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Trust in Political Leaders as Trustworthiness

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Abstract

Social scientists have suggested that more careful theoretical work on the nature of trust is required to satisfactorily carry out their research. At the same time, recent work in philosophy on the topic of trust incorporates very little of the existing empirical work that has been completed and might inform the theory. In this article, I add my voice to the chorus calling for greater transdisciplinary work on the topic of trust, and I aim to contribute to this work by proposing a conceptual infrastructure that can help to clarify and substantiate the theoretical foundations of existing empirical work on the topic of trust in political leaders. This infrastructure will recommend a typology of theories of trust that includes entrusting theories, which focus on what is entrusted, trusting theories, which focus on the values and dispositions of the truster, and trustworthy theories, which focus on the trustworthiness of the trustee. This conceptual infrastructure will be theoretically useful, providing a language in which to understand and articulate the nature of trust and trustworthiness as well as normative matters having to do with the relationship between trust and trustworthiness (i.e., when *should* a political leader be trusted?). It will also be empirically useful, providing a recommended method to determine a set of concepts that can be deployed in empirical work on the presence or absence, and evolving dynamics, of trust and trustworthiness (i.e., when *is* a political leader trusted?).

Keywords

character; political leadership; trust; trustworthiness; trustworthy theory of trust; virtue

1. Introduction

In January 2025, facing a political crisis, including plummeting support of the public and his own party, Justin Trudeau announced that he would resign as leader of the federal Liberal Party, and thus as prime minister of Canada, upon the successful election of a new party leader. In March 2025, Mark Carney was elected as

the new leader and so became the prime minister of Canada. He called on the Governor General to dissolve parliament and hold a snap federal election, which was scheduled for April 28, 2025. Amidst threats of tariffs and annexation from the recently inaugurated Donald Trump, the federal election saw high voter turnout and a drastic reversal of favour, with the Liberal Party, led by Mark Carney, edging ahead of the Conservative Party, led by Pierre Poilievre (Coletto, 2025). This result is all the more remarkable given the Canadian public's lack of knowledge of Mark Carney, who had never before held public office. Though there were many variables at play in this election, these events suggest that the topic of trust, and particularly trust in and the trustworthiness of political leaders, is worthy of investigation. Indeed, the lead-up to and results of the 2025 federal election in Canada demonstrated how central trust in political leaders can be to winning—and losing—an election (Nanos Research, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Because the drama of the federal election involved party leaders who varied greatly in terms of the electorate's familiarity with them, I expect it will be a valuable case study for much upcoming research on the topic of trust in and trustworthiness of political leaders.

In this article, I add my voice to the chorus calling for greater transdisciplinary work on the topic of trust and trustworthiness. Social scientists have suggested that more careful conceptual work on the nature of trust and trustworthiness is required to satisfactorily carry out their research. For example, Fisher et al. (2010, p. 162) contend that "the operationalization of trust in the political sphere in previous research fails to tap the full range of meanings of the concept." Others have worried that the use of "different operational definitions" may have well "resulted in the measurement of potentially different definitions of trust" (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002, p. 616), or that "political trust remains one of the most elusive topics in political science research" and "does not receive sufficient theoretical consideration" (Hooghe, 2011, pp. 269–270). At the same time, most recent work in philosophy on the topic of trust incorporates very little of the empirical work that has been completed and might inform a theory of trust, particularly as it relates to trust in leaders. This article discerns a reflective equilibrium, of sorts, that balances theoretical intuitions about what trust is and empirical findings about particular cases of trust, with the aim of outlining, in a very general way, a conceptual infrastructure that is useful for making sense of trust in political leaders. This conceptual infrastructure will be theoretically useful, providing a language in which to understand and articulate more carefully normative matters having to do with trust in and trustworthiness of political leaders (i.e., when *should* a political leader be trusted?), as well as empirically useful, providing a set of concepts that can (continue to) be deployed in empirical work on the presence or absence, and evolving dynamics, of trust in and trustworthiness of political leaders (i.e., when *is* a political leader trusted?).

More specifically, I argue that the study of trust in political leaders calls for a theory of trust as trustworthiness. I will motivate the importance of trustworthiness for theorizing trust by highlighting the relevance of the trustee's character for understanding trust in leaders. It is surprising that a theory of trust as trustworthiness is largely absent in the philosophical literature. Indeed, despite this theoretical lacuna, character has taken on a central role in some contemporary empirical analyses of trust, including trust in political leaders. For example, as de Clercy et al. (2020, pp. 499–500) note, "in business as in politics, leaders are pivotal actors, and their character is thought to play an important part in creating the necessary conditions for follower support." The motivation for this recent interest in the relevance of character for evaluations of leaders is no doubt linked to "recent crises and scandals in business, politics, sports, the military, and other sectors in society," which helps explain why "research on leader character is currently bourgeoning and has begun to be incorporated in mainstream leadership research and practice," (Seijts & Wright, 2021, p. 1). Character, at least in this literature on leaders in organizational contexts, often is taken

to be "a defined set of interconnected behaviors that are virtuous in nature....Character reflects who people are—not what they are able to do" (Seijts & Milani, 2024, p. 1). However, as there is no robust philosophical work linking together trust and character, especially when it comes to political leaders, my aim in this article is to lay out an initial framework for doing this work.

Of course, as many others have noted, the literature on trust and trustworthiness is broad, ranging over many disciplines and contexts, and there exists little in the way of terminological agreement among them. Thus, I begin this project in Section 2 by highlighting some of these terminological difficulties. From this survey, I develop in Section 3 a typology of existing theories of trust, focusing on a paradigmatic example of each. This typology is intended to bring into focus what I see to be differences among the theories that are key for thinking through trust in political leaders. Specifically, I will identify three major types of theory: entrusting theories, trusting theories, and trustworthy theories. In Section 4, I will show that a trustworthy theory of trust—i.e., a theory of trust that prioritizes the character of the person who is trusted (the trustee)—is the type of theory most typically assumed when evaluating character as the basis for trust in political leaders. Thus, I will suggest that a more robust theory of trust as trustworthiness be developed for continued research in this area, and I will conclude by highlighting the benefits of adopting a trustworthiness theory of trust for doing further theoretical and empirical work on trust in political leaders.

2. Terminological Difficulties

How trust is operationalized in studies conducted by, for example, the American National Election Study, remains unfortunately vague, relying, as it does, on questions like "generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" (American National Election Studies, n.d.). Though some theorists have defended the value of this question, specifically for measuring "generalized trust" (Uslaner, 2015), others have suggested this vagueness requires further specification of the concept. This task is thought to be particularly urgent given that the data shows declining trust; as Rick K. Wilson (2018, p. 279) notes, "Given the importance of the finding that trust is in decline, it is critical to know that the concept is accurately measured." However, because trust is a topic of study in multiple disciplines, including economics, political science, philosophy, sociology, psychology, business, management, leadership studies, and more, such efforts have led to a proliferation of definitions and theories of trust. As Karen S. Cook and Jessica J. Santana note, "There are at least as many conceptualizations of trust as there are disciplines in the social sciences" (Cook & Santana, 2018, p. 253); to this, I would add the disciplines in the humanities as well. There are many ways to carve up the theoretical terrain, including by examining trust as it is relevant to different contexts, thereby producing competing theories of interpersonal trust, institutional trust, self-trust, social trust, political trust, epistemic trust, and so on. Yet, as Carolyn McLeod (2020) notes, and as I will presume in this article, interpersonal trust "arguably is the dominant paradigm of trust," and "most would agree that these [other] forms of 'trust' are coherent only if they share important features of (i.e., can be modelled on) interpersonal trust." As a result, I will restrict my comments to this context, setting aside for now issues relating to trust in institutions, selves, and so on. That is, the theories of trust I offer in Section 3 are all conceived of as interpersonal theories of trust based on the assumption that a theory of trust that is useful for making sense of trust in political leaders, rather than political institutions or processes, will be an interpersonal theory of trust. Though it might be the case that there is something unique about political leaders such that trusting them is different than trusting leaders in other contexts, I do not engage that question here. Rather, as will be made

clear in Section 4, the relevance of character for determining trustworthiness is likely to translate across these roles.

A preliminary way to carve up the theoretical terrain of interpersonal trust is to distinguish theories that build upon the assumptions of rational choice theory, prominent in economics and some areas of political science and sociology and often represented by trust games, and those that do not. Theories based on the assumptions of rational choice theory involve what Jane Mansbridge refers to as predictive trust, which "is a matter of rational probabilistic trust, in regard to either some specific matter (situation-specific trust) or a large set of matters (more generalized trust)" (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 290). It is what Russell Hardin (1999, p. 25) refers to as the purely expectations account of trust, which amounts, he claims, to nothing more than inductive assertions similar to the claim that "the sun will rise tomorrow morning because, after all, it has always risen every morning that we can remember." Both Mansbridge and Hardin, as well as many contemporary theorists of trust, disagree with rational choice theory conceptions of trust because they think that to trust someone is to go beyond the mere expectation that they will act in a predictable way and can be relied upon as a result. Thus, Mansbridge (1999, p. 290) offers the concept of altruistic trust, where "one trusts the other more than is warranted by the available evidence, as a gift, for the good of both the other and the community." For Hardin, trust that goes beyond mere expectations requires that the trustee encapsulate the trustee's interests in their own. In his view, "I trust you because I think it is in your interest to take my interests in the relevant matter seriously" (Hardin, 2002, p. 1). Despite the many and significant differences among these theories, the commonalities demonstrate that, outside of certain areas of economic theory or disciplines informed by them, one point around which contemporary theorists of interpersonal trust converge is that trust involves something more than simple predictions of future behaviour. As Carolyn McLeod (2020) puts it, "For most philosophers, trust is a kind of reliance although it is not mere reliance. Rather, trust involves reliance 'plus some extra factor'," such as the expectations of the truster or the motives of the trustee—or, as I will suggest in Section 4—the character of the trustee.

3. Existing Theories of Trust

In this section, I draw on the preceding to propose a typology of major descriptive theories of trust in the relevant existing literature that highlights what is relevant for discussions of trust in political leaders. First, though, it's important to note what I mean by saying these are descriptive theories of trust. The distinction between descriptive theories and normative theories, though it is often blurred, has to do with identifying the existence and nature of trust, on the one hand, and the existence and nature of justified or warranted trust, on the other. Descriptive theories of trust examine what trust is or what features comprise it. Having such a theory permits answering questions of whether and when person A does trust person B by drawing on evidence such as behavior (A does or does not leave their child with B) or self-reports (A claims they would or would not leave their child with B). Normative theories of trust examine whether person A should trust person B, looking at the conditions under which such trust is or is not justified. Having such a theory permits answering questions of whether and when person A should trust person B by drawing on evidence such as the trustworthiness of the trusted (A should trust B because B is trustworthy) or the benefits of trusting (A will benefit from trusting B). The line between descriptive and normative theories of trust appears blurry when theorists offer both together or when the descriptive theory includes normative, i.e., ethical, concepts. For example, a descriptive theory of trust often will incorporate concepts like "good will" (Baier, 1986) or "interests" (Hardin, 2002), which are normatively-laden insofar as they identify ethical concepts. However,

even with the incorporation of normative concepts, many theories of trust remain descriptive; they aim to elucidate what trust is rather than when trust is warranted.

There exist many typologies of trust, some of which are motivated, as noted in Section 1, by an apparent lack of adequate operationalizations. For example, Fisher et al. (2010) offer a typology that distinguishes among three different forms of trust judgment in order to highlight the complexities of, and difficulties involved with measuring, political trust. The first is strategic trust, informed by the work of theorists like Annette Baier and Russell Hardin, which involves "the perceived particular qualities of the trustee actor (or institution)" (Fisher et al., 2010, p. 163). This kind of trust judgment is strategic, they claim, because it "operates as a *quid pro quo*— in exchange for exposing oneself to potential harm, one gains the potential benefits of social co-operation" (Fisher et al., 2010, p. 164). The second is moral trust, informed by theorists like Eric Uslaner, which involves "the trusting characteristics of the truster" (Fisher et al., 2010, p. 163). This kind of trust judgment "comes from an optimistic world-view that presumes strangers are trustworthy" (Fisher et al., 2010, p. 166). Though Fisher et al. contend that this approach is "normative" and, following Uslaner, term it "moral trust," it is worth noting that it is still a descriptive theory of trust—it aims to articulate what trust is, rather than when it is justified— albeit one that is normatively-laden by its focus on a specifically moral attitude. The third is deliberative trust, informed by theorists like Jürgen Habermas, which involves "the presence of mechanisms to protect the truster from betrayal by the trustee" (Fisher et al., 2010, p. 163). This kind of trust judgment, in the political context, measures the extent to which an institution's structures "promote fair and equitable deliberation with citizens" (Fisher et al., 2010, p. 168).

A similar typology appears in the work of Hancock et al. (2023), whose meta-analysis is developed using a model that identifies three factors involved with interpersonal trust interactions:

> (1) Trustor factors (i.e., factors associated with the characteristics of the individual who trusts), (2) trustee factors (i.e., factors related to the characteristics of the individual in whom trust is placed), and (3) contextual factors (i.e., situational and environmental factors shared between the trustor and trustee at the time of their interaction). (Hancock et al., 2023, p. 2)

As with Fisher et al. (2010), the three areas of focus are the truster, the trustee, and the context in which the trust relationship exists. However, an additional feature that differentiates and also complicates a comparison and evaluation of these various typologies is that each focuses on, or at least uses a different language for, what they examine. Some examine trust judgments, others factors or components of trust, others forms or kinds of trust, and yet others, theories of trust. In a response to Fisher et al. (2010), Marc Hooghe makes note of this complication, suggesting that it arises in this case because the authors do not clarify the ontology of trust that they are working with. He counters that "there are not three different forms of trust [as Fisher et al. propose], but rather three different theoretical approaches to the study of trust, each one focusing on one specific characteristic of the dyad that constitutes a trust relation" (Hooghe, 2011, p. 271). Hooghe offers evidence contrary to Fisher et al.'s conclusions; citizens, on his view, do not form distinct trust judgements about political institutions and actors, but rather form a single trust judgement "as a comprehensive assessment of the political culture that is prevalent within a political system, and that is expected to guide the future behaviour of all political actors" (Hooghe, 2011, p. 275). He contends, therefore, that trust judgements are one-dimensional. Citizens use the same "logic" when assessing political institutions as they do when assessing political decision-makers, which is by referencing the background political norms or culture that are presently dominant (Hooghe, 2011, p. 275).

With such preliminaries in hand, in what follows, I suggest that we can view descriptive theories of trust as one of three types of theory. Serving as a background for this typology is the three-place relation of trust, consisting of truster, trustee, and entrusted. That is, the three-place relation of trust, which is prominent but not universal among theories of trust, assumes that trust involves a truster (person A) who trusts a trustee (person B) with some valued good or to do something (C). Different descriptive theories of trust can be usefully grouped according to which place in this three-place relation they emphasize, even if the theory doesn't subscribe to or endorse the three-place relation itself. Thus, one type of theory focuses on the valued good or project (C) that is entrusted by person A (the truster) to person B (the trustee). I call these theories entrusting theories of trust because of their focus on the valued good or project (C). A second type of theory focuses on the truster (person A). I call these theories trusting theories of trust because of their focus on the person who is doing the trusting. A third type of theory focuses on the trustee (person B). I call these theories trustworthy theories of trust because they focus on the person who is trusted.

Though the typology I propose is similar to other typologies, such as those outlined above, it remains importantly different in that it distinguishes a two-place relation of trust from both a three-place relation and a singular relation. That is, many typologies assume there exists, on the one hand, entrusting theories of trust (a three-place relation) and, on the other hand, trusting theories of trust (singular). For instance, for Devine et al. (2024, p. 660), these two formulations are taken to exhaust the relevant theoretical terrain. The former category often includes what is referred to as strategic trust, which involves a calculation of the likelihood that one will benefit from trusting someone or that the trustee will betray the trust placed in them to take care of, or do, something specific. The latter category often includes what is referred to as general trust or social trust, which involves the general dispositions and attitudes of the truster. What goes missing in these typologies—and what I am proposing here—is the existence of another theoretical approach to trust that conceives of it as being about trustworthiness more broadly. Thus, the trustworthiness theory of trust (a two-place relation) that I propose is reducible neither to calculations of risk to what is entrusted nor to the dispositions and attitudes of the truster.

3.1. Entrusting Theories of Trust

The first type of descriptive theory can be distinguished from others by its emphasis on the three-place relation itself. That is, that there is something that is entrusted to someone, or that we entrust others with something, is a necessary feature of such theories of trust. Entrusting theories of trust, which endorse the three-place relation, are endorsed by a wide range of theorists, many of whom take their cue from the work of Annette Baier, whose work in philosophy is an early engagement with the topic. Trust, Baier notes, is ubiquitous. It is all around us, like air. But, like air, we only notice it is there when it is "scarce or polluted" (Baier, 1986, p. 234). On Baier's view, trust is a three-place relation among truster, trustee, and entrusted. A person (the truster) trusts someone (the trustee) with something they value (the entrusted). When theorized as a three-place relation, trust often is characterized by a set of unique features that distinguish it from mere reliance. For Baier (1986, p. 234), this includes the goodwill of the trustee, as well as their discretion to care for what is being entrusted to them. Thus, though trust is a form of reliance, it is not mere reliance nor is it merely about expectations. Because trust involves going beyond what we can predict or expect of someone else, we place ourselves in a vulnerable position. In trusting others, we put what we care about "within the striking power of others," letting them "'close' enough to what we value to be able to harm

it" (Baier, 1986, p. 235). Thus, in trusting someone, we entrust them with some valued good and grant them discretion in interpreting how to best care for what they are entrusted with.

Though trustworthiness is relevant to entrusting theories of trust, it is always trustworthiness relative to some good or goal. A trustee may well be trustworthy in regard to one thing (e.g., to drive you to the airport) but not another (e.g., to look after your plants while you are away). Thus, trustworthiness, on entrusting theories of trust, is not trustworthiness simpliciter—a point I will elaborate in Section 4. This is a point raised also by Hardin (1999, p. 26), who claims that:

> In virtually all cases of trust, the trust is limited to certain areas. I trust you to return the money for your morning cup of coffee, but I might not trust you with an unsecured loan of thousands of dollars for your down payment on a house.

On entrusting theories, trust will only take a truster so far.

3.2. Trusting Theories of Trust

Entrusting theories of trust, elaborated above, can be usefully distinguished from what I am calling trusting theories of trust. Where the former emphasizes the three-place relation, such that some valued good or project (C) is entrusted to someone, on trusting theories of trust there is no such assumption. Instead, trusting theories of trust focus on the attitudes and behaviors exhibited by the truster. This distinction is helpfully illuminated by, if not fully captured in, the work of Eric M. Uslaner. In Uslaner's (2002) view, social trust or generalized trust, which he notes are terms often used interchangeably, ought to be distinguished from political trust. Generalized trust, he claims, tends to be stable over time, reflecting a psychological foundation that stems from socialization. Generalized trust is the "perception that most people are part of your moral community" (Uslaner, 2002, p. 26). It is this kind of trust that the standard survey question, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?," is, he argues, useful for capturing. The question asks about respondents' attitudes, recognizing that "even the most warm-hearted soul will recognize that *some* people rightfully should not be trusted" (Uslaner, 2002, p. 27). Generalized trust of this sort is distinguished by Uslaner from particularized trust, which "uses group categories to classify people as members of in-groups or out-groups" (Uslaner, 2002, p. 28). So, generalized and particularized trust have to do with the scope of one's moral community. While generalized trusters presume broad commonality on values, particularized trusters are more skeptical; they will only trust those whom they are confident share their values.

In cases of both generalized and particularized trust, where what distinguishes them is the scope of the moral community, the truster remains the unit of consideration. Underlying generalized trust is what Uslaner calls "moralistic trust," a "moral value that reflects an optimistic worldview" (Uslaner, 2002, p. 16). It is the type of value or attitude that leads a person to leave their door unlocked or to ask a stranger to watch their things when they have to step away briefly. Moralistic trust makes trust in strangers or faith in humanity possible, unlike strategic trust, which is based on the truster's previous experience with and knowledge of the trustee. Moralistic trust is built out of "the belief that others share your fundamental moral values" (Uslaner, 2002, p. 18). According to Uslaner, we can't base trust in strangers on their trustworthiness because we don't know them. We must presume that others share our fundamental moral values. Moralistic

trust is thus not an instance of trusting; arguably, it names less a type of trust than it does a type of value or a type of ethical disposition. This is why Uslaner's account of moralistic trust can properly be seen as a trusting theory of trust. It is focused almost exclusively on the person doing the trusting, picking out the value or disposition they have that tends toward exhibiting the behaviours and attitudes that comprise social or generalized trust. Thus, though Uslaner (2002, p. 21) claims that the grammar of moralistic trust is "A trusts," this overview of his position suggests that a better grammar of moralistic trust would be "A is trusting," as in "A is the sort of person who trusts," given that moralistic trust names a value or disposition possessed by the truster.

Note that, despite the name, this account of moralistic trust is nonetheless a descriptive, rather than a normative, theory of trust, as outlined above. Though we likely do want to encourage in people the value of moralistic trust and to exhibit the behaviors and attitudes that comprise social or generalized trust, particularly since it is this kind of trust that forms "an essential foundation of a civil society" (Uslaner, 2002, p. 15), it does not present a set of conditions that tell us when we should trust others. Nor does it focus at all on what it means to be worthy of trust. This is despite Uslaner's (2002) claim that "moralistic trust is a commandment to treat people *as if* they were trustworthy" (p. 18), and his claim that "moral values require *you* to behave *as if they could be trusted*" (p. 19). These are simply claims that describe the implications for the belief of someone who subscribes to or is in possession of the value of moralistic trust. As a result, as a descriptive theory of trust, this account of moralistic trust is best understood as a trusting theory of trust. It is interested, first and foremost, in the values and dispositions of the truster. It resembles what Paul C. Bauer and Markus Freitag (2018, p. 16) refer to as the "reduced statement '*A trusts'* [which] describes the idea that individuals possess some generalized situation-independent expectation."

3.3. Trustworthy Theories of Trust

Entrusting theories of trust focus on the fact that trust involves entrusting something, such as a valued good or project, to someone, typically a particular person or a person who occupies a specific role, and often in a particular context. Trusting theories of trust set aside the relevance of what is entrusted and in whom one's trust is placed, focusing instead on the values and dispositions of the truster. In contrast with these types of theory, a third type can be discerned. This third type of theory, which focuses on the trustee rather than the entrusted or the truster, can be called trustworthy theories of trust. With this type of theory, the focus shifts from relative trustworthiness (as found in entrusting theories) and also from general trusting (as found in trusting theories) to general trustworthiness.

Many theorists have seen the need for an account of trustworthiness and aimed to articulate and clarify what it entails. For example, Onora O'Neill (2018, p. 294) has suggested trustworthiness involves intelligent evaluation of an actor's claims, commitments, and competence. Katherine Hawley (2019, p. 74) has offered a "negative" account of what trustworthiness is, arguing that to be trustworthy is to "avoid unfulfilled commitments," whether that means living up to the commitments one has already made or refusing to take on commitments one is unlikely to be able to live up to. Nancy Nyquist Potter (2002, p. xv)—whose views I will return to in Section 4—has articulated a virtue theory of trustworthiness that offers an account of both "specific trustworthiness (being trustworthy with respect to some good) and full trustworthiness (the expression of the full virtue)."

However, my aim is orthogonal to these theories of trustworthiness. I am less interested in what trustworthiness itself is and more interested in what a focus on trustworthiness reveals about what trust is. In other words, what I am calling trustworthy theories of trust are still theories of trust but they are distinguished by their focus on the role of the trustee in the trust relationship. To know what trust is, one first asks what it means to be trustworthy. This approach echoes and develops a claim offered by Russell Hardin (2002, p. 53), who acknowledges that "many accounts of trust are really accounts of trustworthiness." Yet it departs from the conclusions he offers by suggesting trustworthiness need not come about as a result of internal or external inducements or some combination thereof (Hardin, 2002, pp. 28–29). It is noteworthy that Hardin (2002, p. 38) acknowledges the possibility of a two-place understanding of trustworthiness, though only in passing: "Trustworthiness might be a two-part [i.e., two-place] relation in a way that trust cannot sensibly be. I might be trustworthy with respect to any and every matter that anyone entrusts to me." However, when examining trustworthiness, which, unlike trust, he sees as an inherently moral matter and so brings moral theory to bear, Hardin restricts his analysis to deontological and consequentialist approaches. Thus, he explores how a disposition to be trustworthy can be informed by rules for behaviour (deontology) or consequences of action (consequentialism), but neglects or dismisses altogether the potential of an approach that focuses on character (virtue theory), which is the approach I will recommend in Section 4 (Hardin, 2002, pp. 36–38).

As suggested above, one way to distinguish trustworthy theories of trust from the others is by their grammar: The grammar of entrusting theories of trust are three-place (C is entrusted to B by A), trusting theories of trust are one-place (A is trusting), whereas trustworthy theories of trust are two-place (B is trusted by A). There is a small minority of theorists who defend a conception of trust as a two-place relation. For example, deploying an analogy between trust and love or friendship, Jacopo Domenicucci and Richard Holton (2017) argue in favor of a two-place relation for understanding trust, i.e., A trusts B, that is conceptually prior to the three-place relation. In making their case, they start from the notion of discretion that appears in Baier's account of trust, noting that "very often one grants discretion exactly because one doesn't know what action should be taken," and thus what would be entrusted to the trustee; "It is not that we envisage a particular action that we trust them to perform. We trust them *simpliciter*" (Domenicucci & Holton, 2017, p. 151). This explains why the reactive attitudes typical of trust, such as gratitude or betrayal, are directed at the trustee.

This suggests that Domenicucci and Holton's theory of trust as a two-place relation places primary importance on the role of the trustee. Trust, in their view, is a relation in which the trustee does live up to the trust placed in them (prompting the reactive attitude of gratitude) or does not live up to the trust placed in them (prompting the reactive attitude of betrayal; [Domenicucci & Holton, 2017]). On a trustworthy theory of trust, as I think Domenicucci and Holton's theory exemplifies, trust is defined by the truster's positive estimation of the trustee's trustworthiness. As a result, contra Uslaner, Domenicucci and Holton note that, though it might appear to focus on the truster, the standard question "generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted, or can't you be too careful in dealing with people?" is a question that focuses on the trustee instead. That is, they see this question as basically equivalent to the question "generally speaking, can most people be trusted?" This question doesn't aim to get at facts about the epistemological status of the truster but rather to get at the character of the trustee. It asks about "the other's trustworthiness rather than about one's own trusting capacities" (Domenicucci & Holton, 2017, p. 157).

4. Trust in Political Leaders

In the preceding section, I proposed a typology that distinguishes theories of trust by what feature of the trusting relationship they focus on. Some theories focus on what is entrusted, some theories focus on the values and dispositions of the truster, and others focus on the trustworthiness of the trustee. On this account, then, a trustworthy theory of trust will claim something like the following: "A finds B to be trustworthy." This is distinguished from entrusting theories of trust, which claim something like: "A trusts B with (regard to) C." It is also distinguished from trusting theories of trust, which claim something like: "A is a trusting person." In this section, my aim is to defend a pair of claims that, together, provide the reflective equilibrium noted at the outset of this article. The first claim is that existing empirical work on trust in political leaders, which highlights the relevance of character for evaluating trust, presumes a trustworthy theory of trust—a theory of trust that is worth further elaboration. The second is that a trustworthy theory of trust is well suited to carrying out (further) empirical work on trust in political leaders. In short, I suggest that a trustworthy theory of trust, which focuses on the trustworthiness of the trustee rather than on what is entrusted or on the values and dispositions of the truster, can both clarify and substantiate the theoretical foundations of existing empirical work.

The empirical work I have in mind is research that demonstrates that trust in leaders can be understood as character-based (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) and where a distinction is made between leader competencies, commitment, and character (Seijts & Milani, 2024; Seijts & Wright, 2021). This is not to say that leader competencies and commitment are irrelevant to our evaluation of political leaders, but it is to say that trust in leaders is often character-based; i.e., whether they are evaluated as trustworthy has to do with evaluations of their character, first and foremost. Even though there is little agreement about how to best define character (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004)—at least as little as there is about how to best define trust—the fact of its importance suggests that a version of a trustworthy theory of trust is being deployed in efforts to understand the nature and existence of trust in political leaders. Put differently, if character is used by trusters to estimate the trustworthiness of a trustee, as this work suggests, then trust can be said to exist when trusters make a positive estimation of the trustee's trustworthiness.

In their development of a framework for leader character in organizations, Crossan et al. (2017, p. 996) identified 11 character dimensions, each with a set of constitutive character elements: transcendence, drive, collaboration, humanity, humility, integrity, temperance, justice, accountability, courage, and judgment. As with virtue theory in philosophy, judgment (practical wisdom or *phronesis*) is central, required to "orchestrate the behavioural expression of the various character dimensions whether it be courage, humility or justice" (Crossan et al., 2017, p. 992). Crossan et al. were interested in their study to learn how character contributes to (perceptions of) leader effectiveness in organizations, and so differs from the topic at hand in two ways: The framework proposed is about effectiveness rather than trustworthiness and about leaders within business organizations rather than political leaders. However, even though the contexts of and demands on leaders differ significantly, such that the character elements considered relevant in each case will be different, it is not clear that the use of character simpliciter to conduct such evaluations likewise differs. Moreover, this framework can be, and indeed has been, usefully put to work to learn more about the relevance of character for political leadership. For example, Seijts et al. (2018) test the usefulness of the framework developed by Crossan et al. for understanding Canadians' evaluation of political leaders and de Clercy et al. (2020) use it to conduct a comparative analysis of Canadians' and Americans' evaluation of

political leaders' character, finding that "leader character is an important consideration in the vote for political leaders across the two populations" (de Clercy et al., 2020, p. 510).

A possible objection to this approach would be to claim that trust in political leaders is better captured by entrusting theories of trust, since the trust placed in political leaders will be relative to what they are entrusted with or to do. However, judgments of character are not, or at least are not necessarily, relativized in this way. Thus, to supplement the empirical work carried out by the scholars noted above, a possible guide for developing an account of the character traits involved in evaluating trustworthiness is philosophical work in virtue theory. Nancy Nyquist Potter (2002, p. 14) helpfully notes that character traits are "enduring dispositions" that prompt one to do the right thing; in Aristotle's ethical theory, these are what are called virtues. Potter (2002, p. 17) defines trust as follows: "A trusts B to be x sort of person with regard to y, where 'x' = (from A's perspective) a positive quality of character or way of performing an action and where 'y' = some good that A values." On the theory I am proposing, we can keep the first part of Potter's definition (i.e., A trusts B to be x sort of person) while dispensing with the latter part (i.e., with regard to y). On Potter's (2002, p. 5) view, the full virtue of trustworthiness involves trust that is based "in a belief not only in the other's good will toward oneself but in a belief that the other's good will is part of a more general disposition that extends beyond the context of this particular relationship." Indeed, as Julia Annas (2011, p. 89) notes, the virtuous person's character will be integrated across the various roles they inhabit: "Full, proper virtue requires that our natural dispositions be formed and guided by practical intelligence, which functions holistically over the person's life." It is not enough for a person, such as a political leader, to possess and enact different sets of virtues in their professional role and in their private lives. Character traits are enduring dispositions that carry over and across all the roles one might inhabit and can and do serve as the basis for determining trustworthiness.

As a result, this approach operates with a very thick conception of what the parties who enter into a trust relationship are like. It is thus different from rational choice theories of trust which operate with a much thinner conception. A virtue theory approach to trust also provides a counterpoint to many contemporary studies of trust. For example, Fisher et al. (2010), as outlined above, present a typology that includes strategic trust, moral trust, and deliberative trust. None of these three captures trust as trustworthiness, i.e., they do not focus on global evaluations of the character of the trustee. A virtue theory of trust that begins by focusing on trustworthiness takes us beyond a mere prediction of being treated well and beyond a prediction of being treated well that is based on an assumption or evaluation of the trustee's goodwill toward us in a particular situation or with regard to a particular good. It takes us beyond a belief that someone can be trusted because it would be mutually beneficial or because their interests encapsulate our own (Gauthier, 1987; Hardin, 2002). It also takes us beyond an evaluation that is limited to someone's professional role, i.e., their role as a political leader. Instead, it takes us to an evaluation of a person as a whole, irrespective of the role they occupy or the specific relation they bear to us. This isn't to say that their role and relations are unimportant, as these features will shape what it means for them to act virtuously in any particular instance, but it is to say that our evaluations of their trustworthiness extend beyond these roles and relations.

5. Conclusion

In the opening paragraph of this article, I suggested that the 2025 federal election in Canada might prompt us to investigate the utility of the trustworthy theory of trust I have proposed to make sense of trust in

political leaders. Though there are no doubt many varied reasons the results of the election were as they were, the trustworthiness of the political leaders involved seems worth investigation. After all, that federal election saw the election of a prime minister about whom the electorate had very little pre-existing knowledge. I have suggested that a trustworthy theory of trust, i.e., a theory of trust that focuses on the character of the trustee, can be useful for making sense of trust in political leaders. If we follow this suggestion, then there is a series of recommendations that follow. First, further theoretical work into the usefulness of virtue theory for understanding trust and into the relevance of character for understanding both trust and trustworthiness is warranted. Second, empirical studies into the nature of trust in political leaders would do well to continue asking questions that foreground character, and surveys that explore existing levels of trust would benefit from more nuanced and detailed questions that see character as a relevant feature. Initial questions could interrogate what character traits respondents see as relevant to determining trustworthiness and whether and when those character traits are thought to extend beyond the political leaders' professional role and are seen "holistically" or as "enduring dispositions" as well, such that a political leader is likely to be characterized as trustworthy not only as a leader, but as a person. Finally, normative questions that go beyond descriptive accounts of when a political leader *is* trusted to ask about when a political leader *should* be trusted can helpfully illustrate and enrich the empirical results.

Conflict of Interests
In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Cristine de Clercy (Trent University).

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