styles of political parties (Favero, 2022; Gherghina, 2020, 2021; McDonnell, 2016). In this issue, Gherghina (2025) explores how party members view leaders as transformational, particularly when they are party founders, elected through internal competition, and politically experienced. His findings suggest that leadership legitimacy emerges from internal contestation and perceived competence, not just institutional factors (cf. Hloušek, 2015; Musella, 2018). Transformational leadership tends to emerge in newer, movement-style parties, whereas transactional leadership remains dominant in more established parties, illustrating how party dynamics mediate the co-construction of leadership.

While populist figures often cultivate emotional ties with their supporters, contemporary politics is increasingly driven by negative personalisation—where voters are mobilised more by aversion to opponents than by enthusiasm for their own leaders (Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2021, 2022a, 2022b). In this issue, Aaldering et al. (2025) demonstrate that negative perceptions of political figures have a stronger impact on voter behaviour than positive ones. Leaders thus function more as “push factors,” provoking opposition rather than inspiring support. This negativity bias, amplified by polarisation, reveals that leadership legitimacy is shaped not only by charisma or competence but also by the ways in which leaders are framed by both allies and adversaries.

3. Legitimacy: Distance, Representation Style, and Visual De-Demonisation

Legitimacy, understood as the acceptance of authority, is a core concept in the study of political leadership and is closely linked to the study of followership (Weber, 1958). The articles in the second part of this thematic issue explore the relationship between legitimacy and followership by examining different dimensions of legitimate leadership and the strategies leaders use to invoke them in order to attract greater support. Analysing these dynamics across the European Union, domestic politics, and the realm of social media, the contributions illustrate how distance, representation styles, and visual communication can unexpectedly enhance the legitimacy of political leaders.

Starting the discussion, van Esch and Steenman (2025) explore leader–follower dynamics in the European Union, a context in which the distance between leaders and followers is significant. They challenge the common notion in EU studies that distance impacts the legitimacy of the EU negatively (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Popper, 2013). Applying a framework that distinguishes five dimensions of legitimate leadership—democratic election, credibility, ideological representation, social identification, and emotions—they find that the more distant the leader, the more positive people’s evaluation of their EU leadership. Moreover, the analysis reveals a strong correlation between citizens’ assessment of its leaders and their trust in the EU. Illustrating the paradoxical role of distance in leader–follower dynamics, this connection is strongest for the most distant leaders.

The contribution by Várnagy et al. (2025) focuses on the role of input legitimacy and expertise in domestic representative politics, examining Hungarian citizens’ preferences for leaders’ representational styles during crisis decision-making. The study asks whether citizens prefer their representatives to consult voters or involve experts, and whether they value the representation of the public good over party loyalty. Using a conjoint vignette experiment, they find that Hungarian voters favour citizen participation regardless of the crisis type. Moreover, contrary to expectations and the prevailing strong party discipline in Hungary, citizens

prefer leaders to advocate for public interests over party lines. Their findings highlight a weakening of the representative linkage and emphasise the growing importance of performative elements of representation in Hungary's current populist political landscape.

Bonansinga (2025) explores the performative dimension of legitimacy by examining Marine Le Pen's visual communication on Instagram. The article engages with recent findings suggesting that the visual self-presentation of populist radical right actors on platforms like Instagram and TikTok tends to emphasize predominantly positive imagery. Drawing on the theoretical framework of "visual de-demonisation" and operationalising its core concepts, Bonansinga demonstrates how three main goals—communicating legitimacy, portraying good character, and presenting a broad policy platform—are visually conveyed. The analysis highlights the ambiguity in Le Pen's imagery, where signals of care, competence, and command over both "hard" and "soft" issues intersect to portray her as a well-rounded leader. In doing so, this study refines the theory of visual de-demonisation and enhances our understanding of performative populist leadership.

4. Followership and Legitimacy in Autocratic Politics

Traditionally, legitimacy and followership have been primarily associated with democratic politics. However, in recent years, this distinction has blurred due to the emergence of illiberal leadership in formerly democratic states and the rise of personalist, competitive autocratic regimes (Patapan, 2022). The articles in this section demonstrate that legitimacy and followership are also central to understanding autocratic politics.

To illustrate this point, Helms (2025) begins by describing the changing nature of modern authoritarian regimes and comparing leader-follower dynamics in autocratic and democratic systems. This article highlights that contemporary authoritarian leaders often seek to appear democratic, reflecting the moral appeal of democracy and marking a shift towards competitive autocracies. In addition, it argues that followers in authoritarian regimes can be as influential as in democracies, actively legitimising or delegitimising leaders. Especially in personalist autocracies, fanatic followers are valuable resources, pressuring non-followers and minorities, thereby playing a crucial role in regime stability.

Burrett (2025) extends the argument that legitimacy and followership are key to understanding autocratic politics. Focusing on the Russian President Vladimir Putin's presidential election campaigns, the article examines the extent to which his messaging reflects the values and preferences of his constituents. Initially presenting himself as a moderate nationalist reformer seeking integration with the West, Putin shifted, after his return to the presidency in 2012, towards a more aggressive posture against what he portrays as a hostile West and domestic opposition. He also appealed to conservative followers by supporting the Orthodox Church and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. Stable sources of his legitimacy include Russia's role in WWII and his perceived stewardship of the Russian economy. This article supports the thesis that autocratic rule relies not only on repression but also on legitimacy derived from appealing to citizens' evolving social values.

5. Toward a New Research Agenda

The shift towards a relational understanding of political leadership, along with the recognition of the importance of legitimacy and followership, has been underway for some time. This thematic issue advances

this body of literature by offering four key lessons drawn from the studies presented, which may help shape future research agendas in the field.

5.1. Towards an Integrated Theoretical and Methodological Framework for Leadership Legitimacy

While the relational conception of political leadership has been widely acknowledged in theory, this issue highlights the critical need for its empirical investigation. Leadership is increasingly understood not as an inherent quality of individuals but as a dynamic and contested process shaped by followers' perceptions, emotions, and evaluations. However, capturing this relational interplay in empirical research is far from straightforward. The studies presented here reveal that theories and concepts still require greater definitional clarity, more robust operationalisation, and innovative methods tailored to the complexity of leader–follower dynamics. Yet, when these challenges are met, such research not only advances empirical knowledge but also contributes to the refinement of existing theoretical frameworks.

Work on legitimacy and followership remains fragmented across disciplines—including political science, social psychology, communication, and leadership studies—each offering valuable yet partial insights. This thematic issue also demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary dialogue while calling for greater conceptual integration and methodological convergence. Moreover, the contributions show that legitimacy is a multidimensional construct (Laing, 2021; van Esch, 2017; van Esch & Steenman, 2025), shaped by factors such as emotional resonance, symbolic representation, and cultural context (Yates & Weissmann, 2018). Future research must adopt a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to better capture how legitimacy is formed and contested across diverse political settings.

5.2. Bridging Leader Behaviour and Follower Perceptions Through Online Impression Management

A persistent challenge in the empirical study of political leadership is the separation between analyses of leaders' strategies to seek legitimacy and followers' attributions of legitimacy. As this thematic issue illustrates, most studies tend to focus either on leaders' efforts (Bonansinga, 2025; Burrett, 2025; Helms, 2025) or on followers' perceptions and contestations (Aaldering et al., 2025; Gherghina, 2025; Metz & Plesz, 2025; van Esch & Steenman, 2025; Várnagy et al., 2025). Yet these two dimensions are inherently interdependent and should be examined together through more holistic research designs that better capture the relational dynamics of leadership.

A promising way to bridge this gap is through the study of *online impression management* (Bonansinga, 2025; Metz et al., 2025) and *charisma signalling* (Metz & Kövesdi, 2025; Tur et al., 2022). As politics becomes increasingly mediatised and personalised, social media have emerged as critical arenas for leaders to project charisma, authenticity, and prototypicality. These platforms offer a unique space where leaders can demonstrate legitimacy by crafting charismatic and relatable personas, thereby reducing perceived distance (van Esch & Steenman, 2025) and fostering the illusion of direct connection (Metz et al., 2025). Such curated performances activate both leader intent and follower reception, providing valuable empirical insights into how legitimacy is co-constructed in real time within digital political arenas.

5.3. Emotional Contagion and Follower Dynamics in Leadership Perception

Building on the previous lesson, the relational approach to political leadership calls for greater attention to how legitimacy is co-constructed not only between leaders and their followers but also *among* followers themselves. One underexplored mechanism in this process is emotional contagion—the transmission of affective states, moods, and narratives within political communities (Clarkson et al., 2020). Rather than forming independent judgments in isolation, individuals often interpret leaders through shared emotional climates shaped by identity, group dynamics, and collective experience. These emotionally charged interactions can reinforce perceptions of charisma and legitimacy—or, conversely, erode support when negative emotions spread within the community

Future research should examine how emotional resonance circulates within follower groups and how these dynamics influence both the perception and durability of leadership legitimacy. Special attention should be given to both digital and face-to-face environments, where emotional cues are amplified and rapidly diffused. Investigating the conditions under which emotions spread—and how they affect tolerance for transgressive leadership behaviour—would significantly enrich our understanding of followership as a socially embedded, affectively driven phenomenon, one that plays a central role in the rise and resilience of political leaders.

5.4. Democratic Fragility and the Teflon Effect: Leadership and Legitimacy in (Competitive) Autocracies

The concepts of leadership, legitimacy, and followership are not only central to democratic theory but also critical for understanding political dynamics in autocracies, particularly within personalist and competitive authoritarian regimes (Burrett, 2025; Helms, 2025). In these contexts, traditional mechanisms of democratic accountability are often weakened, circumvented, or rendered symbolic, raising important questions about how leaders maintain authority amid democratic erosion and persistent norm violations. As Metz and Kövesdi (2025b) demonstrate, the endurance of norm-violating leaders—so-called Teflon leaders—poses a fundamental challenge to democratic theory. These leaders seem to enjoy a form of moral immunity, with their transgressions downplayed or reframed by loyal followers. This protection is not merely rooted in authoritarian or populist predispositions but is actively constructed through partisan loyalty, identity-based evaluations, and strategic moral justifications. In polarised political environments, charismatic or populist leaders often weaponise moral boundaries, presenting themselves as virtuous outsiders resisting a corrupt establishment, thereby transforming rule-breaking into a perceived act of political integrity.

This dynamic undermines what Przeworski (1999) identified as the core democratic function: the peaceful removal of ineffective or norm-breaking leaders. As institutional accountability gives way to affective loyalty, the electorate's capacity to sanction misconduct is severely weakened. The *Teflon effect* thus signals a broader erosion of democratic resilience, normalising deviance and entrenching illegitimate leadership (Metz & Kövesdi, 2025b). Future research should investigate the factors that reinforce this effect, including dark personality traits (Nai & Maier, 2024), affective polarisation, and emotionally charged partisan attachments (Aaldering et al., 2025). Particular attention should be paid to how these mechanisms function across different regime types, shedding light on the psychological and social foundations that allow leaders to maintain legitimacy even amid scandal, incompetence, or systemic abuse. These insights are crucial for developing a more comprehensive theory of political leadership that accounts for its illiberal, affect-driven, and often remarkably enduring forms.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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