

The Irresistible Allure of Charismatic Leaders? Populism, Social Identity, and Polarisation

Rudolf Metz ^{1,2}  and Bendegúz Plesz ^{1,3} 

¹ Institute for Political Science, HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

² Institute of Social and Political Science, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

³ Faculty of Law, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

Correspondence: Rudolf Metz (metz.rudolf@tk.hun-ren.hu)

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Abstract

This article examines the complex interplay between populism, social identity, and charisma attribution in leader–follower relationships. Drawing on a survey conducted in Hungary during the 2022 election, we investigate how populist attitudes and partisan identity shape citizens’ perceptions of leaders, specifically assessing the charismatic appeal of Viktor Orbán and Péter Márki-Zay, and charisma attribution across three levels: a general need for charismatic leadership, recognition of specific charismatic behaviours, and emotional attachment. We found that while populist attitudes drive an overarching idealisation of leadership, partisan identity more directly influences the perception of leaders’ charismatic qualities and emotional connections to them. Contrary to prevailing assumptions, our findings reveal that populist attitudes do not have a direct effect on (leader) affective polarisation, while the idealisation of leadership significantly increases it. A key observation here is that while partisanship influences both positive and negative perceptions of charisma, identity strength only enhances emotional attachment in the positive direction. It has no moderating effect on negative perceptions, suggesting that rejection of the out-group leader is a foundational aspect of group membership. These dynamics underscore the role of populism and identity politics in fostering political divisions, suggesting that identity-based attachments are crucial for understanding the emotional resonance between charismatic leaders and their followers. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the relationship between charismatic leadership and populism, identity, and polarisation, emphasising the significance of followers’ attitudes in political dynamics.

Keywords

affective polarisation; charismatic leadership; followership; Péter Márki-Zay; populist attitudes; social identity; Viktor Orbán

1. Introduction

Politics has become increasingly personalised in recent years, with rising support for illiberal and authoritarian leaders evident in both public attitudes and election outcomes. Researchers attribute democratic backsliding largely to the influence and popularity of these leaders (Bartels, 2023; Berlucchi & Kellam, 2023). However, public and academic focus has primarily been leader-centred, which offers limited insight into how followers' characteristics and views shape their engagement with such figures. Two key explanations have gained particular prominence within political science.

Perhaps the most popular explanation for this trend is the rise of populism. Although there is no consensus on this point (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; Viviani, 2023), there is a strong assumption among populism researchers that leaders strategically use populist rhetoric to forge a quasi-direct relationship with their voters (De La Torre, 2023; Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2021; Pappas, 2020; Turnbull et al., 2024; Weyland, 2024). Conversely, researchers, particularly within the strategic and performative approaches to populism, describe charisma as a critical factor for the facilitation and success of populist politics.

Empirical evidence for the charismatic leadership thesis remains limited. Most research on the relationship between charismatic leadership and populism focuses on the supply side—examining leaders through theoretical and anecdotal lenses—while relatively few studies have explored the follower perspective. Research has suggested, however, that leader evaluation is more central for populist radical-right voters than others (Michel et al., 2020), with these parties effectively leveraging positive perceptions of their leaders to gain support (Angelucci et al., 2024). However, the evidence is inconclusive, as studies often oversimplify the leader–follower dynamic by linking populist followership exclusively to radical-right voting and charisma to leaders' likeability (Donovan, 2021; Michel et al., 2020; van der Brug & Mughan, 2007). Hawkins (2011) introduced an expert survey to measure charismatic party linkages, revealing a strong correlation between charisma and populist discourse. His findings show that all highly populist leaders (e.g., Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales) exhibit high charisma, with no populist party operating without charismatic leadership, thus underscoring charisma's role in sustaining populist movements. In contrast, Pappas (2016) identified only 5 out of 45 populist leaders as truly charismatic (e.g., Jean-Marie Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Jörg Haider), arguing that most populist leaders lack the personalism or radicalism necessary for genuine charisma.

Another stream of research (Andrews-Lee, 2021; Eberhardt & Merolla, 2017; Favero, 2022; McDonnell, 2016; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2011) has examined the attribution of charisma to leaders identified as populists without fully considering the role of followers' populist worldviews. The influence of individual populist attitudes thus remains underexplored. Populist attitudes have been equated with authoritarianism, but no definitive relationship has been established between these attitudes and leader trait evaluations (Seijts & Clercy, 2020). Conversely, findings suggest that individuals with populist attitudes are more inclined to favour leaders exhibiting dark personality traits (Nai, 2022). A German survey experiment further indicated that individuals with populist or authoritarian attitudes are more accepting of illiberal politics when they perceive policy-level alignment with leaders (Lewandowsky & Jankowski, 2023).

Another prominent theoretical framework posits that attitudes towards authoritarian leadership—and perceptions of democracy—are heavily influenced by partisan identity (Braley et al., 2023; Kingzette et al., 2021; Krishnarajan, 2023). Citizens are more likely to support illiberal policies when their preferred party is

in power but become critical of the state of democracy when in opposition (Littvay et al., 2024), thus demonstrating that “most voters are partisans first and democrats only second” (Graham & Svobik, 2020, p. 393). Shared identity fosters trust, perceived effectiveness (Giessner et al., 2009), and perceived charisma (Steffens et al., 2014) in leaders, while also leading followers to overlook mistakes and norm violations (Davies et al., 2024; Giessner et al., 2009; Krishnarajan, 2023).

The most significant consequence of populism and identity politics is the deepening of political cleavages along social identity lines, shifting the focus away from policy concerns. While populist party support does not always increase polarisation, populist attitudes amplify affective polarisation, heightening ingroup favouritism and outgroup hostility (Pérez-Rajó, 2024). Stefanelli (2023) found a strong link between populist attitudes, support for extreme ideological positions, and affective polarisation in leader evaluations, although this connection depends on party affiliation. Studies further reveal that leader-based affective polarisation reflects partisan affective polarisation, with voter preferences increasingly shaped by negative perceptions of out-party leaders (Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2022; Reiljan et al., 2023).

This article seeks to advance the discourse on the charismatic leadership thesis (Michel et al., 2020; van der Brug & Mughan, 2007) within the populism literature in two primary ways. First, building on prior studies (Andrews-Lee, 2021; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2011), it integrates insights from the social psychological leadership literature, which has pioneered empirical research on charisma. Taking a follower-centric perspective, this article examines citizens’ demand for and support of political leaders as charisma attributions—a social construct central to charismatic leader–follower relationships. Populism is defined here as an ideational construct (Hawkins et al., 2018), aligning with the bottom-up focus on how followers recognise and respond to leaders’ charisma. This ideational approach contrasts with leader-centric theories that frame populism as a strategy, style, or performance (Moffitt, 2016; Weyland, 2024), making it more suitable for analysing follower-centric dynamics of charisma.

This study investigates how individual populist views and partisan identity influence charisma attributions, exploring whether a general need for charismatic leadership or populist attitudes more strongly drives leader affective polarisation. Using survey data from Hungary’s 2022 election—focusing on Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and opposition candidate Péter Márki-Zay—it builds on existing leadership scholarship (Carsten et al., 2019; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Meindl et al., 1985) emphasising the influence of individual characteristics and values (e.g., self-esteem, gender, community values, and partisanship) on leadership dynamics.

Second, an innovative charisma scale is introduced that disaggregates charisma into three critical dimensions: the abstract need for leadership, the recognition of specific charismatic behaviours, and emotional engagement with these leaders. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how populist attitudes and shared identities shape charisma attribution. Before addressing the levels of charisma and associated hypotheses, these dynamics are contextualised within the specific patterns of voter behaviour in Hungary.

2. Polarisation, Populism, and Leader-Centrism in Hungary

Following the 2010 landslide election and consecutive two-thirds legislative majorities, Hungary’s political system has transformed significantly, shifting towards authoritarian politics and undermining liberal

democratic institutions (Körösenyi et al., 2020). Reforms have permeated all sectors, affecting the constitution, judiciary, media, and civil rights. Although research often emphasises leadership actions or institutional changes, few studies have explored demand-side factors like polarisation, populism, and leader-centrism. Empirical evidence indicates that Hungary's electorate has long been conducive to polarisation, populism, and charismatic leadership, even before the authoritarian shift. The emergence of the new regime was underpinned by the critical 2010 elections (Róbert & Papp, 2012), which reshuffled the Hungarian political landscape giving a huge political mandate to Fidesz and its satellite party, the KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party). This outcome followed a collapse in support for the socialist-liberal coalition, weakened by political, moral, and economic crises that destabilised the post-communist party system. Signs of political polarisation and negative partisanship—where voters align against disliked parties rather than for preferred ones—were already visible in the early 2000s (Körösenyi, 2013; Rose & Mishler, 1998). By 2010, this polarisation had intensified markedly, placing Hungary among the most polarised nations globally (McCoy et al., 2018; Patkós, 2022).

Hungary's polarisation is often linked to the rise of populism and strategic manoeuvres of political elites (McCoy et al., 2018; Metz, 2024a; Palonen, 2009). Populism has become dominant in party competition (Enyedi & Róna, 2018), governance (Bartha et al., 2020), and rhetoric (Tóth, 2020). Studies have confirmed that populist attitudes are deeply embedded in Hungarian society, with relative deprivation serving as a strong predictor of these views. Tóth and Lantos (2024) found no substantial differences in feelings of relative deprivation between voters for the government and for the opposition, although the latter display stronger populist attitudes. Additionally, research has shown that the Manichean and anti-pluralist elements of populist attitudes drive a preference for governance by strong leaders over representative institutions (Krekó, 2021).

A recent comparative study (Reiljan et al., 2023) revealed that Hungary exhibits one of the highest levels of polarisation in its perceptions of party leaders, ranking fourth among the 40 countries analysed, surpassed only by Turkey, Montenegro, and Bulgaria. Since the 2000s, Hungarians have shown a pattern of “passive admiration” for leaders (Tóka, 2006), aligning with a traditional preference for strong and cultic leaders (Apor, 2021). Following the democratic transition, personalised party structures have gained traction (Hloušek, 2015; Metz & Oross, 2020; Metz & Várnagy, 2021), and post-2010 shifts in Hungary's political landscape are frequently attributed to Viktor Orbán's charismatic leadership (Illés et al., 2018; Körösenyi et al., 2020; Körösenyi & Patkós, 2017; Metz & Kövesdi, 2023).

By 2022, the Hungarian opposition had adopted personalised leadership and populist rhetoric, uniting left- and right-wing parties in a joint electoral campaign under the United for Hungary coalition. Opposition voters selected Péter Márki-Zay as their candidate in primaries, making him the most influential opposition figure in over a decade. While some opposition parties, like the radical right-wing Jobbik, had previously used populist rhetoric, this approach became more prominent, marked by an anti-constitutionalist, anti-elitist, and people-centred campaign and Márki-Zay's provocative and transgressive challenges to Fidesz–KDNP's legitimacy and conservative positioning.

3. The Three Levels of Charisma Attribution

Scepticism persists in the social sciences regarding the scientific utility of the concept of charisma. Leadership researchers have addressed these doubts in various ways: Some have incorporated charisma conceptually and methodologically as a stylistic element within transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), while others place it at the core of empirical study. Charisma is often conceptualised in two primary ways. One approach views it as a leader's social influence over followers, using emotions, values, and symbols (Antonakis et al., 2016), building on Weber's (1978, p. 241) idea of "supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional qualities." However, this perspective risks overlooking the role of followers. For Weber, it was not the presence of extraordinary qualities that was decisive but rather their recognition by followers. As he stated, "what is important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to the charismatic authority, by his 'followers' or 'disciples'" (Weber, 1978, p. 242). In other words, charismatic leadership depends not on any intrinsic abilities of the leader but rather on an exceptional emotional relationship in which followers perceive the leader as extraordinary (Willner, 1985, p. 8).

Charismatic leadership is thus understood as a relational and socially constructed phenomenon, emerging when followers attribute exceptional qualities to leaders, thereby legitimising their authority (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Meindl, 1995). This follower-centric approach (Metz, 2024b) positions followers as active participants in the leadership process, with their characteristics influencing how they perceive and attribute charisma and influence to leaders. Despite this recognition, few studies on populism have investigated charismatic leadership from the followers' perspective. Existing research often relies on researcher ratings (Pappas, 2016), expert surveys (Hawkins, 2011), popularity indexes (Donovan, 2021; Michel et al., 2020; van der Brug & Mughan, 2007), or interviews (Favero, 2022; McDonnell, 2016), with only limited use of charismatic leadership scales commonly applied in leadership research (Andrews-Lee, 2021; Eberhardt & Merolla, 2017; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2011).

Conceptual challenges persist, however, as charisma is frequently studied through ill-defined, overlapping, or theoretically inconsistent dimensions (Antonakis et al., 2016; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). To address these issues, it is crucial to analyse charisma attribution as a cognitive and emotional process within a well-defined theoretical and methodological framework. This article identifies three levels of charisma attribution: abstract (general need for charismatic leadership), cognitive (perceptions of charismatic behaviours), and emotional (attachment to charismatic leaders). By integrating insights from both populism and leadership research, this approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of how charisma is attributed and how individual character traits influence this process.

3.1. Abstract Level: *The Hunger for Charisma*

Charismatic attribution begins with the assumption that a leader must possess extraordinary influence over events in the country and the world. Attributing causal mechanisms to leadership, though potentially an error or bias, satisfies a deep-seated psychological need to simplify the world's complexities. As Meindl (2004, p. 464) notes, "the faithful belief in leadership is itself beneficial in providing a sense of comfort and security, in reducing feelings of uncertainty, and in providing a sense of human agency and control." People often interpret various organisational, social, and political phenomena solely through the actions of leaders, over-attributing both positive and negative outcomes disproportionately to them. This idealisation can

distort perceptions of leaders' roles, as Meindl's (1990, 1995) "romance of leadership" thesis suggests, as individuals over-attribute outcomes to leaders, thus overshadowing other external factors. Meindl (1990, p. 182) describes charisma as the "hyper-romanticization" of leaders and suggests that charismatic leadership is an extreme case of this idealisation. Examining the general beliefs in the importance of leadership and perception of charisma, a number of studies have reported a positive correlation (see Meindl, 1990; Shamir, 1992), while others have found minimal or no association (see Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Bligh et al., 2005). However, a meta-analysis of 18 studies indicates that the romance of leadership, considered as an individual difference variable, is indeed correlated with followers' perceptions of charisma (Schyns et al., 2007).

The romance of leadership thesis suggests that individuals tend to overestimate leaders' roles in outcomes, whether positive or negative. This effect is especially complex for populist politicians, who often formulate ambitious promises, thus raising supporters' expectations about their influence and abilities. Still, populists' poor performance is frequently attributed by their followers to external factors, such as the machinations of powerful international elites, unwanted economic and social trends, or other unexpected events (e.g., natural disasters, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the wars of the recent past), fostering uncritical support. Analyses of Juan Perón and Hugo Chávez—charismatic politicians in Latin America widely considered populist (Andrews-Lee, 2021; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2011)—have shown that they are protected by a "Teflon-like" personality that prevents their followers from blaming them for their poor performance or mistakes. The effects of their charisma can also have long-term consequences: The erosion of the leader's support slows down and can even turn into a personal cult after their death. Earlier research by Awamleh and Gardner (1999, p. 361) found similar results: Followers of leaders perceived as charismatic are more likely to forgive them for failures and mistakes. To turn the idea around: Anti-elitist sentiment in populism can be seen as frustration stemming from unmet expectations of elite leaders. Populist followers selectively attribute outcomes, viewing both populist politicians' failures and rivals' successes as products of external factors rather than leader performance. Thus, populist promises of redemption elevate followers' expectations while deflecting blame onto others:

Hypothesis 1: The populist worldview increases the likelihood of attributing greater influence to political leaders at the expense of other contextual factors.

3.2. Cognitive Level: Recognising Charismatic Leaders

Political science often simplifies leader evaluations using broad personality traits or feeling thermometers, while leadership studies have employed various scales without a clear distinction between the behavioural and emotional aspects of charisma attribution (Antonakis et al., 2016; Ito et al., 2020; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Although interrelated, these dimensions represent two levels of charismatic relationships: Recognising a leader's behaviour does not inherently lead to followership, while the emotional level captures a deeper willingness to follow.

Conger and Kanungo's (1987) behavioural theory posits that charisma attribution arises from the perceived distinctive behaviours of politicians, rather than their social or organisational status. Charismatic behaviours include sensitivity to followers' needs and the environment, articulating ambitious visions, using innovative and unconventional means to challenge the status quo, and demonstrating personal sacrifice and risk-taking

for collective goals. Followers interpret these behaviours as evidence of a leader's unique abilities and motivations, consequently constructing their charismatic image.

Previous studies have suggested that perceptions of charismatic behaviour are minimally influenced by populist worldviews. McDonnell's (2016) research on three populist right-wing parties—the Italian People's Party for Freedom, the Northern League, and the Swiss People's Party—found that followers attributed special abilities and missions to their leaders, but emotional commitment varied. Unlike the Swiss case, Berlusconi's and Bossi's followers showed unconditional acceptance of their charismatic authority, while only Bossi's supporters displayed strong emotional ties. These differences stem from the leaders' roles as party founders. Berlusconi's authority was linked to his ownership of the party, while Bossi's influence was strengthened by his creation of a northern Italian identity. This suggests that social identity, rather than populist views, plays a greater role in charisma attribution, a view supported by leadership research (Steffens et al., 2014):

Hypothesis 2a: Partisan voters perceive their leaders' charismatic behaviour as more charismatic than non-partisan respondents.

Hypothesis 2b: Partisan voters perceive the rival leader's charismatic behaviour to be much lower than non-partisan respondents.

The strength of social group membership represents a pivotal mediating factor in the context of partisanship that influences the recognition of a leader's charismatic behaviour:

Hypothesis 2c: Followers with a stronger partisan identity are more likely to perceive the behaviour of the endorsed leader as more charismatic than those who identify less with the party.

Hypothesis 2d: Followers with a stronger partisan identity are more likely to perceive the behaviour of the rival leader as less charismatic than those who identify less with the party.

3.3. Emotional Level: Attachment to the Charismatic Leader

Emotional attachment to a leader is fundamental to charismatic leadership (Antonakis et al., 2016; Weber, 1978; Willner, 1985). This bond is characterised by followers' intense emotional commitment to specific political figures requiring not only the acknowledgment of the leader's exceptional qualities but also the willingness of followers to align their preferences and actions accordingly. As Madsen and Snow (1991, p. 338) assert, "charisma is never simply the result of the magnetism of a leader; it depends equally upon the 'magnetizability' of the followers." Empirical evidence indicates that followers with high affective intensity and arousal are more likely to form charismatic relationships with leaders (Damen et al., 2008; Pastor et al., 2007). Charismatic leaders, in turn, aim to channel these positive emotions into both collective and individual action (Sy et al., 2018). Building on McDonnell's (2016) findings, we further posit that a shared identity strengthens emotional attachment to the leader:

Hypothesis 3a: Partisan followers express stronger emotional attachment to their own leaders than non-partisan respondents.

Hypothesis 3b: Partisan followers express stronger emotional rejection of the rival leader than non-partisan respondents.

The strength of social group membership may be a critical mediating factor in partisanship that shapes followers' emotional attachment to leaders:

Hypothesis 3c: Followers with a stronger partisan identity are more likely to express stronger emotional attachment to the endorsed leader than those who identify less with the party.

Hypothesis 3d: Followers with a stronger partisan identity are more likely to express stronger emotional rejection of the rival leader than those who identify less with the party.

Charismatic leaders rarely provoke neutral responses; they are often revered by followers and viewed as diabolic by detractors. As Willner (1985, p. 7) noted, charismatic leaders generate intense emotions, with even their opponents acknowledging them as extraordinary and often fearing their influence. Similarly, Tucker (1968, p. 746) observed that leaders evoking positive charisma among supporters are likely to elicit negative reactions, or counter-charisma, from those who view their actions as ruinous rather than redemptive. Counter or negative charisma is built on recognition of perceived harmful intention. This aligns with negative personalisation, where negative emotions towards rival leaders drive voting behaviour and intensify affective polarisation (Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2022; Reiljan et al., 2023). Highly polarising charismatic leaders not only mobilise opposition but also deepen political divides. In populist contexts, negative charisma is amplified through divisive rhetoric and transgressive politics targeting opponents and "enemies of the people" (Metz, 2024a). Studies further confirm that populist worldviews exacerbate identity-based polarisation (Pérez-Rajó, 2024; Stefanelli, 2023):

Hypothesis 4: The populist worldview is associated with an increase in affective polarisation.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants and Procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online survey between 23 February and 4 March 2022 ($N = 1,200$), a month before the Hungarian national election. The survey was carried out by a professional public opinion polling company (NRC, <https://nrc.hu>). The sample was representative of the Hungarian population with internet access, aged between 18 and 65 years ($M = 43.73$, $SD = 12.61$), and gender, age, level of education, and place of residence quotas were met. The 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election resulted in a decisive victory for the Fidesz-KDNP alliance, securing 54.13% of the votes. The United Opposition received 34.44%, while the radical right-wing Mi Hazánk (Our Country) received 5.88% and surpassed the 5% parliamentary threshold. The pirate party MKKP (Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog) won 3.27% and remained outside parliament. Respondents first completed a short questionnaire about demographics, political interest, and political orientations. They then rated the items pertaining to populism, romance of leadership, and the behavioural and emotional charisma scales on the same 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement.

4.2. Measures

The data set comprises *three levels of charisma attributions* (see Supplementary File, Table 14). First, the inclination to ascribe excessive causal influence to leadership was gauged using a condensed iteration of the Romance of Leadership Scale (RLS; Schyns et al., 2007). The items were adapted to the political context, following the approach of Shamir (1994), who tested his version of the RLS in the context of Israeli elections. The five items (four positive and one negative) were loaded onto a single RLS factor, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.72$. Second, the behavioural charisma block was presented prior to any partisan identification question. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceived the following statements to be representative of Viktor Orbán/Péter Márki-Zay, regardless of their voting intention. In accordance with the existing literature (Conger & Kanungo, 1994; Shamir, 1994), the behavioural charisma scale comprises a range of behavioural traits, including inspiration, vision, innovation, unconventional behaviour, sacrifice, sensitivity to the needs of followers, sensitivity to the environment, and extraordinary abilities. The reliability coefficients for perceived charismatic behaviour were $\alpha = 0.90$ and $\alpha = 0.93$. Finally, the scale for the emotional charismatic bond was presented after the section in which respondents indicated their partisan attachments. Participants were then requested to evaluate their affinity with actual politicians, commencing with their selected leader and subsequently with the opposing leader. This block also demonstrated robust internal validity, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of $\alpha = 0.98$ and $\alpha = 0.99$.

The relationship between the scales is as follows: The abstract-level RLS did not correlate with the scales about specific leaders (see Supplementary File, Table 6), except in a weak manner with the recognition of Orbán Viktor's charismatic behaviour ($r = 0.206$, $p = 0.000$). This indicates that romanticisation of leadership in the abstract is not contingent on the ability to recognise and connect with a particular leader. Furthermore, the recognition of one leader's charismatic behaviour is entirely independent of the recognition of the other's ($r = -0.002$, $p = 0.957$), which corroborates the hypothesis that the behavioural scales were effective in separating the evaluations from partisanship to a certain extent. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the specific leader scales revealed more intricate relationships. The emotional scales demonstrated a weak and negative correlation with recognition of the behavioural charisma of the opposite leader ($r = -0.254$, $p = 0.000$; $r = -0.271$, $p = 0.000$). Additionally, the two emotional scales exhibited a moderate and negative correlation ($r = -0.400$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that emotional proximity to one leader is accompanied by emotional distance from the other. There was also a pronounced positive correlation between a leader's behavioural and emotional charisma ($r = 0.699$, $p = 0.000$; $r = 0.682$, $p = 0.000$).

As for the *strength of partisan identity (closeness)*, after a question about party preference for the 2022 election, we asked, "How close do you feel to this party list?" This item measured the closeness on a 7-point Likert scale. To run larger case number models, non-partisans were recoded from missing to 0, resulting in an 8-point Likert scale.

Leader affective polarisation is analogous to closeness in its objective of quantifying the emotional engagement of respondents. However, whereas closeness exclusively uses one aspect of the relationship (positive sentiments; Reiljan et al., 2023; Stefanelli, 2023), leader affective polarisation assesses the discrepancy between positive and negative affections towards leaders. Leader affective polarisation is distinct from closeness in that it pertains to leaders rather than groups.

Finally, to capture latent *populist attitudes* (see Supplementary File, Table 13), ideational populism was deconstructed into three latent dimensions following Castanho Silva et al. (2019)—namely, anti-elitism, people-centred attitudes, and a Manichean worldview. There is still a lack of consensus on the measurement of populist attitudes with available scales, and the literature still struggles with cross-national validity (Castanho Silva et al., 2020). Measuring populism as a multidimensional concept is also problematic, because survey items may not capture one dimension (Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Schulz et al., 2018), but tap into two or three dimensions simultaneously (Akkerman et al., 2014). We therefore refrained from analysing the dimensions of populism individually and loaded all our items into one reliable populism scale ($\alpha = 0.74$), which we used to analyse how populist attitudes explain the hunger for charisma or the attribution of behavioural and emotional charisma.

5. Results: Charisma Attribution—Populist Worldviews and Partisan Identities

5.1. The Populist Worldview: A Hunger for Charismatic Leadership

At the macro level, Hungarian politics is characterised by high levels of both partisan polarisation and leader affect. The results demonstrated a notable prevalence of populist attitudes and generalised idealised expectations of leaders among respondents. The majority of respondents (80%) exhibited populist attitudes, as indicated by a score above the median of 4 on the 7-point Likert scale ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 0.886$). In contrast, pluralists, who are open to compromise and favour a representative system over direct democratic solutions, constituted a minority (see Supplementary File, Figure 2). The desire for charismatic leadership was even more pronounced than the populist worldview in the sample, with 85% of respondents scoring above the median on the RLS ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 0.857$). This indicates that most individuals tend to overestimate the influence of political leaders in the political process, interpreting political events through the lens of their actions. In light of these findings, it is unsurprising that the 2022 Hungarian elections focused on the two leading candidates. The personalisation of Hungarian politics is not only rooted in supply-side factors, namely the emergence of charismatic leaders, but could also be explained by strong demand.

The analysis showed that Fidesz–KDNP voters attached a bit more importance to leadership than non-voters or undecided voters ($\beta = 0.338$, $p = 0.000$), while opposition voters tended to align themselves with non-voters. Partisanship did not seem to explain the romanticisation of leadership ($R^2 = 0.032$; Table 1, Model 3): These attitudes were widespread and more or less similar across party lines. However, the results showed that populism had a significant impact on the RLS. The results indicate that a more populist voter attaches greater importance to leadership ($\beta = 0.400$, $p = 0.000$, $R^2 = 0.171$). Each 1-point increase in the populism scale is associated with a 0.4-point increase in the RLS, and populism alone explains 17% of the variance in RLS scores. This effect is strongest among non-partisan or undecided voters ($\beta = 0.600$, $p = 0.000$, $R^2 = 0.337$), suggesting that populist attitudes among non-partisan voters significantly increase the romanticisation of leadership (Table 1, Model 6). In other words, those who hold populist views tend to place more importance on political leaders than their non-populist counterparts. The populist worldview thus creates a kind of “messianic expectation,” and, on a more general level, confirms the charismatic leadership thesis of the populist literature. The results thus support Hypothesis 1.

Table 1. OLS regression models predicting the RLS.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Total sample			Fidesz–KDNP voters	United Opposition voters	Non- or undecided voters
Populist worldview	0.428*** (0.026)	0.400*** (0.025)		0.132** (0.052)	0.391*** (0.053)	0.600*** (0.036)
Partisanship [ref.: Non- or undecided voters]						
Fidesz–KDNP voters	0.335*** (0.062)		0.338*** (0.060)			
United Opposition voters	0.070 (0.064)		0.282*** (0.062)			
Mi Hazánk voters	–0.059 (0.122)		0.270** (0.135)			
MKKP voters	0.113 (0.137)		0.271* (0.154)			
Gender	–0.205*** (0.046)					
Education	0.028 (0.018)					
Type of residence	0.006 (0.021)					
Political interest	0.143*** (0.028)					
Left–right scale	0.036** (0.017)					
_cons	2.304*** (0.175)	3.121*** (0.126)	4.892*** (0.036)	4.629*** (0.238)	3.156*** (0.277)	2.007*** (0.177)
Observations	1,200	1,200	1,200	304	278	544
R-squared	0.248	0.171	0.032	0.021	0.165	0.337

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses; *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

5.2. Partisan Identity and the Recognition of Charismatic Behaviour

A notable discrepancy appeared in the behavioural charisma ratings of the two leading candidates. Viktor Orbán’s behaviour was perceived as more charismatic ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.449$) than Péter Márki-Zay’s ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.611$). This is a considerable discrepancy that might be mediated by Márki-Zay’s relatively brief tenure in politics or by the stark contrasts in media portrayal within a government-dominated media landscape and the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict during the electoral period, which benefited the incumbent prime minister by triggering a “rally-around-the-flag” effect (see Metz, 2024b).

Analysis of the assessments of leaders’ behavioural charisma revealed that they were primarily explained by partisanship. In line with Weber’s conceptualisation of charisma, the results indicated that charisma is a highly subjective phenomenon and closely related to social identity, which is a central explanatory variable

in the perception of a leader's charismatic qualities (Table 2, Models 1 and 3; for more see Supplementary File, Tables 9 and 10). Fidesz-KDNP voters perceived Viktor Orbán's charismatic behaviour to be significantly more charismatic than non- or undecided voters ($\beta = 1.760, p = 0.000$); similarly, United Opposition voters perceived Péter Márki-Zay's behavioural charisma to be higher than non- or undecided voters ($\beta = 1.434, p = 0.000$). In terms of negative charisma, United Opposition voters perceived Orbán's behavioural charisma to be significantly lower than non- or undecided voters ($\beta = -0.311, p = 0.000$), and similarly, Fidesz-KDNP voters perceived Márki-Zay's behavioural charisma to be significantly lower than non- or undecided voters ($\beta = -0.612, p = 0.000$). Hypotheses 2a and 2b were thus supported. The relationship was further moderated by the strength of group membership (closeness to the party), but only in a positive direction. This suggests that voters with stronger group membership perceive their leader's charisma to be more pronounced (Table 2, Models 2 and 4). Hypothesis 2c was thus supported. However, voters with stronger and weaker partisan identity did not perceive the rival leader's charisma to the same extent (Table 2, Models 2 and 4), so Hypothesis 2d is rejected.

Table 2. OLS regression models examining leaders' charismatic behaviour.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Behaviour		Péter Márki-Zay's Charismatic Behaviour	
Partisanship [ref.: Non- or undecided voters]				
Fidesz-KDNP voters	1.760*** (0.086)	-0.319 (0.306)	-0.612*** (0.103)	-1.054*** (0.371)
United Opposition voters	-0.310*** (0.088)	0.123 (0.306)	1.434*** (0.106)	-0.170 (0.371)
Mi Hazánk voters	-0.135 (0.192)	-0.229 (0.773)	-0.418* (0.229)	-0.426 (0.936)
MKKP voters	-0.007 (0.218)	-0.120 (0.545)	0.210 (0.261)	-0.097 (0.661)
Closeness to party		0.019 (0.035)		-0.050 (0.043)
Interaction between Partisanship and Closeness [ref.: Non- or undecided voters]				
Fidesz-KDNP voters		0.352*** (0.063)		0.125 (0.076)
United Opposition voters		-0.100 (0.066)		0.353*** (0.080)
Mi Hazánk voters		0 (0.146)		0.047 (0.177)
MKKP voters		0.008 (0.118)		0.115 (0.143)
_cons	4.109*** (0.051)	4.1*** (0.053)	3.516*** (0.061)	3.538*** (0.064)
Observations	1,200	1,200	1,200	1,200
R-squared	0.320	0.349	0.212	0.227

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses; *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

The explanatory power of populism was also diminished when we attempted to account for how voters identify the charismatic behaviour of a particular leader (see Supplementary File, Tables 9 and 10). In other words, the populist worldview is an insufficient explanation for the recognition of charisma.

5.3. Party Identity, Emotional Charisma, and Affective Polarisation

The emotional charisma ratings of the two leading candidates were more similar to each other than the behavioural ratings. Overall, a slightly higher level of warmth was expressed towards Viktor Orbán ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 2.105$) than towards Péter Márki-Zay ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.938$). A closer examination of the leaders' emotional charismatic bond with their followers revealed that Orbán's partisan followers connected to him slightly more ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.276$) than Márki-Zay's followers connected to their candidate ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.511$). However, this difference was considerably less pronounced than in the behavioural dimension. Similarly, the findings indicate that the emotional charismatic bond is also markedly subjective and closely associated with group membership as a pivotal explanatory variable in recognising a leader's charismatic qualities (Table 3, Models 1 and 3). Voters affiliated with the Fidesz-KDNP electoral coalition ascribed greater emotional charisma to Viktor Orbán than voters who were undecided or not affiliated with any party ($\beta = 2.975$, $p = 0.000$). Similarly, those who supported the United Opposition ascribed greater emotional charisma to Márki-Zay than undecided or unaffiliated voters ($\beta = 2.590$, $p = 0.000$). With regard to negative charisma, United Opposition voters manifested a more pronounced rejection of Viktor Orbán's emotional charisma compared to non- or undecided voters ($\beta = -1.312$, $p = 0.000$). Similarly, Fidesz-KDNP voters exhibited a notable degree of rejection of Márki-Zay's emotional charisma ($\beta = -0.928$, $p = 0.000$). Hypotheses 3a and 3b were therefore supported. The strength of group membership (closeness to party) further moderated this relationship, exerting an influence in the positive direction. Voters with stronger group membership were thus more emotionally connected to their leader (Table 3, Models 2 and 4). Hypothesis 3c was thus supported. The data indicate that voters with strong and weak partisan identities expressed emotional coldness and rejection of a rival leader to a similar extent (Table 3, Models 2 and 4), so Hypothesis 3d is rejected. The results also indicate that partisanship and the strength of partisanship in the behavioural charisma dimension accounted for between 21% and 35% of the variance, while in the emotional dimension, the same variables explained between 44% and 61% of the variance.

Similarly, populism was rendered ineffective when attempting to explain the phenomenon of emotional charisma (see Supplementary File, Tables 11 and 12). In the case of Márki-Zay, populism lost its effect when partisanship was included in the model. However, in the case of Viktor Orbán, populism was identified as a significant negative factor ($\beta = -0.302$, $p = 0.000$). In examining the model fits, populism was found to account for only 7.8% and 2.1% of the variation, while partisan identity accounted for 44.1% and 56%; the strength of partisanship accounted for 48.6% and 24.1%. The populist worldview was thus an insufficient explanation for why individuals form stronger emotional connections with specific leaders.

The results indicated an overall moderate level of leader affective polarisation. Those who were undecided or did not identify with any particular party exhibited low levels of affective polarisation towards the leaders in question, as did those who identified with a third party. The two opposing political blocs demonstrated a high level of leader affective polarisation, which is consistent with previous findings about affective political polarisation in Hungary (Reiljan et al., 2023). Those who voted for the incumbent government exhibited slightly greater affective polarisation ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.691$) than those who voted for the opposition ($M = 3.68$,

Table 3. OLS regression models for leaders' emotional charisma.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Viktor Orbán's Emotional Charisma		Péter Márki-Zay's Emotional Charisma	
Partisanship [ref.: Non- or undecided voters]				
Fidesz–KDNP voters	2.975*** (0.100)	–0.849** (0.344)	–0.928*** (0.104)	–1.088*** (0.367)
United Opposition voters	–1.312*** (0.103)	–1.421*** (0.345)	2.590*** (0.107)	–0.478 (0.367)
Mi Hazánk voters	–0.251 (0.224)	0.418 (0.869)	–0.486** (0.232)	0.041 (0.926)
MKKP voters	–0.694*** (0.254)	0.355 (0.613)	0.479* (0.264)	–0.559 (0.654)
Closeness		0.119*** (0.040)		0.044 (0.042)
Interaction between Partisanship and Closeness [ref.: Non- or undecided voters]				
Fidesz–KDNP voters		0.570*** (0.071)		–0.012 (0.076)
United Opposition voters		–0.089 (0.075)		0.547*** (0.079)
Mi Hazánk voters		–0.236 (0.164)		–0.140 (0.175)
MKKP voters		–0.344*** (0.133)		0.194 (0.142)
_cons	2.784*** (0.060)	2.733*** (0.059)	2.463*** (0.062)	2.444*** (0.063)
Observations	1,200	1,200	1,200	1,200
R-squared	0.560	0.609	0.441	0.477

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses; *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

$SD = 1.716$). Moreover, further testing indicated that the idealisation of leadership (RLS; $\beta = 0.638$, $p = 0.000$), political interest ($\beta = 0.799$, $p = 0.000$), and consumption of political news ($\beta = 0.590$, $p = 0.000$) contribute to leader affective polarisation, whereas populist attitudes do not (Supplementary File, Table 7, Model 2). In conclusion, Hypothesis 4 is rejected.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The rise of charismatic leaders has become an increasingly salient phenomenon in the context of global trends, including the personalisation of politics and the growing support for illiberal and authoritarian practices. This study offers empirical insights into how individual populist worldviews and political identities shape charismatic relationships between leaders and followers, as well as how affective polarisation in leader evaluations is influenced by populism and the idealisation of leadership. Prior research has highlighted populism, leader-centrism, and polarisation as key factors in Hungarian voter behaviour, making Hungary an ideal case for our analysis. Unsurprisingly, we found a strong presence of populist worldviews among

both opposition and ruling-party voters, accompanied by substantial messianic expectations, thus supporting the hypothesis that individuals with strong populist attitudes attribute greater influence to leaders. Consequently, populism provides a lens through which individuals perceive and amplify leaders' roles and impact.

However, these populist attitudes and openness to charismatic leadership do not necessarily translate directly into behaviours such as followership or voting behaviour: Hawkins et al. (2020) note that populist attitudes require "activation." Recent studies have suggested that this activation is most effective within identity groups. Ferrari (2022) showed that voters' responses to populist and anti-populist messages are heavily influenced by party identification, with support aligned with their preferred party's stance. We argue that leaders must build and mobilise a shared identity, defined as "the people," to activate populist attitudes and fulfil the demands for charismatic leadership (Uysal et al., 2022). The Hungarian election campaign illustrated this dynamic, as Orbán more successfully mobilised his group's identity against migrants, sexual minorities, and Ukrainians, while Márki-Zay faced greater challenges as an outsider leading a fragmented, multi-party coalition.

Our results indicate that partisan identity, rather than populist attitudes, plays a decisive role in followers' recognition of charismatic behaviour and the development of emotional attachment to charismatic leaders. This finding does not necessarily contradict the charismatic leadership thesis in populism studies (Michel et al., 2020; van der Brug & Mughan, 2007). Future research should examine populist politicians more closely, analysing their signals of charisma (Antonakis et al., 2016) alongside their populist rhetoric, as aligned with strategic and performative approaches to populism.

Scholars have also noted that populism is intertwined with modern identity politics (Aslanidis, 2020; Uysal et al., 2022), a dimension not fully captured by populist attitude scales. Empirical evidence has shown that disadvantaged groups, who often struggle to form a positive identity, are more susceptible to populist worldviews (Spruyt et al., 2016), thus supporting the assumption that individuals become more receptive to populism (Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021) and to strong leaders (Hogg, 2021) when their identity is insecure. Such dynamics could have serious implications for democratic politics: Partisan identity may lead individuals to overlook a leader's bad outcomes and moral failings (Davies et al., 2024; Giessner et al., 2009) or to abandon previous policy positions (Agadjanian, 2020) and democratic principles (Krishnarajan, 2023) to maintain loyalty to the leader.

The romanticisation of leadership, partly influenced by the populist zeitgeist, contributes to affective polarisation in leader evaluations. Idealising leaders intensifies affective polarisation, with our findings suggesting populism has an indirect effect. Charisma attribution reveals a nuanced picture: Partisanship explains both positive and negative perceptions of charismatic behaviour and displays of emotional attachments. This effect is positively moderated by the strength of partisan identity, with those closer to the group perceiving their leader's behaviour as more charismatic and expressing stronger emotional attachment. However, rejection of the rival leader appears consistent among both strong and weak group affiliates, thus suggesting that opposition to the rival is a precondition for group membership and remains unaffected by the strength of group identification.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Rudolf Metz is a political scientist and economist specializing in political leadership. He is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Political Science, HUN-REN Centre for Social Science Research, and an associate professor at Corvinus University of Budapest. He serves on the editorial boards of *Leadership* and the *International Journal of Public Leadership* and is a board member of the Hungarian Political Science Association and PUPOL – Academic Network for Public and Political Leadership. In 2024, he was elected to the Steering Committee of the ECPR Elites and Political Leadership Standing Group.



Bendegúz Plesz is a political scientist and an early career researcher specializing in electoral behaviour. He is a junior research fellow at the Institute for Political Science, HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences, and a PhD student and an assistant lecturer at Eötvös Loránd University. His research interests lie at the intersection of electoral behaviour and democratic theory, with a special focus on identity politics.