Legitimacy and Followership in National and International Political Leadership

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EDITORIAL

Followers First: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Political Leadership

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Followership and Legitimacy in Autocratic Politics

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

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

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

5. Toward a New Research Agenda

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.3. Emotional Contagion and Follower Dynamics in Leadership Perception

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

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

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

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

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

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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

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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 & Svolik, 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 (Körösényi 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 (Körösényi, 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; Körösényi et al., 2020; Körösényi & 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 ($β = 2.975$, $p = 0.000$). Similarly, those who supported the United Opposition ascribed greater emotional charisma to Márki-Zay than undecided or unaffiliated voters ($β = 2.590$, $p = 0.000$). 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 ($β = -1.312$, $p = 0.000$). Similarly, Fidesz–KDNP voters exhibited a notable degree of rejection of Márki-Zay's emotional charisma ($β = -0.928$, $p = 0.000$). 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 ($β = -0.302$, $p = 0.000$). 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***	−0.849**	−0.928***	−1.088***
	(0.100)	(0.344)	(0.104)	(0.367)
United Opposition voters	−1.312***	−1.421***	2.590***	−0.478
	(0.103)	(0.345)	(0.107)	(0.367)
Mi Hazánk voters	−0.251	0.418	−0.486**	0.041
	(0.224)	(0.869)	(0.232)	(0.926)
MKKP voters	−0.694***	0.355	0.479*	−0.559
	(0.254)	(0.613)	(0.264)	(0.654)
Closeness		0.119***		0.044
		(0.040)		(0.042)
Interaction between Partisanship and Closeness [ref.: Non- or undecided voters]				
Fidesz–KDNP voters		0.570***		−0.012
		(0.071)		(0.076)
United Opposition voters		−0.089		0.547***
		(0.075)		(0.079)
Mi Hazánk voters		−0.236		−0.140
		(0.164)		(0.175)
MKKP voters		−0.344***		0.194
		(0.133)		(0.142)
_cons	2.784***	2.733***	2.463***	2.444***
	(0.060)	(0.059)	(0.062)	(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.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

Character, Gender, and Populism: How Female Populist Voters Judge the Character of Political Leaders

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Abstract

Many voters choose to follow political leaders based on an assessment of character. However, political scientists employ relatively few tools to precisely measure character, and there is even less study of the key factors that influence such voter assessments. We employ an analytical framework drawn from the management sciences to examine how a sample of voting-age, anglophone Canadians judged the character of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during the 2020–2021 Covid-19 pandemic time frame. We propose and find support for the assertion that gender and right-wing populism are important explanatory variables. Importantly, and controlling for a host of demographic variables, the interaction of gender and populism suggests that subscription to right-wing populist attitudes may more significantly corrode character assessments among female voters than among male voters.

Keywords

character; Covid-19; gender; leadership; right-wing authoritarianism; right-wing populism

1. Introduction

Neglected for many years, the study of political leadership has been enjoying a resurgence of scholarly interest. Part of the explanation for this trend owes much to recent political and economic events, including Russia's incursion into Ukraine, the Israel–Palestine conflict, the global Covid-19 pandemic, extreme weather events and climate change, the rise of social media in politics, the return of Donald Trump to the American presidency, and growing United States–China tensions, which have served in various ways to focus attention on political leaders and the citizens who support their policies. Remarking upon the research renaissance in

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political leadership, Dandalt (2023) notes many new efforts in public sector leadership to evaluate leadership performance among recent research trends. This is true particularly in applied research studies that theorize and measure political leadership to explain success and failure on the part of leaders in capturing votes and mobilizing public support.

Our attention in the present article continues a line of inquiry we have generated, which studies the virtues and character strengths that Canadian voters desire modern political leaders to possess (e.g., de Clercy et al., 2020; Seijts & de Clercy, 2020; Seijts et al., 2018). In exploratory research, we employ an empirically derived character framework, grounded in the fields of positive psychology and management sciences, to understand how citizens of voting age value and evaluate the character of political leaders. We focus in particular on two groups of voters—female voters and right-wing populist voters—to study how they assess the importance of character to political leadership and how they evaluate the character-related behaviors displayed by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during the 2020–2021 Covid-19 pandemic time frame.

Our research contributes to the new surge in populism studies that follows the rise of populist politics around the world (e.g., Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021; Roberts, 2023; Wegscheider et al., 2023). For the most part, right-wing populism has been considered a particularly masculine and misogynist phenomenon (Snipes & Mudde, 2020). Mayer (2015, p. 391) notes that "one of the earliest and best-established findings about electoral support for populist radical right-wing parties is that they attract more men than women." Yet anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that within Canada and other democracies, some female political leaders clearly align with right-wing populist ideologies and some female voters are strongly attracted to right-wing populist candidates.

There is a well-documented gender gap among citizens in support for right-wing populist parties: male voters are consistently more supportive than female voters. This gender gap among voters is apparent when examining male and female voting patterns in many recent national and regional elections in North America, such as the 2024 election in the United States that returned Donald Trump to the presidency, the development of Pierre Poilievre's pathway to the Conservative Party of Canada leadership, and the contestation of the People's Party of Canada under Maxime Bernier in the last two federal elections. Yet despite the populism gender gap among citizens, women are key to many modern popular radical right campaigns. For example, in a 2024 *New York Times* interview, Steve Bannon—whom commentator David Brooks half-mockingly tags as "populism's grand strategist" (Brooks, 2024, para. 2)—described his movement's demographics this way:

> I would say 60 percent female. Female and over 40 years old. A lot of that, a third of them brought in by the pandemic, and the Moms for America. A ton of moms, women who didn't read a lot of books in college. They're not politically active. They had no interest. It was only later in life, as they became the C.O.O. of the American family, they realized how tough it was to make ends meet. And then they saw the lack of education, and it was really the pandemic when they walked by the computer and saw what the kids are doing. They're now at the tip of the spear. (Brooks, 2024, para. 49–50)

Despite the clear presence of women within grassroots populist organizations, at the ballot box, and at the head of legislative parties (e.g., Marine Le Pen in France and Giorgia Meloni in Italy), study of women's role in the rise of right-wing populism lags behind the broader study of populism in politics. In the present analysis,

we build upon previous research that has examined how voters adjudicate character in political leadership and the gendered aspect of such judgments (e.g., de Clercy et al., 2020; Seijts & de Clercy, 2020; Seijts et al., 2018). Further, the exploratory survey research in which we utilized the leader character framework developed by Crossan et al. (2017) revealed that individuals of voting age who self-reported high authoritarianism leanings (used as a proxy for populist attitude) generally reported lower ratings for the perceived importance of dimensions of character than those who self-reported low authoritarianism leanings; the significant correlations ranged from .09 to .24. Therefore, we further probe the effect of a populist attitude among voters on both the perceived importance of leader character and its myriad dimensions, as well as the adjudication of the character-related behaviors of a political leader—the prime minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau—during the global Covid-19 pandemic (and using a more appropriate, validated measure of populist attitude). In addition, we explicitly consider the role of voters' gender in examining these relationships. In this article, "male and female" are used interchangeably with "man and woman" to indicate gender identity.

Research has shown that character is an indispensable component of leadership—including political leadership (e.g., Barber, 1972; Clifford, 2018; Crossan et al., 2023; Laustsen & Bor, 2017; Pfiffner, 2003). Character is an important personal attribute or resource, and is foundational to judgment and subsequent behavior, from the mundane to the most challenging. We focus on the prime minister and attributions of his character by individuals of voting age for two reasons. First, the pandemic presented an important opportunity to study leadership and character. In Canada, as in many other countries, the pandemic was a singular event where much focus was on the prime minister. Individuals had ample opportunity to form beliefs about his leadership in general and his character in particular. Second, the pandemic coincided with the rise of, and perhaps generated some support for, populism.

Thus, given the context, we examined whether citizens of voting age with a strong right-wing populist attitude are distinct in their assessment of leader character. We further examined whether gender moderated the relationship between a right-wing populist attitude and attributions of character. We pursued our research questions through a survey that included a validated framework of leader character that originated in the management sciences. This framework has been applied in several studies of political behavior (e.g., de Clercy et al., 2020; Seijts & de Clercy, 2020; Seijts et al., 2023). As discussed in more detail below, using survey research to study voter attitudes, we propose and find support for the assertion that gender and right-wing populism are important explanatory variables. Importantly, and controlling for a host of demographic variables, the interaction of gender and populism suggests that subscription to right-wing populist attitudes may more significantly corrode character assessments among female voters than among male voters. These findings are new, and they suggest that female populist voters assess the character of their national leaders quite differently than male populist voters.

We structured our article as follows: First, we provide the background of our study by briefly reviewing some of the salient literatures on character, leadership and gender, and right-wing populism. Second, we describe the core propositions, the context in which we tested them and our methodology. Third, we present our findings. Finally, we highlight the significance of our results along with opportunities for future studies to build on and extend our results.

2. Literature Review

The personalization of politics and the assessment of the character of our political leaders continues to be of interest to both scholars and the public (e.g., Aaldering & van der Pas, 2018; Garzia, 2011; Metz, 2021; Pfiffner, 2003). There are two questions relevant to our analysis of political leadership. First, what dimensions of character are perceived as important to successful leadership in the political arena? Second, what inputs or behaviors do people of voting age consider when adjudicating the character of their leaders? We believe that both questions are insightful in predicting how character contributes to an individual's election to public office and executive success once in office.

We employed the virtuous character perspective in our study. Foundational to this approach to character is the scholarship of Peterson and Seligman (2004). They proposed that virtues and character strengths are the components of a positive, well-developed character. Peterson and Seligman conducted a multiyear research program in which they delineated 24 character strengths and placed them within six universally endorsed virtues: courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom. Virtues are inherently good human qualities (e.g., Newstead & Riggio, 2023; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seijts et al., 2023). Peterson and Seligman articulated that character strengths represent myriad ways—thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—to express the superordinate virtues. For example, the virtue of temperance is reflected in four character strengths: forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation. The activation of character strengths contributes to human excellence.

The virtues and character strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004), and adapted by other scholars, are often considered to be equally important to individuals across genders, cultures, religions, racio-ethnicities, communities, and socioeconomic classes (e.g., Dahlsgaard et al., 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). However, the results of recent surveys and laboratory studies bring to light subtle yet consistent differences across these domains in the importance attributed to character in leadership. For example, based on survey data from the United States and Canada, women respondents typically considered character to be more important to successful leadership in business and politics than did men, and women had higher expectations than men that individuals should demonstrate strong, well-developed character in a leadership role (e.g., Mohan et al., 2023; Seijts et al., 2021, 2023).

Along with comparing how men and women voters assess the character of their political leaders, in this study we are interested in examining gender differences among voters with respect to populist ideology. The body of political science research on populism has been growing rapidly in light of the current wave of populist politics affecting polities around the world (e.g., Betz, 2017; Mudde, 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017; Vachudova, 2021; Wegscheider et al., 2023). There have been at least four postwar waves of populist politics on the right side of the political spectrum that drew analytical attention and spawned new studies to try to explain why voters were attracted to right-wing populism (Mudde, 2019).

In the first wave, the literature built upon several foundational studies that appeared in the wake of the Second World War, as scholars sought to confront fascism's legacy (Adorno et al., 1950; Roberts, 2023, p. 14). In the second wave beginning in the 1950s, the proliferation of a "new cohort of party leaders who had little in common with neo-fascists but who did not fit the traditional conservative mold," including French politician Pierre Poujade, led many analysts to focus on party system and class factors to explain support for the populist

right (Roberts, 2023, pp. 18–19). The 1980s witnessed the rise of many radical right parties in Europe. Scholars such as Betz focused on macro-level social and economic conditions that might explain growing voter support for these groups (Betz, 1994; Roberts, 2023). Finally, the spread of populism across many polities in the 2000s has generated many new studies, some particularly focused on explaining why citizens are drawn to populist radical right (PRR) parties (e.g., Plattner, 2010). Following Mudde's 2007 definition of the modern PRR, scholars in this vein also focus on examining the leadership of populist politicians who invoke "the general will" in their quest to win the contest between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2017, p. 4; see also Roberts, 2020, p. 112).

Despite the rapid growth of studies in this area, one consistent and enduring narrative permeating the literature holds that the ideology of populism is much more appealing to male citizens than female citizens. For example, Sauer (2020) described right-wing populism as "a male phenomenon" (p. 24) and explained that right-wing populist mobilization is "a project of masculinist identity politics" (p. 24). A similar sentiment was communicated cogently by Snipes and Mudde (2020) who articulated that the PRR is considered a "particularly masculine and misogynist phenomenon," and PRR parties "are generally perceived as Männerparteien—that is, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, political parties *of* men, *by* men, and *for* men" (pp. 438–439, emphasis in original). Populist leaders are generally male and in the general academic view their supporters are fairly overwhelmingly male. The emphasis on right-wing populism's masculine leadership composition and voter attraction is a dominant approach in the extant literature, which is buttressed by studies demonstrating that, overall, female voters are consistently less supportive of populist politicians than male voters (e.g., Coffé, 2013, 2019; Gidengil et al., 2005; Mayer, 2015; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017).

At the same time, some women have risen through party ranks to lead populist parties, and there has been some scholarly attention to their political importance. Recent attention to examining the role of gender in populism's leadership and public support is found in studies of European populism (e.g., Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). In general, many European countries have a long history of populism within national politics, so the literature here is somewhat richer and more developed than for other democracies. For example, Snipes and Mudde examine the media framing of France's Marine Le Pen, parliamentary party leader of France's National Rally and the "unofficial leader of the European populist radical right" to help explain her effective leadership (2020, p. 438). Also focusing on Le Pen's leadership, by interviewing politicians and activists affiliated with the members of the French Front National party, Geva (2020) examines populism, gendered symbolism, and the radical right to suggest populism presents a stylistic performance of hegemonic masculinity which women leaders can enact successfully if combined with performances of hegemonic femininity. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) compare four case studies of right- and left-wing populist parties in Northern Europe, Venezuela, and Bolivia in terms of their representation, policies, and discourse relating to women, concluding the relationship between populism and gender politics is highly dependent on the cultural and political context in which populist actors are located.

Along with studying individual female populist leaders and the partisan contexts which envelop them, some scholars focus on studying the persistent difference in male and female voter support for PRR leaders, which is also referred to as the populism "gender gap" (Harteveld et al., 2015, p. 106). To probe what attracts female voters to vote for PRR parties, Spierings and Zaslove (2017) focus on explaining the gender gap between men and women in voting for populist parties on the right and left, arguing that socialization is an important factor. Harteveld et al. (2015) study the gap between women and men populist voters on the radical right in Western

and Eastern Europe in a systematic study of 17 countries using survey data from the 2009 European Election Studies. Examining several explanatory models for the gender gap in populist voting, they conclude it is an artifact of two influences: mediation (women's attitudes and characteristics differ from men's in ways that explain the PRR vote) and moderation (women vote for different reasons than men). Interestingly, they note women are less likely to vote for PRR parties even if they agree with them, and they conclude that the gender gap may be produced in part because "women are more strongly deterred than men by other characteristics shared by PRR parties, such as their political style, occasional association with historic violence, stigmatization by parts of the elite and the general public, or ideological issues" (Harteveld et al., 2015, p. 129).

As Dingler and Lefkofridi (2021) observe, research on the relationship between populist ideology and support from women voters remains an underdeveloped area in both theoretical and empirical terms. Our study aimed to fill part of this gap in the literature by examining how gender and populism may independently and interactively influence how voters adjudicate the character of a national political leader.

3. Propositions and Method

Drawing on some of our earlier findings and insights as discussed above, in light of some extant insights into the nature of the gender gap among populist voters, and in view of the general absence of precise knowledge about how populist ideology might influence what voters think about leader character, we undertook our analysis based on three main questions.

3.1. Proposition 1

First, we explored whether there is a robust gender gap when women and men voters assess character in political leadership. In other words, does gender matter when assessing leader character? We propose that gender does matter. This proposition is based on some of the extant literature as discussed above, such as Harteveld et al. (2015), alongside findings we collected from our earlier research. Hence, we expected that the results of our survey would indicate differences between men and women of voting age in the importance each group attributed to leader character, and also in the assessment of character with respect to Prime Minister Trudeau. In particular, we expected that women voters would value virtues and character strengths more than male voters. This is perhaps surprising, as virtues and character strengths are considered inherently good human qualities, not necessarily gendered ones.

Support for our assertion is rooted in extant studies, such as the findings obtained by Mohan et al. (2023) in three surveys and an experimental study. They examined whether the widely reported gender-based biases associated with leadership competencies and associated behaviors are also prevalent in the evaluation of character in business leadership. Mohan et al. used the empirically derived leader character framework developed by Crossan et al. (2017) to guide their research questions. The results indicated that women of working age with substantial work experience considered character and the associated behaviors to be more important in a business leadership role than did men, and women had higher expectations than men that leaders should demonstrate character-related behaviors to be successful. Scholars have speculated that such differences may be rooted in evolutionary, social structuralist, and biosocial explanations (e.g., Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). And yet the role of gender in research on virtues and character strengths has rarely been the focus of systematic research.

3.2. Proposition 2

Second, we were interested in exploring whether right-wing populism matters when voters adjudicate character in their leaders. Are right-wing populists and non-populists indistinguishable when it comes to judging character, or does populism influence the assessment of character? Again, based on earlier research findings we reported, we propose there is a durable difference between populist and non-populist voters with respect to the importance attributed to character and the actual evaluation of character-related behaviors demonstrated by leaders. For example, Seijts and de Clercy (2020) deployed a survey in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom in 2018 to investigate whether voters who held populist attitudes differed in how they judged the character of political leaders such as Justin Trudeau, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, and Nigel Farage compared to voters with non-populist attitudes. The results indicated that populist and non-populist voters in each jurisdiction possessed different attitudes about character; these differences seemed durable despite the presence of other factors such as differing socioeconomic statuses that were included in the analyses. Generally, character in political leaders mattered less to populist voters than to non-populist voters. Further, populist voters were more positive concerning the character of populist leaders such as Trump and Johnson. The effects that were obtained were small yet consistent across analyses. Seijts and de Clercy called for more research to replicate their findings and develop a better understanding of the role of populism in the attributions of character in political leadership, since the indicator they used for populist attitude was really a measure of authoritarianism leanings. Therefore, we expected that populist voters value virtues and character strengths less than non-populist voters.

3.3. Proposition 3

Third, we wondered whether there is a difference between men and women populist voters regarding their assessment of character in leaders. In other words, does being a female right-wing populist voter indicate different attitudes about character than those generally held by male right-wing populist voters? And are there distinct differences between women with low- versus high-populist attitudes? We propose that populism should make a difference in particular for women in light of extant research suggesting that populist ideology itself differentially appeals to voters based on their gender (e.g., Dingler & Lefkofridi, 2021; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017).

3.4. Method

To explore these propositions empirically, we used the leader character framework developed by Crossan et al. (2015, 2023) to understand how virtues and associated character strengths are understood by voters. Their multiyear qualitative and quantitative research program involving over 5,000 leaders from the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors culminated in the framework shown in Figure 1 in the Supplementary File. The framework has been used in a multitude of settings including but not limited to business, politics, engineering, medicine, and law enforcement.

There are two important features of the framework that have relevance to our study. First, judgment is at the center of the framework. This is because practical wisdom—or judgment—is the result of the application of the dimensions of leader character in contextually appropriate ways. For example, as Seijts et al. (2018) explained,

the wise leader understands when it is appropriate to act with vigor and when to be patient and considerate of other people's concerns; when to demonstrate humility and when to be assertive; and so forth. As a practical illustration, throughout the Russo-Ukrainian war, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has shown how to conduct oneself in a calm, composed manner, and has exemplified unrelenting determination in confronting highly challenging situations. He has inspired and mobilized collective action against Russia at an unprecedented breadth, depth, and pace by rallying Ukraine's citizens and its military, as well as galvanizing most of the international community (e.g., Murray et al., 2024; Spector, 2023). He can activate character dimensions such as transcendence, temperance, courage, drive, collaboration, humanity, and humility; therefore, his depth of character during a time of extreme crisis helps to facilitate good judgment.

Second, the dimensions are interrelated and support each other. That is, behaviors that individuals may consider to be virtuous—for example, drive or courage—may in fact operate as vices when they are not accompanied by other dimensions of character such as temperance: drive and courage can easily turn into recklessness in the absence of patience and calmness. Consider, again, the example of Zelenskyy. How does he, or any leader in a time of war, maintain such a calm demeanor—given the countless missile and mortar attacks, the witnessing of death and injury, the display of appalling acts of cruelty, and the horrible stories about family separations and children being kidnapped—and not have his judgment be compromised by anger or rage? Perhaps his transcendence allows him to remain future-oriented and optimistic that Ukraine will prevail. Or perhaps his calm is inspired by a deep sense of interconnectedness with the very people he is leading, who have yet to give up on the dream of victory. Regardless of which other dimensions of character he is drawing upon, they equilibrize the anger to ensure that his judgment is balanced and uncompromised.

4. Survey Sample and Procedures

We created a survey instrument and relied on the AskingCanadians organization—a proprietary and well-established research panel community—to administer the survey and collect the data. The survey (available from the authors upon request) was administered from July 21–August 3, 2021. Seven hundred forty-nine Canadians of voting age participated in the survey. The time to complete the survey was approximately 20 minutes. The programming of the survey allowed the respondents to complete the items over several sessions if they were interrupted.

Of the respondents, 375 self-identified as male, 372 self-identified as female, and two respondents did not disclose their gender. As well, 206 respondents were between the ages of 18–34, 276 were between the ages of 35–54, and 270 respondents were 55 years of age or older. We sampled respondents using only an English-language survey across Canada. The sample was measured against interlocking age, gender, and regional quota structures that resembled the demographic distribution of Canada.

Our sample appeared to be highly representative as it related to political affiliation. For example, we asked participants to respond to the question "If a national election were held today, which of the following best describes your political affiliation." The percentage for Liberal Party affiliation was 34.4%. This percentage mirrors comprehensive national opinion polling data at 35.1% at the time we collected the data (CBC News, 2021).

Our two main dependent variables were (a) the perceived importance of the dimensions of character for political leadership, and (b) to what extent the respondents believed that Prime Minister Trudeau demonstrated each of the dimensions of character throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Measures

5.1. Demographic Variables

We included questions about the gender, age, income, education level, place of birth, and political preference of the respondents, since these variables have been included in prior studies examining assessments of the character of political leaders (e.g., Laustsen & Bor, 2017; Seijts et al., 2023) and populism (e.g., Yildirim & Bulut, 2022).

5.2. Character

We deployed the character framework developed by Crossan et al. (2017) to explore two questions. First, we used it to assess how respondents rated the perceived importance of the dimensions of character for political leadership. Specifically, we asked the respondents to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed that the dimensions are an essential element for performing the role of prime minister. We presented the dimensions at random to minimize the threats of fatigue and order effects. We also provided the character elements in parentheses (e.g., Integrity [authentic, candid, transparent, principled, and consistent]; see Figure 1 in the Supplementary File) to enhance the clarity, transparency, and understanding of the dimension and hence facilitate a common frame of reference among the respondents. The response options ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5); the midpoint of the scale was *neither disagree nor agree* (3). The average score of the items was taken as an index of the perceived importance of character for political leadership.

Second, we used the framework to appraise how respondents rated the interrelated leadership behaviors of Trudeau. Specifically, we asked the respondents to indicate to what extent they believed Trudeau demonstrated each of the dimensions and elements of character throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. We believe that given the magnitude of the health crisis, and the considerable media attention, the respondents had a wealth of opportunities to observe the behaviors Trudeau displayed. The response options ranged from *not at all* (1) to *a great extent* (5); the midpoint of the scale was *somewhat* (3). The average score of the items was taken as an index of the character-related behaviors demonstrated by Trudeau.

5.3. Populist Attitude

We used three items from the populism scale developed and validated by Akkerman et al. (2014). A sample item is "The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people." The response options ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5); the midpoint of the scale was *neither disagree nor agree* (3). The average score of the items was taken as the measure of right-wing populist attitude. A higher score on the scale indicated a higher level of populist attitude. To confirm our populism indicator reflects right-wing populism, we checked the correlation with Liberal Party affiliation and right-wing authoritarianism, finding that our measure of right-wing populism is correlated negatively with Liberal Party affiliation and positively with right-wing authoritarianism.

5.4. Right-Wing Authoritarianism

As researchers often question whether findings about populism are in fact reflective of authoritarian attitudes (see the seminal work of Adorno et al., 1950), we included a measure of right-wing authoritarianism in our study. We used 22 items from the right-wing authoritarianism scale developed and validated by Altemeyer (1996). A sample item is "The only way our country can get through the crisis ahead is to get back to our traditional values, put some tough leaders in power, and silence the troublemakers spreading bad ideas." The response options ranged from *You very strongly disagree with the statement* (1) to *You very strongly agree with the statement* (9); the midpoint of the scale was *You feel exactly and precisely neutral about the statement* (5). The average score of the items was taken as the measure of right-wing authoritarianism. A higher score on the scale indicated a higher level of authoritarianism.

6. Results

The means, standard deviations, Cronbach alphas, and intercorrelations among the measured variables are shown in Table 1 in the Supplementary File. A confirmatory factor analysis was completed on the measures for character, populist attitude, and right-wing authoritarianism. First, the solutions for a single-factor and three-factor model were compared to investigate whether the three measures are truly distinct or measure the same latent variable. Second, we explored whether the items loaded more strongly on their corresponding construct than on other constructs we measured.

The chi-square difference test showed that there was a significant difference between the single- and three-factor model ($p < .001$), where the three-factor solution showed a better fit. Across all fit indices, the three-factor solution showed a better fit than the single-factor solution (see Table 2 in the Supplementary File). For the three-factor model, the RMSEA, SRMR, CFI, and TLI were satisfactory. Subsequent analyses, however, revealed that six items were problematic in the right-wing authoritarianism measure: Their factor loadings were low (using a cutoff score of .400). Thus, we dropped these items from further statistical analyses; the fit indices of our final three-factor model are shown in Table 2 in the Supplementary File (see revised three-factor model). The correlations among the three factors—ranging from $-.25$ ($p < .001$) to .18 ($p < .001$)—suggest that multicollinearity was not a problem. Overall, the confirmatory factor analysis indicated that our measures for character, populist attitude, and right-wing authoritarianism represent related but distinct constructs.

Our article centers around character and is based on the premise that voter attributions of character matter in political leadership. Therefore, we first explored whether the respondents considered character to be a critical element for effectively performing the role of prime minister. We investigated this question in two ways. First, Crossan et al. (2015) articulated that strong, effective leadership is a function of competencies, character, and commitment to the role of leadership. Hence, we instructed the respondents to rank the importance of competencies, character, and commitment as they related to fulfilling the duties of prime minister. We provided the respondents with a short, basic definition of competencies (skills, knowledge), character (virtues, personality traits, values), and commitment (aspiration, engagement, sacrifice) to differentiate between these components of leadership. The results revealed that 45% of the respondents ranked competencies as most important, followed by character at 42%. This finding implies that while competencies loom large in the minds of voters, they also care deeply about the character of their leaders.

Second, the results in Table 3A in the Supplementary File show the data for the perceived importance of the dimensions of character for performing the role of prime minister. The overall mean ($M = 4.24$, $SD = .71$) indicates that respondents *agree* to *strongly agree* that character is important for performing the role of prime minister. Table 3B in the Supplementary File also indicates that most respondents believe that Prime Minister Trudeau somewhat ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.03$) demonstrated the dimensions of character throughout the health crisis. He scored highest on collaboration, humanity, and temperance; and lowest on accountability, integrity, and judgment. The results in Tables 3A and 3B also show the ratings by gender (male, female) and populism (low, high). We contrasted the scores of the respondents who scored roughly in the bottom third of the populist attitude scale (score ≤ 3.00; $N = 184$) with those who scored roughly in the top third of the scale (score ≥ 4.00; $N = 288$). The results indicate that women generally rated the importance of the character dimensions higher than men; and no systematic differences in importance ratings were found between low and high populists. The latter finding was somewhat unexpected. However, both women and voters who self-reported a low-populist attitude rated Trudeau higher on the character-related behaviors displayed during the Covid-19 pandemic than men and those respondents who self-reported a high-populist attitude.

We tested our three propositions through stepwise multiple regression. The dependent variable was the assessment of the character of Trudeau by the respondents. The dimensions of character were combined into a single score. The first independent variable was the gender of the respondents (0 = male, 1 = female). The second independent variable was populist attitude. We mean-centered this variable in our regression analyses to reduce multicollinearity and improve the interpretability of the results. We included age, place of birth, education, political affiliation, income, and right-wing authoritarianism as control variables. The control variables were entered in step 1, followed by the main effects for gender and populist attitude in step 2. Lastly, we entered the gender × populist attitude interaction in step 3 to explore whether the interaction added any incremental variance. Such incremental variance would provide support for the relationship between gender and populist attitude in the evaluation of character-related behaviors. The results are shown in Table 4 in the Supplementary File and point to several important observations. Each step in our stepwise regression significantly predicted the assessment of the character of Trudeau by the respondents, with a moderate and significant increase in total variance explained by each model.

Support was found for proposition 1, which holds there is a gender gap when women and men assess character. The findings revealed that women rated Trudeau significantly higher on displaying the dimensions of character throughout the Covid-19 pandemic than men, $\beta = .12$, $t(416) = 3.10$, $p < .01$.

The results also provide support for proposition 2, namely, that populism matters when explaining how voters judge character. There was a significant main effect of populist attitude on character attributions, such that those respondents with a higher populist attitude rated Trudeau significantly lower on activating the dimensions of character than those with a lower populist attitude, $\beta = -.14$, $t(416) = -3.47$, $p < .001$.

And, lastly, support was found for proposition 3, which proposed that gender and populism interact in the assessment of character, $\beta = -11$, $t(415) = -2.05$, $p < .05$. The data revealed that women generally rated Trudeau higher on character than men; however, the assessment of character was affected more strongly by a populist attitude held by women than for men. The graphic display of the interaction is shown in Figure 2 in the Supplementary File. This finding suggests that a populist attitude is corrosive to how Canadians of voting age see Trudeau and his character—and that this effect is more distinct for women than for men.

The results in Table 4 in the Supplementary File also indicate that place of birth, political orientation, and right-wing authoritarianism were significant control variables. Respondents born outside of Canada rated Trudeau higher on character than those born in Canada. Individuals with a Liberal Party affiliation provided higher ratings of character for Trudeau than those who self-identified as non-Liberals. And participants who scored higher on the right-wing authoritarianism scale indicated they felt that Trudeau demonstrated fewer character-related behaviors than those who scored lower on the scale.

We converted the R^2 to an effect size, or f^2 (Cohen, 1992). The f^2 for our final and overall regression model was = .64. Effect sizes between .01 and .15 are considered small; between .15 and .35 are considered medium; and effect sizes above .35 are considered large.

We also explored how many populists in our sample are non-Liberals. This was both important and interesting because one could make the argument that if most respondents with a high-populist attitude were also more prone to be non-Liberal voters, then we are just tapping non-Liberals' dislike of Trudeau. The results are shown in Table 5 in the Supplementary File and indicate populists can be found across all parties. Since we included political orientation in the stepwise multiple regression, we controlled for the effect of this potential confounding variable on character attributions.

7. Discussion

Our results reinforce the notion that people of voting age consider character an essential element for performing the role of prime minister (e.g., Clifford, 2018; Laustsen & Bor, 2017; Seijts et al., 2023). As we stated earlier, an important assumption of the conceptual scheme of virtues and character strengths that Peterson and Seligman (2004) proposed—and the work that emanated from their research—is that these virtues and character strengths are universal. The results of our study suggest that character and the associated behaviors may be valued differently by observers. For example, we found an effect for gender. Perhaps men might consider the dimensions of character as a nice-to-have rather than a must-have in a leadership role in politics. Perhaps men believe these qualities detract from effective performance. Interestingly, we found no differences in the perceived importance—or desirability—of the dimensions of character as adjudicated by low- versus high-populist voters. This finding is somewhat inconsistent with the results reported by Seijts and de Clercy (2020). However, we acknowledge that this earlier study used authoritarianism leanings (low, high) in its analyses to explore differences in the evaluation of character. Our results revealed that right-wing authoritarianism and populist attitudes are related yet different constructs. Hence, we find comfort in the results we obtained. Nevertheless, we believe that our results make a strong case for examining character in context (e.g., business versus the political arena) as well as considering whether the dimensions and elements captured in frameworks of character truly generalize across demographics.

Further, our results revealed that there was a significant gap between the perceived importance of character and its myriad dimensions and how Prime Minister Trudeau measured up against these dimensions during the Covid-19 pandemic. A novel finding that we obtained was that, controlling for a host of demographic variables, the gender of respondents along with a right-wing populist attitude helped to explain the evaluation of the character-related behaviors displayed by Trudeau: men and high-populist respondents rated Trudeau lower than women and low-populist respondents. The finding that high-populist respondents

rated Trudeau lower on the dimensions of character than low-populist respondents is, perhaps, not very telling. Since high-populist voters score higher on political distrust and cynicism, it only makes sense that they approve of the sitting prime minister less (e.g., Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Thielmann & Hilbig, 2023). However, the interesting result was that among female voters, subscription to a right-wing populist attitude more significantly corroded character assessments as compared to male right-wing populist voters. These findings underscore the gendered dimensions of populist ideology and its impact on leadership evaluations. The ΔR^2 for the interaction was small; and the standardized beta coefficients for the main and interaction effects were small in magnitude as well. Nevertheless, we believe such differences may have a substantial impact on outcomes including actual vote choice (e.g., Clifford, 2018; Garzia, 2011; Johnston, 2002). This is a significant insight because it suggests that the adoption of an intense right-wing populist ideology may drive down the valuation of leader character among some voters. Such voters clearly do not assess character when assessing political leaders. Such citizens may choose to follow leaders who have other qualities beyond good character, and so this carries implications for the quality of democracy.

Our results underscore that populist voters are not solely men. Our findings demonstrate that many women voters subscribe to a right-wing populist ideology, and also that the intensely populist female voters seem to carry different attitudes than non-populist female voters. This certainly merits additional exploration to help develop a richer understanding of how populist attitudes shape the adjudication of character in leaders. The study of populist attitudes and their effect on behavior is of theoretical and practical relevance given the steady rise of populist parties and politicians all over the world (e.g., Vachudova, 2021; Wegscheider et al., 2023). Our results also reinforce and extend the findings that Mohan et al. (2023) and others obtained: demographic and socio-ethnic variables affect how individuals perceive character and hence refute, to some extent, the argument that virtues and character strengths transcend gender, racio-ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic classes, religions, intellectual traditions, and so forth. Put differently, individuals appear to interpret the same character-related behaviors—as positive as they may be—differently depending on individual and contextual variables. The character and personality traits of both the leader and the people of voting age play a role in election and vote choice. The fact that the impact of demographic variables such as the gender of voters and a populist attitude in the evaluation of leadership and character-related behaviors has received scant attention is an important omission in the literature and, consequently, warrants further study. For example, a priority in research is to uncover the specific reasons why women place a greater emphasis on character than men, and why individuals with a populist attitude appear to downplay character when assessing leaders.

8. Strengths, Limitations, and Areas for Future Research

Our study has several strengths. First, our study is interdisciplinary in nature. We combined the literature on virtues and character strengths from the areas of positive psychology and management with the literature on populism in political science. Such interdisciplinary efforts may lead to new, creative research insights and subsequent impact. Second, we used established scales to measure our variables of interest. Further, a confirmatory factor analysis revealed that our variables could be differentiated from each other. For example, right-wing authoritarianism and populism appear to be related yet distinct constructs. In other words, common method bias and multicollinearity, which are often a concern in survey research, are not likely threats for interpreting the relationships among character, gender of respondents, and a populist attitude. Third, our sample—Canadians of voting age—was representative of the electorate at the time the data were collected.

We studied an actual leader who was faced with a significant challenge: leading a nation through the Covid-19 pandemic. His actions were public, and available for Canadians to observe and evaluate daily. Fourth, we included several control variables in our analysis to tease apart the relationships among character, gender, and a populist attitude in a robust fashion.

Our study also has several limitations, which point to opportunities for future studies to further explore the relationships among character, gender, a populist attitude, and other demographic characteristics pertinent to understanding why citizens choose to follow leaders. First, the cross-sectional design of our data collection process limits the interpretations of the findings. For example, even though we collected data concerning the character assessments of Trudeau at a specific time, we cannot rule out that different demographic characteristics and news items also influenced the assessments. For example, studies are needed to deepen our understanding regarding the myriad sociocultural variables that may shape how we think about, evaluate, and reinforce character-related behaviors of both male and female leaders. This is because specific enactments of such character-related behaviors tend to be contextual, experienced in, and responsive to culture and time (e.g., Newstead et al., 2018; van Zyl et al., 2024). Second, the data we utilized were self-report data. Future studies are needed that deploy multiple sources of data as well as myriad qualitative and quantitative methods that allow for the examination of mechanisms through which the variables we studied contribute to the prediction of outcomes, and to tell an even stronger (and causal) narrative. Third, we need to ascertain the generalizability of our results. For example, our results are based on a single leader in a single country facing a unique situation. Consequently, we should proceed with caution when interpreting the results of our study. Fourth, the behavioral items for character were distinctly positive in nature. The items did not include vice states of character such as reckless, confrontational, anxious, or dogmatic. Finally, we acknowledge that our study is limited in part because we focused on right-wing populism. It would be interesting to assess the perception of the importance of character and character attributions of political leaders by left-wing populists. Nonetheless, we conclude our analysis sheds light on some key factors that drive how citizens judge the character of their political leaders, including the roles of gender and populism.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Transformational Party Leaders: Determinants of Leadership Style Assessment in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

The literature discussing leadership style identifies great variation between contemporary party leaders. While much attention is devoted to their actions, portrayal in the media, and relationships with their followers, there is limited analysis of which factors make a party leader transformational or transactional. This article addresses this gap in the literature and seeks to identify the characteristics of the party leaders or of the party to which they belong which lead party members to evaluate them on the transactional–transformational continuum. It uses original survey data from a modified version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. The analysis includes 12 political parties with parliamentary representation from Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania between 2004 and 2018. The findings illustrate that members perceive as more transformational the first leaders of the party, those who have won competitive internal elections, and those with extensive political experience within the party.

Keywords

leadership style; organization; party leaders; post-communism; transformational

1. Introduction

Party leaders continue to be important for their parties, in terms of winning elections and for governance in general (Bittner, 2011; Ceron, 2012; Lobo, 2018). In an era of highly personalized politics (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021), much depends upon the individual political actors and their characteristics rather than on institutions or collective actors. This importance is reflected, for example, in voters' orientation toward party leaders in many countries that use an electoral system based on proportional representation, in which political parties often

have prominence over candidates compared to majoritarian systems. To take another example, party leaders are also prominent in parties that use a more stratarchical form of organization in which the decision-making is distributed among the various levels and units within the party (Cross, 2018). Even in these circumstances the leaders serve as the image of the party and are recognizable by both members and voters. This also largely applies to parties springing from social movements.

Since party leaders have high influence over the internal and external lives of their parties, leadership styles are important because they reflect their abilities and approaches, and allow a better understanding of their actions (Gherghina, 2020; Harmel & Svåsand, 1993). Party leadership styles can be assessed either objectively—through a review of leaders' statements or behaviors—or subjectively, by examining the ways in which leaders see themselves, or how members, activists, and voters see them. Understanding the perceptions of members about their leaders is important because members are at the core of parties' functioning, so their views give insights into leaders' legitimacy and members' reasons to engage in the internal life of their party (Astudillo & Detterbeck, 2020; Scarrow, 2015; van Haute & Gauja, 2015). This is of particular relevance when referring to the transformational vs. transactional style of leaders. Previous research has looked at members' perceptions of their leader's charisma (McDonnell, 2016), or explained party members' perceptions of leadership styles on the transactional–transformational continuum by focusing on members' characteristics (Gherghina, 2021).

However, we do not yet know if leader or party characteristics influence members' assessment of leadership styles. This article fills that gap in the literature and aims to explain the extent to which four characteristics of leaders and two of political parties influence members in considering the leaders of their parties as being more transformational. The study covers 12 political parties with continuous parliamentary representation in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania. It disregards the new parties formed in this period which have had fewer than two parliamentary terms in office. The dependent variable of this study is the party members' assessment of party leaders on the transactional–transformational continuum (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Burns, 1978) with the help of the results of a survey based on a modified version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. The survey was conducted in May–July 2018 with a minimum of 50 party members from each of the 12 parties, distributed as follows: 35 ordinary members, 10 leaders of local branches, and five national-level officials and parliamentarians. The members had great variation in terms of age, length of party membership, and area of residence. The survey used respondents from across these levels to ensure broad coverage within each party. The party members were asked to assess the style of all the leaders of their party in office between 2004 and 2018, including instances in which the same party leader had had several terms in office. In total, the survey covered 28 party leaders with 47 terms in office; the latter is the unit of analysis in this article. The members' assessment was aggregated into a single score per party leader for one term in office and to level out party members' characteristics. The independent variables come from secondary sources such as election databases, party websites, and leaders' CVs or short biographies.

This analysis helps in advancing the broader study of leadership in two directions. First, it informs about the organizational implications of the leader effect and personalization. In line with existing studies, the article seeks to understand political leadership from the followers' perspective (Metz, 2024) in the specific setting of several contemporary political parties. In doing so, it complements leader-centric studies reliant on the analysis of styles and traits that are rarely comparable across leaders and political settings. Second, the analysis draws on leadership studies that point to the internal dynamics of parties as organizations rather

than approaching party organizations from a structurally static perspective. Contemporary personalized or movement parties have reshaped the dominant leadership structure and expectations, bringing transformational leadership styles to the fore, while transactional leadership is more suited to the organizational structure and policies of earlier mass, catch-all, or even cartel parties. This development can be linked directly to the contemporary challenges faced by political parties which include a rapidly changing media environment, people's disconnection from society, legitimacy question marks, or, in some cases, lower party membership numbers.

The next section reviews the literature about transformational and transactional leadership and formulates several testable hypotheses about the potential leader and party causes for variation in members' assessment of leadership styles. The third section presents the data and methodology used in the article. The fourth section includes the results of the analysis and sets out their interpretation. The conclusions summarize the key findings and discuss the major implications for the broader fields of leadership studies and party politics.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

The leadership literature has dedicated significant attention to outlining the features of transactional and transformational styles. Burns (1978, 2003) set out the foundations of the theory by identifying some general differences between the two styles. In his view, the two styles are at the opposite ends of a single continuum that characterizes the relationship of leaders with their followers. At one end, transactional leadership focuses on short-term goals to be achieved through an exchange of resources. These leaders provide their followers with something they want, and require something else in return. At the other end of the spectrum, transformational leadership is more visionary, moves beyond short-term goals, and presupposes a leader–follower relationship based on an understanding of needs. These leaders proactively engage their supporters, attempting to create a shared vision and sense of purpose within the organization.

Transactional leadership is reactive, rests on the principles of reward and punishment, makes a direct appeal to the self-interest of individuals, and is characterized by an asymmetric relation in which leaders communicate their expectations or requirements to followers (Bass, 1997; Foley, 2013; Gherghina, 2021). Transactional leadership involves rewarding the followers deemed to meet these expectations (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), or punishing them when this does not happen. Management by exception is another characteristic, which means that leaders take corrective action when the interaction with their followers raises problems (Howell & Avolio, 1993).

Transformational leaders increase awareness of what is right, good, or important, motivate followers to achieve, intellectually stimulate those around them, foster high moral maturity, and inspire followers to go beyond their self-interests and aim for a greater good (Avolio et al., 1991; Bass, 1997). Transformational leadership provides idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. These aims mean that leaders act in an exemplary way, motivate and inspire their followers, support and are sensitive to followers' input, question assumptions, and promote non-traditional thinking (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013; Bass & Avolio, 1997, 2000; Boehm et al., 2015; Tracey & Hinkin, 1998). Such leaders also pursue their followers' self-development, which can be achieved with the help of feedback to improve performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Tracey & Hinkin, 1998).

Over time, scholars have agreed that transactional and transformative leadership styles are a matter of scale rather than a dichotomy, and that leaders can be both transactional and transformational rather than adhering only to one type of characteristics (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Bass, 1985, 1999; Lowe et al., 1996). They can start with transactional features and take transformational actions, or the other way around.

These leader–follower relations have been translated to the realm of party politics by several studies. For example, Kitschelt (2000) illustrates the transactional vs. transformational characteristics of leaders by referring to their clientelistic offers or the programmatic linkages that are driven by a logic of exchange with asymmetric transactions vs. charisma that inspires and leads followers to believe that their leaders can create a better future. The personal leaders in patrimonial or business-firm parties such as Silvio Berlusconi for Forza Italia or Andrej Babiš for ANO in the Czech Republic are illustrative examples of politicians with transactional characteristics (Cirhan & Kopecký, 2020; Musella, 2018). The leaders with charisma and personal attributes that lead to the development of their parties and inspire followers, such as Viktor Orbán for Fidesz and Gábor Vona for Jobbik, both in Hungary, and Umberto Bossie for Lega Nord in Italy, resemble transformational leaders (McDonnell, 2016; Metz & Oross, 2020).

This article tests the extent to which the characteristics of leaders and of political parties can shape members' assessment of leadership styles. The leader-level variables are the following: being the first leader of the party, the competitiveness of intra-party leadership selection, the level of experience in the party, and holding a high public office. The party-level variables are government incumbency and electoral loss. To start with the leaders' characteristics, the first argument relates to the first office holder of this position. Newly-formed political parties are appealing to the electorate due to their perceived distance from the traditional approaches of established parties, new issues, emphasis on specific ideological elements, strategies of mobilization, or freshness in their manner of doing politics, rather than the policy content (Lucardie, 2000; Sikk, 2012). The people who join these parties as members are motivated by the party values and policies, but also by the leader (Poletti et al., 2019). The first leaders of political parties are usually (one of) their founders, and members may view them in a positive light. Such leaders can be considered inspiring and motivational due to the ideas they support, their decision to embark on a difficult and uncertain venture, and their wish to break away from the existing ways of doing politics. These leaders often have the task of building party organizations to enhance sustainability in the electoral arena (Cirhan, 2023), which means that as leaders they serve as examples for the members on how to go beyond self-interest and aim for a greater good. Members' mobilization and recruitment can often happen through intellectually stimulating discourses and actions to raise awareness. All these factors indicate that founder-leaders may be perceived as more transformational than other party leaders.

The second argument is that the competitiveness of party leadership selection can influence perceptions of leadership style. In most political parties with minimal commitment to intra-party democracy, leaders are selected at the party congress, at a meeting of their territorial representatives, or through the involvement of party members in primaries (Cross & Pilet, 2016). The competitiveness of the leadership selection process comes through the number and strength of competitors. Competitive contests often lead to rich exchanges of ideas between the candidates, and expose party members to alternative avenues for action in the short and medium term. The candidates must persuade a majority of voters of their abilities and capacity to lead the party. In this context, transactional strategies based on rewards or appealing to members' self-interest are very unlikely to be successful electoral strategies. Instead, competitive elections can be won by candidates

who can act as role models that members can identify with, articulate a vision, promote high performance expectations for the party, and emphasize the importance of party goals. All these behaviors are traditionally associated with transformational leadership (Podsakoff et al., 1990). The uncontested selection of leaders, also known as "coronations," can lead to more unpredictable leadership styles because of the lack of pressure on the candidates.

Leaders with extensive political experience are more competent in handling problems, mainly because they can acquire skills and develop abilities in the range of contexts associated with the positions they have occupied (Baturo & Elkink, 2022). The political experience of party leaders allows them to accumulate skills, networks (gaining human, social, and cultural capital), and reputation that enable them to raise and maintain the support needed to lead their party and continue in office (Claessen, 2023). Party leaders with party experience in various decision-making positions are familiar with how the organization works, what its members desire, what motivates them, and how things can be handled effectively. Leaders who have previously occupied positions in the party's central office—the unit that is usually in charge of the day-to-day coordination of activities and decision-making in the party—know the ropes and understand the collective identity of the party. Such leaders are well placed to identify new opportunities, to intellectually stimulate the members, and to inspire them into a stronger mobilization that is less motivated by self-interest. Equally importantly, these are positions in which their qualities are visible to larger audiences (Gherghina, 2020; McDonnell, 2016).

Holding a national public office at the same time as the party leader position could influence perceptions of leadership style (Bankov, 2020). The leader is the face of the party when occupying a public office, which can provide several benefits if the person is popular among voters, but can also make unpopular public office holders more vulnerable (Uchiyama, 2023). For example, a prime minister can make appointments that motivate and show individual consideration for some party members; they can develop networks and connections that transcend partisan lines and thus broaden the horizon of their party; and they can use their political capital to inspire and ensure the development of their party. All these mean that party leaders in public office may be proactive in leadership style. Party leaders without a high public office such as prime minister or speaker of parliament usually have fewer resources, may lack a firm understanding of the political system beyond their party, and might adopt a reactive approach. Following all these arguments, I expect that members will perceive as more transformational:

> H1: The first leaders of the party.

> H2: Leaders selected through competitive selection processes.

> H3: Leaders with extensive experience in party positions.

> H4: Leaders who hold a high-level public office at the same time.

Moving on to the party-level variables, incumbency is one potential driver for members' perceptions of leadership styles. Governing parties prioritize policy-making (Mair, 2008) and are constrained by the need to respond to salient problems in society (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). Internal conflicts hinder parties' performance in office, cast doubts over their competence, and compel parties to use supplementary resources. As such, the leaders of governing parties might pursue unity to avoid these costs, and a

transformational leadership style could achieve this task. Evidence from firm behavior indicates that transformational leadership can ensure team coordination and performance by encouraging members to adopt a cooperative approach (Zhang et al., 2011). Similarly, party leaders may adopt—or be perceived to adopt—this leadership style to manage conflicts efficiently within the party.

Electoral defeat is one important driver for party change in terms of organization and/or ideology (Harmel & Janda, 1994; Margalit et al., 2021). Party leaders often pay the price after electoral defeat: They may decide to resign as a sign that they are taking the blame for the poor performance. The new leaders then have the difficult task of resurrecting the party, rethinking some of its key policies, lifting members' spirits, and putting the party on the road to better results in the next election. A transformational leadership style is most appropriate to achieve these goals because it focuses on the group's needs and can ensure broader members' mobilization for swift recovery. In addition, an electoral loss can push members to see the post-defeat leaders through wishful-thinking lenses. The members may form beliefs about these leaders based on the need for transformation rather than on evidence or real behavior. Consequently, I expect that members will perceive the leaders of their party as more transformational when:

H5: The party is in government.

H6: The leader was elected after a loss in the national legislative elections.

3. Data and Method

To test these hypotheses, this article combines primary and secondary data. The primary data is used for the dependent variable, which is the positioning of party leaders on the transactional–transformational range. The data comes from a survey conducted in May–July 2018 among members of 12 political parties in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania. The questionnaire included 21 multiple-choice questions that were asked from the members' point of view. In the original Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, leaders were asked to evaluate their own style. This article uses a third-party assessment approach in which the classic self-perception Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire is replaced by the opinion of party members from several levels of the party. From each political party, a minimum of 50 members (and a maximum of 70) were targeted. While this number may seem small, surveying party members in these countries is challenging because many members are suspicious, and some parties want the approval of the leader to proceed. The answers were recorded either through an online link to the survey or by the research assistants, who met the members face-to-face or spoke with them over the phone. When comparing the answers recorded with these methods there was no observable bias in terms of completion rate or skipping questions.

These three countries were selected due to their similarities in terms of post-communist political systems, multi-party systems, frequent alternation of parties in government, and great variation between the parties in terms of leadership change. Moreover, the limited social embeddedness of political parties and their historical tradition of prominent leaders provide more space for charismatic leadership, which is often transformational (Hlousek, 2015). The analysis includes the parties that were regularly present in their country's parliament between 2004 or the year of their formation and 2018. All the survey respondents had been party members since 2004. The starting point of this study coincides with important progress made by Bulgaria and Romania in terms of their democratic performance. Both countries improved their international

ranking score around that year (Polity IV or Freedom House). Also, 2004 marked the first election cycle after the formal start of the accession negotiation for the EU accession in all three countries. The study includes the following parties: Ataka, Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), and Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) in Bulgaria; Fidesz, Jobbik, Politics Can Be Different (LMP), and Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) in Hungary; Liberal Democratic Party (PDL), National Liberal Party (PNL), Social Democratic Party (PSD), and Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) in Romania. These parties had a total of 28 different leaders between 2004 and 2018. Some of those leaders had several terms in office, and the questionnaire asked the members to assess the leadership style of each of them. Interim or very short terms in office of the same party leader were removed from the analysis. Also, the survey pre-test indicated that party members did not distinguish between the different terms in office of some leaders, so these were collated. For example, Antonescu was elected as party leader in 2009, then re-elected in 2010 and 2013, but the members gave the same assessment for all three terms. As such, his terms were merged into one. When a party had had several leaders, several observations were recorded. For example, LMP had a dual leadership, so the party members were asked to assess the leadership style of each leader.

The unit of analysis is the assessment of a party leader per term in office. The units of observation are nested in parties. The assessment is the average of the members' assessment in the party, which is coded as an interval variable with values from 1 (*purely transactional*) to 5 (*purely transformational*). Each respondent answered 21 questions about leaders, with answers on a 5-point ordinal scale ranging from *not at all* (coded 1) to *always* (coded 5). For example, one item reads as follows: "Helps the members to develop." For each item there is a score between 1 and 5, with *purely transactional* and *purely transformational* as the extremes. The dependent variable is the average of these scores.

The first leader of the party (H1) is a dichotomous variable coded 1 for instances in which the leader is assessed by the members as having that characteristic. Competitiveness of leadership selection (H2) is measured on an interval-ratio scale using the indicator of competitiveness (Kenig, 2009). Uncontested elections are coded 0. The experience of the leader in party positions prior to becoming a leader (H3) is a count variable reflecting the number of years in any party position. Holding a public office (H4) is a dummy coded 1 if the party leader occupies the office of prime minister or speaker of parliament, and 0 otherwise. Party incumbency (H5) is a variable coded between 0 if the party had always been in opposition in the national parliament during the leader's term in office and 1 if the party had been in government. Since party leaders' terms do not necessarily coincide with election terms, the share of presence in government is calculated. For example, if a leader's term in office was three years, during which time the party was half in opposition and half in government, then the coding is 0.5. Electoral loss (H6) is measured on an interval ratio scale as the difference in votes between the elections, relative to the average electoral result (Gherghina, 2014). All the variables were standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing them by the standard deviation for each value.

The study uses bivariate and multi-level regression models to test the effects of leader-level and party-level variables. There is evidence of clustering. The chi-square test for the likelihood ratio test vs. logistic model is statistically significant, which gives support to the use of a multi-level as opposed to a single-level model. The model containing randomly varying intercepts fits significantly better than a single level where the intercepts are not randomly varying. However, the value of the estimated intraclass correlation coefficient is at the lower limit of the conventional threshold that indicates substantial clustering (0.05). The checks for

multicollinearity show no reason for concern. The highest value of the correlation coefficient between the independent variables is 0.46, between holding an office (leader-level variable) and incumbency (party-level variable). In some countries (e.g., Germany and the United Kingdom) the leader of the party forming the government automatically becomes the country's prime minister. However, this is not the case in any of the countries investigated here, which is one reason why the correlation between the two variables examined here is moderate. Another reason is that some parties included in the analysis were minor government coalition partners, while the prime minister belonged to another party.

3.1. Robustness Checks

The statistical analysis could not include many variables because the number of cases is very low ($N = 47$). The potential effect of several other variables that could have had an impact on members' assessment were tested, such as the party leader's age (count variable), party leader's gender (0 for female and 1 for male), whether the leaders were involved in scandals during their terms in office (0 for no scandals and 1 for various types of scandals), whether the leader came after a complete or partial term in office of their predecessors (0 for incomplete and 1 for complete), party size (count variable as a share of seats), and party age (count variable). The effects of these variables are presented in the Supplementary File, and the results indicate that none of them are either strong or statistically significant.

4. First Leaders, Competitive Elections, and Party Experience

There is great variation in the assessments of party leadership styles across the 47 terms in office. Figure 1 presents a comparison of the scores for the units of observation, listed on the horizontal axis. The vertical axis shows the scores on the transactional–transformational continuum, ranging between a minimum of 2.36 and a maximum of 4.50 with a mean of 3.60. Most party leaders are far from the transactional end of the spectrum: The lowest value is for Lyutvi Mestan from DPS in Bulgaria, an unsurprising assessment since Mestan abruptly ended his term in office as leader after being removed by the central office and expelled from the party due to his visible pro-Turkish-government stance after a controversy with Russia. At the same time, no leader is too close to the pure transformational end of the range either: Here, the highest value is for the second term covered in this analysis of Ahmet Dogan from DPS in Bulgaria. Dogan's three terms as leader covered by this study are ranked the highest, which may explain the DPS members' perceptions of Mestan as a transactional leader. In addition to his behavior in office, there could also have been a strong contrast with Dogan who was considered highly transformational. The second most transformational party leader is Orbán: All his terms in office covered by this study are ranked as highly transformational. He was assessed as increasingly transformational from one term to another, which could explain why he remains the uncontested leader of the party at the time of writing, six years after the survey was conducted. The distribution of leadership styles across parties shows no country bias.

The relatively high values in Figure 1 could be also due to the theoretical bias of the models that makes transformational leadership both socially and politically desirable, while transactional leadership is less attractive to members. Nye (2008) criticized Burns' conceptualization of transformational leadership because it has values attached to the concept instead of being free from normative judgments. Khanin (2007) argues that the approaches used by Bass also formulate normative expectations. These biases can be reflected in party members' individual expectations towards the leader of their party. There may be a strong
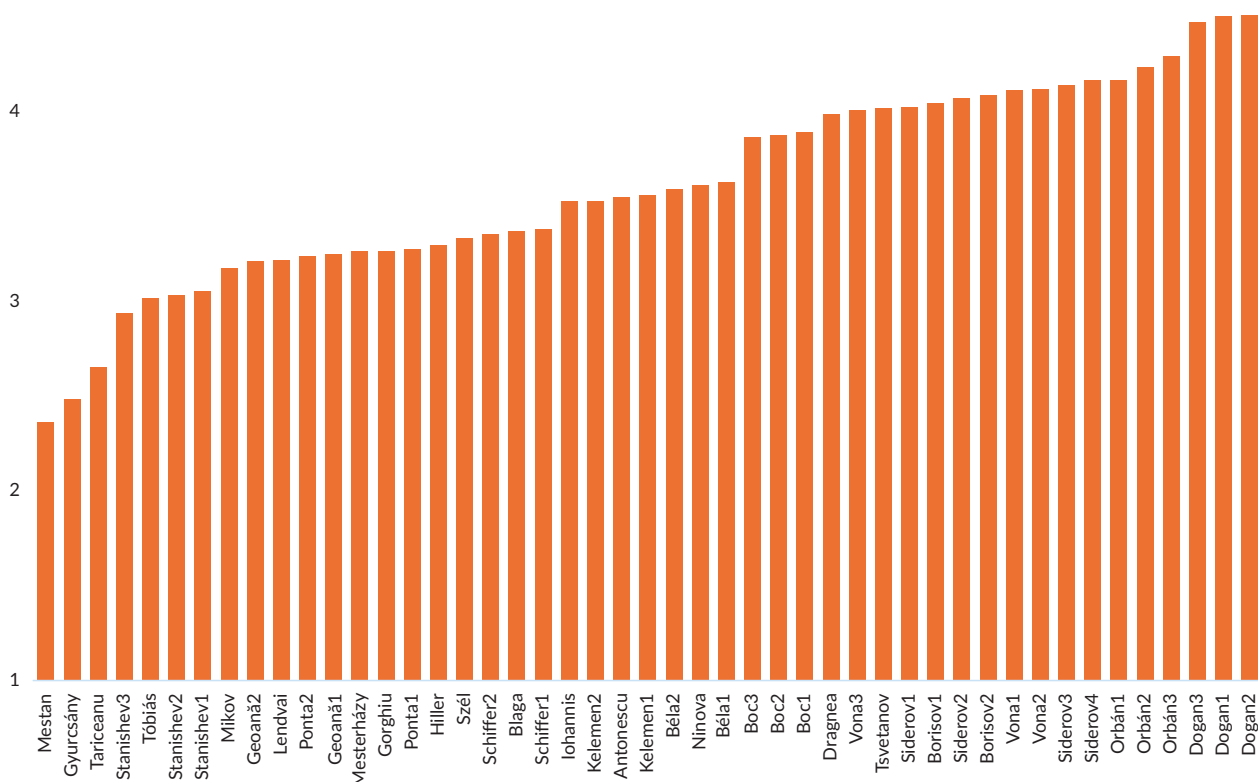
Figure 1. The assessment of party leadership styles in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania.

projection of positive attributes when it comes to a representative member of the community (Haslam et al., 2020), such as a party leader.

Party members differentiated between the terms in office and assessed leaders with various degrees of transformational leadership. Some of the leaders were assessed as more transactional over time. For example, Sergey Stanishev had three terms in office as leader of BSP in Bulgaria in the period covered by this study, and the members rated his first term as the most transformational and his last term as the least transformational. He was at the lower end of the continuum, i.e., on the left-side bars in Figure 1. Emil Boc for PDL in Romania and Gabor Vona for Jobbik in Hungary had similar trajectories, both starting at much higher levels of transformational leadership. Like Orbán, other leaders were assessed as becoming more transformational over time; for example, Boyko Borisov for GERB in Bulgaria and Volen Siderov for Ataka in the same country. In most instances, party members assessed the leadership style of the same party leader in the same way, with some notable exceptions such as those of Stanishev or Vona.

Table 1 presents the correlation coefficients between the assessments of party leaders and each of the variables included in the hypotheses and the variables for robustness checks. The results of the correlations indicate strong support for H1, with the first leaders of the party being considered more transformational than other party leaders. The competitiveness of elections (H2) appears to make a difference, but in the opposite direction than was theoretically expected: Leaders who had had coronations were more transformational than those

Table 1. Bivariate correlations with assessment of party leadership styles.

Level	Variable	Correlation coefficient
Leader	First leader	0.54**
	Competitiveness	−0.18
	Party experience	0.10
	Public office	−0.09
Party	Incumbency	−0.11
	Electoral loss	0.23
Robustness		
Leader	Scandals	−0.24
	Age	0.08
	Gender	0.15
Party	Incomplete term	0.13
	Size	−0.11
	Party age	−0.52**

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

who had faced strong competition. The correlation with electoral loss (H6) is also counterintuitive, as the party leaders elected after an electoral gain were assessed as more transformational.

Among the variables included in the robustness checks, the leaders facing fewer scandals and those from newer parties were assessed as more transformational. Both of these results are intuitive, because involvement in a scandal can hardly be associated with the idealized influence, inspirational motivation, or intellectual stimulation that characterize transformational leadership. Party age is highly correlated (0.66) with being the first leader and competitive elections, and was not included in the statistical analysis due to reasons of collinearity. As such, the leaders of the newer parties were considered more transformational for the reasons outlined in the causal mechanism presented for H1.

The statistical analysis is presented in Figure 2 and must be taken with a grain of salt due to the low number of cases. The regression coefficients lend support to the first three hypotheses, according to which the leaders who were the first to run their party, those who reached office after more competitive elections, and those with high party experience prior to becoming leaders were considered more transformational by the party members. The strong positive effect of the first leaders was visible in Figure 1, where many of the leaders with high transformational scores were founder-leaders of their parties: Siderov for Ataka, Dogan for DPS, and Tsvetanov for GERB in Bulgaria; and Orbán for Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary. Borisov, who also scored highly, was one of the GERB founder-elites but could not run the party until 2009 because he was the mayor of Sofia. In terms of competitiveness, Boc for PDL in Romania was assessed as more transformational after facing strong competition in the 2011 internal elections against Vasile Blaga, who became the party leader in 2012 after Boc resigned, following the party's poor results in the 2012 national legislative elections. The effect of party experience is unsurprising if we look at the profiles of the two top leaders according to the members' assessment (Dogan and Orbán), both of whom had many years of activity in the party before the terms in office covered by this study. At the other end of the spectrum, closer to a transactional profile, leaders such as Mestan for DPS in Bulgaria, Mesterházy for MSZP in Hungary, and Geoana for PSD and Gorghiu for PNL in Romania, all had limited party experience before becoming leaders.
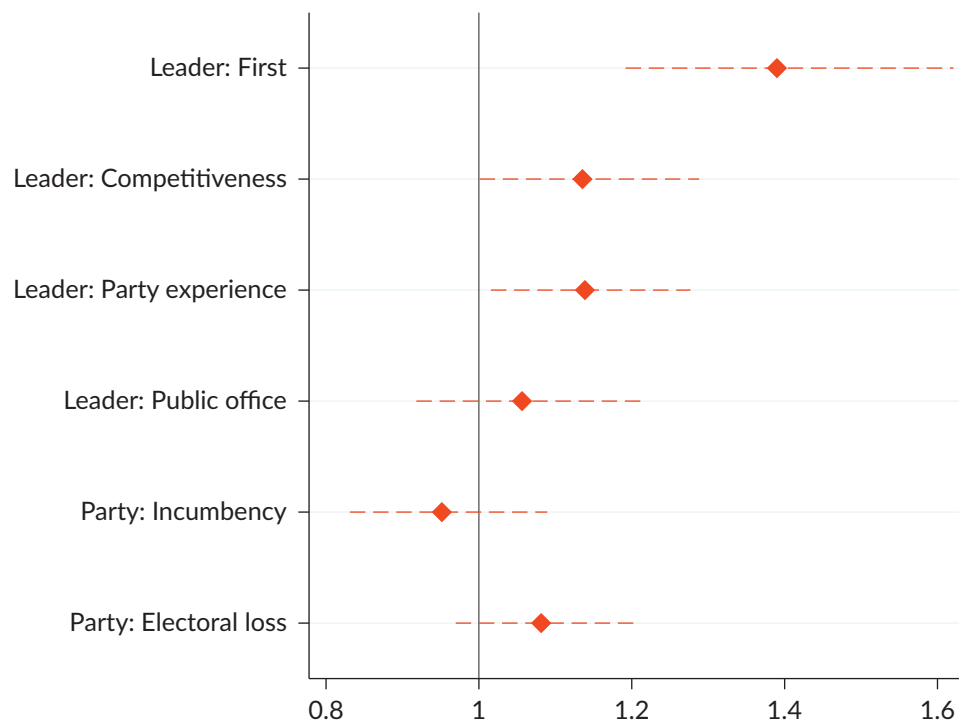
Figure 2. The effects on leadership style assessment.

The presence of party leaders in public office does not influence members' assessment of their leadership styles. One possible explanation for this is that once in public office, some leaders devoted less time to party development and communication with members, focusing more on their cabinet work. The party can come second, especially when the prime minister must fight to govern with a parliamentary minority or cohabit with the president (Raunio & Sedelius, 2020; Samuels & Shugart, 2010). For example, Calin Popescu-Tariceanu was the PNL leader between 2004 and 2009 and prime minister between 2004 and 2008. He was forced to navigate the deep waters of a minority government after the coalition partners left (PDL, at the time called Democratic Party, PD). Tariceanu also conflicted with the country's president, a former PD president, with whom he had to cohabit until the elections in 2008. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that PNL's members considered him to be more transactional in his party activity.

The leadership styles are similar for parties in government and for those in opposition. One possible explanation could be that the leaders of opposition parties engage in a more transformational style in an attempt to reshape the organization and inspire their followers to create a long-lasting collective identity. Finally, party leaders who take office after an electoral loss of votes or defeat are not considered more transformational. This result may confirm previous findings that electoral defeat is acceptable provided the party remains in office (Bille, 1997). Party leaders may not be perceived as transformational after poor performance at the polls if the general state of the art does not change much. The corollary is that party leaders will not be assessed as more transactional even if they get better results in elections. For example, Mikhail Mikov became party leader of BSP in Bulgaria in July 2014, just a few months before a dramatic loss for the party, compared to the national legislative elections in 2013. As Figure 1 indicates, he was considered one of the most transactional leaders among those studied here. Kornelia Ninova won the internal elections against Mikov in May 2016, roughly 10 months before the BSP registered a very good

electoral result, comparable with the one it achieved in 2013. Ninova is average in terms of transactional leadership among the leaders in this study, well above Mikov.

5. Conclusions

This article has aimed to identify the sources of party members' assessment of leadership style. It analyzed several leader- or party-level variables in order to explain the variation in assessment across 12 parties in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania between 2004 and 2018. In doing so, it is one of the few studies to have investigated party members' attitudes toward their leaders. The findings illustrate that the first leaders are perceived as more transformational by the members. The first leaders are among the elites who established the party, which means that they started from scratch and their behaviors have been crucial to organizational development and electoral performance. The first leaders establish an emotional connection with the members, especially with those who joined the party at its inception. Another result is that competitive internal elections encourage members to assess their leader as more transformational. Contestation and opposition pushes candidates to produce novel ideas that address existing problems and improve the party's functioning (Aylott & Bolin, 2017; Kenig, 2009). Such ideas can hardly be confined to transactions, since such approaches would be liable to receive criticism. Finally, this study illustrates that those leaders with extensive political experience within the party are considered more transformational, perhaps due to the higher level of professionalization over time, which is associated with several types of behaviors and performance (Chiru, 2020). None of the other variables influence the members' assessment of leadership styles.

These results have broader implications for leadership studies and party politics beyond the three cases examined here. These cases are illustrative for the universe of new democracies in which transformational party leadership is likely to occur, which means that their conclusions are generalizable to other, similar contexts. One of these implications is that the members' assessment of leadership styles is rooted in actions and features that are healthy for the party. Internal competition, unless it is taken to the extreme and generates severe conflict, can be a good way to produce meaningful changes in the party and promote competent people to key decision-making positions. Experience is often associated with expertise and understanding of how the party can be taken forward. A second empirical implication of these results is that members' views of transformational leadership can occur in any party, irrespective of their government or opposition status, size, or electoral gains. This means that political leaders with transformational styles are not only found in specific party profiles. Nevertheless, this study illustrates that leaders who establish a party have a head start in terms of members' assessment.

Two limitations of this study are the relatively low number of political parties covered in the analysis and the potential memory bias in assessing leaders who were in office in the 2000s. Further research can address both issues by increasing the number of political parties, either in these three countries, since many new parties have emerged since the survey was conducted, or in other Central and Eastern European countries. A members' survey on recent party leaders would enrich the universe of cases and go some way to resolving the memory bias issue. Including parties with several co-leaders could shed new light on the meaning of transformational leadership styles and be able to identify differences between those who share power within a party. Equally importantly, future studies could compare the perceptions of party leadership styles among party members and voters in order to understand whether the two groups converge. Such studies could add knowledge about the effects that leadership styles could have on occupying public office, which would explore

a reverse causal relationship than those pursued in the present article. Moreover, comparisons between public evaluations of party leaders and of prime ministers in office would be useful to understand whether the party position is more prominent or whether the highly visible government role of party leaders shapes the public's assessments of leadership.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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ARTICLE

Leader Effects in an Era of Negative Politics: Who Has a Negativity Bias?

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Abstract

It is well known that voters' evaluation of candidates on leadership traits influences their overall candidate assessment and vote choice (i.e., leader effects). It remains unclear, however, whether positive or negative leader trait evaluations are most influential. We argue that especially in current-day political reality—in which ideological and affective polarization are skyrocketing and the political climate is fueled with negativity, high levels of incivility, and negative campaigning—the negative leader effects outweigh the positive ones. Moreover, we expect this negativity bias in leader effects to be conditioned by partisanship and political dissatisfaction. To test these expectations, we triangulate multiple studies. First, we use data from a multi-country election survey to examine the relation between perceived leadership traits of real candidates and party preferences, providing observational evidence from the US, the Netherlands, France, and Germany. Second, focusing on the causal mechanism, we test the negativity bias in a survey experiment among American voters. Here, we manipulate how leadership traits (competence, leadership, integrity, empathy) of a fictitious candidate are presented in terms of valence (positive, negative), and test the impact of these cues on voters' candidate evaluations and vote choices. The findings indicate, as predicted, that negative leader effects influence voters most strongly. Thus, the role of party leaders is mainly a push instead of a pull factor in elections. Additionally, we show that partisanship and political dissatisfaction seem relevant only for candidate evaluations, not for vote choice. This article pushes the field of candidate evaluations forward by examining the dynamics of the negativity bias in leader effects in an era of negative politics.

Keywords

candidate evaluation; leader effects; negativity bias; political polarization

1. Introduction

The year 2024 had been anticipated as a "record year" of elections around the globe—even before some momentous elections were announced, such as those that took place in Iran or France in the summer (Masterson, 2023). What most elections have in common is that the political leaders running for office play an important role. This applies to those in executive office (such as the president of the US, the prime minister of Poland, or the president of the European Commission), their challengers/opposition leaders (such as Claudia Sheinbaum in Mexico or Keir Starmer in the UK), or other party leaders (such as far-right party leaders in France and Austria). A long line of existing research shows that leaders can be decisive in vote choice and election outcomes in democratic elections (e.g., Bittner, 2011; Garzia et al., 2020; Lobo & Curtice, 2014).

Amid the rise of polarization in democratic societies, both with respect to party positions (e.g., Lönnqvist et al., 2020) and citizen attitudes (e.g., Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008), as well as affect (e.g., Garzia et al., 2023; Iyengar et al., 2012), we ask whether leader effects apply more to those who decide for a specific party because of their leader or more to those whose vote choice is based on their antipathy towards another party's leader. More specifically, we examine whether positive or negative leader trait evaluations are most influential for overall leader assessment and vote choice. Based on the theory of a negativity bias, which is shown to exist in politics, media, and society (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Soroka, 2014), one would expect the negative leader effects to outperform the positive ones. Past research has tried to tackle this question, but the findings remain largely inconclusive with some showing that positive leader effects are strongest while others finding the opposite (e.g., Aaldering et al., 2018; Aarts & Blais, 2013; Nai et al., 2023).

Our article seeks to shed new light on this issue making a three-fold contribution to the literature. First, theoretically, we argue that the presumed negativity bias in leader effects is conditional upon partisanship and political dissatisfaction. Conceptually, we conceive of leader effects as professionally relevant traits (Kinder, 1986) being decisive for both candidate evaluations and vote choice. Second, methodologically, we triangulate cross-sectional survey data from the US, France, the Netherlands, and Germany with experimental data from the US, to assess the causality of our assumptions. Third, substantially, we provide new empirical evidence on the dynamics of the negativity bias in leader effects, which is particularly important in current times of negative politics, with increased polarization, incivility, populism, democratic backsliding, and the popularity of politicians with dark personality traits.

2. Theory

A large scholarship on candidate evaluations and leader effects shows that party preferences and vote choice are influenced by voters' assessment of the political candidate (e.g., Aarts et al., 2013; Bittner, 2011; Garzia, 2013; Lobo & Curtice, 2014; Mughan, 2000). The exact scope of this impact is debated and, for instance, it is argued to be dependent on political institutions (e.g., Curtice & Hunjan, 2013), partisan de-alignment (e.g., Kriesi, 2012), or time—for instance, some research on the personalization of politics states that the strength of the impact of the perceptions of candidates on the vote decision has increased over time (e.g., Garzia et al., 2020; Hayes & McAllister, 1997; McAllister, 2007; but see also Clarke et al., 2004; King, 2002; Nadeau & Nevitte, 2013). That notwithstanding, the underlying claim that voter's evaluations of candidates affect their party preferences and voting behavior is hardly disputed. These

candidate evaluations, oftentimes effectuated through media coverage of politicians (e.g., Aaldering, 2018; Aaldering et al., 2018; Bos et al., 2011; Gattermann & de Vreese, 2017; Gattermann & Marquart, 2020), mostly strengthen pre-existing party preferences. However, they also can incentivize voters to deviate from their previous preferred party. As these candidate perceptions are somewhat short-term and dynamic attitudes, especially compared to the (relatively) stable socio-demographics, partisanship, and political ideology, they help explain individual-level electoral volatile behavior (Miller & Shanks, 1996; Stokes et al., 1958; van der Meer et al., 2012).

Much of the research on leader effects focuses on the leadership traits of politicians: Voters' perceptions of the leadership qualities of a politician are used as a heuristic for the overall evaluation of the politician (Greene, 2001; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013; Shabad & Andersen, 1979). Thus, whether voters perceive a political candidate as, for instance, knowledgeable, trustworthy, or decisive, matters for their evaluation of that politician and in the end, their vote decision. There is a lively scholarly discussion on which traits, or trait dimensions, are specifically important for candidates (see for instance Aaldering & Vliegenthart, 2016; Bittner, 2011; Greene, 2001; Simonton, 1986). The common denominator in all these trait-typologies is that they focus on (behavioral) characteristics of politicians that are related to the quality of their performance as a politician. As per the seminal work of Kinder (1986), for instance, voters prefer their representatives to be competent and empathic and show leadership and integrity. Thus, voters' positive assessments of political candidates on these leadership traits are rewarded, shown by increased positive candidate evaluation and electoral popularity of the candidate's party (i.e., positive leader effects). Likewise, voters' negative assessment of candidates on these leadership traits is penalized and tends to result in less favorable candidate evaluations and a lower likelihood to vote for the candidate's party (i.e., negative leader effects; e.g., Aaldering et al., 2018; Bittner, 2011; Ferreira da Silva & Costa, 2019).

Although both the positive and the negative leadership trait evaluations are expected to affect voters, these effects are most likely not equal in strength. It is unclear, however, whether political leaders are mainly a pull factor to convince voters for support, or a push factor into the camp of the political opponent. Thus, what remains unknown is whether positive or negative leader effects most strongly affect voters.

A long line of psychological research shows the existence of a negativity bias (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992): stronger impact of negative information than positive information. The general asymmetry in the effects of positive and negative information can be translated to the political realm as well, as stronger effects for negative information compared to positive information are found in response to campaign information (Lau & Pomper, 2002), economic information (Soroka, 2006), and candidate information (e.g., Lau, 1982). It has been shown, for instance, that positive information about political candidates is less influential on the overall perceptions of candidates and vote choices than negative candidate information (e.g., Holbrook et al., 2001; Klein, 1991; Lau, 1982; Nai et al., 2023; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013; Soroka, 2014). In line with the negativity bias, thus, one would expect that negative leadership trait evaluations have a stronger effect on candidate favorability and vote choice than positive leadership trait evaluations.

The current-day political reality is likely to exacerbate this negativity bias in leadership effects. Western democracies experience a rise in various forms of polarization. On the one hand, from an ideological standpoint, parties tend to move towards more extreme positions and further away from each other (i.e.,

party polarization; e.g., Lönnqvist et al., 2020; Pierson & Schickler, 2020), which coincides with an increased ideological distance among their electorates (i.e., attitude polarization; e.g., A. I. Abramowitz, 2010; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008). On the other hand, we see a stark rise in *affective* polarization, unfolding as deepening hostile feelings experienced by voters towards the out-party and their supporters (e.g., Garzia et al., 2023; Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020). These various forms of polarization have led to a coarsening of the political debate with an oppositional and conflictual style. We witness, for instance, a rise in negative campaigning and attack politics among political elites (e.g., Nai, 2020), employing a more aggressive style, for instance using more uncivil language (e.g., Rossini et al., 2021). Relatedly, we see a rise of political leaders with dark personality traits (e.g., Nai & Maier, 2024) and the popularity of ring-wing populist parties, employing a negative worldview in which the "evil" elites harm the "pure" people (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018; Mudde, 2007, 2019) and which capitalize on (and instigate) fear among their followers, for instance against immigrants (e.g., Wodak, 2015). The grim environment in which political elites operate spills over to the public at large, which shows increased incivility in political discussion online (e.g., Rossini, 2022) and an increased willingness to support hostility towards out-group politicians and voters, or even accept physical violence against political opponents (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). Furthermore, the overwhelming negativity in the political sphere leads to increased negative partisanship (e.g., Medeiros & Noël, 2014) and negative voting, i.e., a vote choice mainly driven by negative assessment of the out-party than by positive evaluations of the in-party (e.g., Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2022a, 2022b; Weber, 2021).

We believe that this harsh political climate also affects leader effects. Voters encounter predominantly negative political information, including about political candidates, and they are thus primed to be affected more strongly by this negative information in their overall candidate evaluation and vote decision. This is in line with Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2021) who show that average candidate evaluation scores have decreased over time, while the association between out-party leader dislike and vote choice have become stronger over time. All in all, in the current political environment, we expect that voters are more likely to be affected in their overall candidate assessment and vote choice by negative leader trait evaluation than by positive leader trait evaluation. Thus, we hypothesize:

> H1: Negative leader trait effects on overall candidate evaluation and vote choice are stronger than positive leader trait effects.

Although the existence of a negativity bias in numerous information processes seems today incontrovertible, when it comes to *leader effects* the literature finds mixed and inconclusive results. Surprisingly, not all studies testing the asymmetrical effects of positive and negative leadership evaluation on overall candidate assessment and vote choice point in the same direction. Some studies show that, as expected, negative information about candidates has a stronger impact (e.g., Holbrook et al., 2001; Klein, 1991; Lau, 1982; Nai et al., 2023; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013; Soroka, 2014), while others show the opposite and find that positive information about a candidate actually has a stronger effect on voters (e.g., Aaldering et al., 2018; Aarts & Blais, 2013; Wattenberg, 1991). A likely explanation for these puzzling conflicting findings is that the negativity bias is not universal, but rather some citizens will be affected more strongly by negative candidate information while others follow a different dynamic. Thus, not everyone is likely to be affected by negative and positive candidate information in a similar way. In this article, we examine the two most likely intervening factors: partisanship and political dissatisfaction.

First, the most obvious conditioning factor for variation in the strength and scope of leadership effects is partisanship or pre-existing ideological preferences. The leader effects literature has overwhelmingly shown that party preferences are not only a result, but also a driver of candidate assessments (e.g., Page & Jones, 1979). Thus, due to reciprocal causality, partisan attitudes muddle the examination of leader effects. Some scholars have attempted to isolate the leadership effects from partisanship, for instance by taking an instrumental variable approach (Garzia, 2012) or by considering exogenous mediated leader effects (Aaldering, 2018; Aaldering et al., 2018; Gattermann & de Vreese, 2017). However, the conditioning role of partisanship for the *negativity bias* in leader effects was not directly tested, while there are strong reasons to suspect that it plays an important role.

Motivated reasoning research indicates, broadly speaking, that citizens engage in biased information processing. Because the defense of pre-existing beliefs and dispositions is an innate goal in humans, any new information that is at odds with such beliefs (e.g., any type of persuasive or incongruent message; Vargiu et al., 2024) is by default much more likely to be resisted and discarded (Kunda, 1990). It is, for instance, shown that partisans display more scrutiny towards arguments of opposing parties than towards arguments of their own party (Taber & Lodge, 2006) and that support for a proposed policy plan increases when the opposing party advocates against that policy (Bolsen et al., 2014). This process is mainly studied in relation to partisan beliefs (e.g., Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006), although more recently, motivated reasoning based on other belief systems is studied as well (e.g., Boyer et al., 2022; Landrum et al., 2017). If we apply this psychological mechanism to positive and negative leader effects, it implies that negative information about an out-party candidate is more easily accepted than negative information about the in-party candidate—because the latter is at odds with pre-existing positive beliefs about the in-party candidate. Likewise, positive information about the in-party candidate will more easily be believed than positive information about an out-party candidate. These differentiating processes will result in a stronger negativity bias in leader effects for out-party politicians than for in-party politicians. Therefore, we expect:

> H2: Negative leader trait effects on overall candidate evaluation and vote choice are stronger than positive leader trait effects, particularly for out-party candidates compared to in-party candidates.

Second, we argue that besides partisanship, political dissatisfaction should also be a conditioning factor in leader effects. In Western democracies, we see an increase in political dissatisfaction, political cynicism, and political distrust over time (e.g., Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Dalton & Weldon, 2005; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). These trends are related to the stark rise in popularity of populist parties (e.g., Rooduijn et al., 2023), for which anti-elitism is a core element of their ideology, which fuels the dissatisfaction among their supporters with the political establishment (e.g., Mudde, 2007; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Among the non-populist voters, there might be dissatisfaction with the political system due to the anti-democratic and authoritative turn these established democracies make as a result of the increasing success of right-wing populist parties (e.g., M. J. Abramowitz et al., 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019. This indicates that citizens increasingly have a baseline negative pre-disposition towards politics and become discontent with the current political system as a whole. This political dissatisfaction towards politics and the political system seems to spill over towards the politicians operating in them, as research shows that the traits voters associate with politicians, in general, are becoming increasingly negative over time and include things like power-hungry, sleazy, and manipulative (Van der Pas et al., 2024).

We argue that these negative attitudes towards politics and politicians affect how voters are impacted by positive and negative leadership trait information. As with the conditioning factor of partisanship, motivated reasoning is likely to play a role in the moderating impact of political dissatisfaction on the negativity bias in leadership effects as well. As discussed previously, motivated reasoning theory predicts that citizens are less likely to accept and more likely to counterargue information that does not align with pre-existing beliefs (Kunda, 1990). As politically dissatisfied voters have an overall negative assessment of politics, parties, and politicians in general, new negative information about politicians will be more easily accepted by them, compared to politically satisfied citizens. Simultaneously, new positive information about political leaders is likely to be reviewed with more scrutiny, as this does not match their existing beliefs about the political realm. Thus, we expect that the negativity bias in leader effects is most pronounced for politically dissatisfied voters, leading to the following hypothesis:

> H3: Negative leader trait effects on overall candidate evaluation and vote choice are stronger than positive leader trait effects, particularly for politically dissatisfied voters compared to politically satisfied voters.

In the following, we test our hypotheses in two different studies. We deal with them one after the other before we discuss the results in detail.

3. Study 1

3.1. Data

Study 1 seeks to gather initial empirical evidence of the extent to which (perceived) candidate leadership traits influence overall candidate evaluations and voting decisions through observational data. Study 1 relies on data from four post-electoral online surveys collected on a sample of the respective voting populations in the aftermath of the respective presidential elections in the US ($N = 1,064$; 2020), and national parliamentary elections in Germany ($N = 999$; 2021), the Netherlands ($N = 1,007$; 2021), and France ($N = 1,165$; 2022). As age, gender, and macro-region of residence were used as quota factors, the samples are representative on these aspects. Participants were drawn from traditional, actively managed, double-opt-in market research panels and received an email invitation informing them about the research purpose and expected length (8–10 minutes). No deception was involved.

3.2. Methods and Measures

Our key independent variables are constructed based on the so-called "Kinder battery" (Kinder, 1986), encompassing leadership, empathy, competence, and honesty. Respondents are asked to rank party leaders on each of these four traits on a scale from 1 = *not well at all* to 5 = *extremely well*. First, we have computed a unified "core" measure that averages, for each candidate, their scores on the four traits, ranging from 1 to 5. This measure forms a coherent construct, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.91. Second, to test the asymmetric effect of negative and positive candidate perceptions, we adapt the empirical strategy employed by previous studies (Aarts & Blais, 2013; Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2021; Lau, 1982; Nai et al., 2023; Soroka, 2014), computing two separate dummy variables for each candidate tapping into whether they are perceived by respondents as either scoring high or low on our trait index. Accordingly, trait positivity is coded 1 for all

respondents reporting values in the 66–100th percentiles of the original trait index variable, and 0 for all other respondents. Trait negativity is coded 1 for all respondents reporting values in the 0–33rd percentiles of the original variable, and 0 for all others. Thus, individuals in the 34–65th percentile are coded 0 on both trait negativity and trait positivity variables. This enables us to capture all of the variance in candidate trait evaluations but allows for data on one side of neutral to have a different effect than data on the other side of neutral. Unlike previous studies, we chose a cut-off point criterion based on the distribution rather than on values of the answer scale (i.e., the mid-point) due to the stark differences between candidate scores on traits and the highly skewed nature of the distribution of observations, particularly among partisans.

Our dependent variables are respondents' thermometer evaluations of party leaders (0–100 scale in the US, divided by 10 to recode into a 0–10 scale; and 0–10 scale in France, Germany, and the Netherlands) in each of the countries and their vote choice. Our analyses include as baseline controls the strength of identification with a given party (if any) on a 4-point scale (0 = *not identified with that party*; 1 = *only a sympathizer*; 2 = *fairly close*; 3 = *very close*). The data does not include a direct measure of political satisfaction on the individual level. To gauge this political attitude, we constructed a variable measuring the mean score assigned by respondents to all parties in their respective country, as a proxy for overall individual-level party system support.

We have stacked the data matrix so that the unit of analysis is located at the party*respondent combination. In other words, every respondent appears in the dataset as many times as there are parties for which the respondent evaluated party leaders' personality traits. We test our hypotheses by means of OLS regression with country fixed-effects (to account for cross-country variation) and robust standard errors clustered at the respondent level (to account for the stacked structure of the data). Results are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

3.3. Results

Model 1 in Table 1 shows that, even after controlling for ideological proximity and strength of party identification, perceived trait positivity bears a significant positive relationship with respondents' thermometer assessment of the party leaders. Results do not change if we re-estimate the model with a logistic specification and vote choice as dependent variable (see Model 1 of Table 2). Thus, we find full support for positive leader effects. Model 2 of Table 1 replaces trait positivity with trait negativity and shows that also the latter is significantly correlated with the dependent variable, although with an opposite sign. As before, results are the same if we replace the dependent variable with party vote choice. Thus, the results show a negative relationship between respondent's leader trait assessment of party leaders and their overall candidate evaluation and vote choice, thereby fully supporting the expectation of negative leader effects.

To test the reciprocal effect of both trait positivity and negativity, we have included in Model 3 of Table 1 both variables and compared the respective regression coefficients. They remain statistically significant and signed in the expected direction. When compared, we observe that trait negativity's coefficient is slightly larger in magnitude. Moreover, tests for nonlinear combinations of estimators show that the difference in (absolute) magnitude between the two effects is statistically significant ($b = 0.30$, $p = 0.000$), thereby offering empirical support for a negativity bias in leader effects (H1). For example, the baseline predicted value for a candidate scoring 0 on trait positivity and negativity is 4.42; for a candidate scoring 0 on trait negativity and 1 on trait positivity it is 5.78; but for a candidate scoring 1 on trait negativity and 0 on trait positivity it is 2.75—thus, the relative effect vis-à-vis the baseline value is substantially stronger for trait negativity.

Interestingly, the magnitude of the difference between the two effects is even higher if we use vote choice as dependent variable. And here as well, the test for nonlinear combinations of estimators shows that the difference between the effects is significant ($b = 0.45$, $p = 0.041$). For example, the baseline predicted value for a candidate scoring 0 on trait positivity and negativity is 0.16; for a candidate scoring 0 on trait negativity and 1 on trait positivity it is 0.20; but for a candidate scoring 1 on trait negativity and 0 on trait positivity it is 0.10.

To test the differential effect of trait positivity and negativity on in-party and out-party leaders respectively, we resorted to two interactions between both our trait measures and respondents' declared strength of identification with the parties. Model 4 of Table 1 shows a positive significant interaction between trait positivity and strength of partisanship, but no significant negative interaction between trait negativity and strength of partisanship. Thus, we do not find evidence of a particularly strong negativity bias in leader effects for out-partisans. Model 4 of Table 2 also shows no significant results for vote choice, thereby lending no support for H2. Note that the results hold even if we employ a categorical instead of a linear specification of strength of partisanship (see Table A3 in the Supplementary File).

Lastly, we employ a similar strategy to tap into whether more dissatisfied voters are actually those for whom trait negativity matters more than trait positivity. Results in Model 5 of Table 1 show no statistically

Table 1. Effect of leader trait assessment on candidate evaluation.

	Model 1 B/(SE)	Model 2 B/(SE)	Model 3 B/(SE)	Model 4 B/(SE)	Model 5 B/(SE)
Trait positivity	1.96*** (0.06)		1.36*** (0.05)	1.28*** (0.06)	1.53*** (0.17)
Trait negativity		−2.18*** (0.06)	−1.66*** (0.06)	−1.66*** (0.06)	−1.26*** (0.17)
Trait positivity#PID				0.20*** (0.06)	
Trait negativity#PID				−0.17 (0.19)	
Trait positivity#System-level support					−0.04 (0.04)
Trait negativity#System-level support					−0.10* (0.04)
Party feeling thermometer	0.58*** (0.01)	0.56*** (0.01)	0.49*** (0.01)	0.50*** (0.01)	0.47*** (0.01)
Strength of party identification (PID)	0.22*** (0.03)	0.33*** (0.03)	0.24*** (0.02)	0.10 (0.06)	0.29*** (0.02)
System-level support (mean all parties)					0.13*** (0.03)
Constant	0.75*** (0.05)	2.44*** (0.07)	2.09*** (0.07)	2.13*** (0.07)	1.54*** (0.15)
N (respondents)	2,739	2,739	2,739	2,739	2,739
N (observations)	14,114	14,114	14,114	14,114	14,114
R-squared	0.66	0.67	0.69	0.69	0.69

Notes: The dependent variable in this table is party leader feeling thermometer on a scale from 0 to 10 and presented are the regression coefficients; PID is strength of party identification; all models include country fixed-effects and robust standard errors clustered at the respondent-level in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 2. Effect of leader trait assessment on vote choice.

	Model 1 B/(SE)	Model 2 B/(SE)	Model 3 B/(SE)	Model 4 B/(SE)	Model 5 B/(SE)
Trait positivity	1.33*** (0.10)		0.89*** (0.10)	0.89*** (0.12)	0.95** (0.30)
Trait negativity		−2.14*** (0.19)	−1.61*** (0.20)	−1.36*** (0.21)	−1.81** (0.56)
Trait positivity#PID				−0.01 (0.13)	
Trait negativity#PID				−0.23 (0.18)	
Trait positivity#System-level support					−0.19 (0.07)
Trait negativity#System-level support					0.02 (0.14)
Party feeling thermometer	0.27*** (0.02)	0.28*** (0.02)	0.24*** (0.02)	0.24*** (0.02)	0.36*** (0.02)
Strength of party identification (PID)	1.84*** (0.06)	1.87*** (0.06)	1.61*** (0.20)	1.89*** (0.12)	1.73*** (0.06)
System-level support (mean all parties)					−0.41*** (0.06)
Constant	−3.68*** (0.10)	−2.52*** (0.14)	−2.83*** (0.15)	−2.86*** (0.16)	−1.18*** (0.28)
N (respondents)	2,479	2,479	2,479	2,479	2,479
N (observations)	13,000	13,000	13,000	13,000	13,000
R-squared	0.64	0.64	0.65	0.65	0.61

Notes: The dependent variable in this table is party vote choice and the models present logistic regression analysis and log odds coefficients; PID is strength of party identification; all models include country fixed-effects and robust standard errors clustered at the respondent-level in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

significant interaction between trait positivity and system-level support, while the interaction is significant and negatively signed in the case of trait negativity and system-level support. Model 5 of Table 2 shows no evidence of a moderation effect based on political dissatisfaction on the relationship between trait positivity/negativity and vote choice. Thus, the negativity bias in leader effects is stronger for politically dissatisfied voters (H3) regarding candidate evaluations, but not vote choice. Tables A4 and A5 in the Supplementary File show a robustness analysis in which the four leadership traits are included as separate variables, instead of the combined trait assessment. The results are consistent with the main analyses. Our robustness tests also include a re-estimation of the models for both candidate evaluations and vote choice (Model 3 from Tables 1 and 2) on a country-by-country basis. The results largely corroborate the findings from the main analysis (see Tables A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File).

So, the results of Study 1 show that there is a negativity bias in the relationship between leadership trait assessment on the one hand and candidate evaluation and vote choice on the other. Contrary to our expectations, these relationships do not seem to be conditional upon partisanship and political dissatisfaction. As these findings are based on survey data from four countries with varying political systems and a diverse set of politicians, the external validity of the results is strong. However, due to the

observational nature of the data, the causal mechanism could not be tested. Especially given the reciprocal relationship between leader evaluations and party preferences (see e.g., Garzia, 2012; Page & Jones, 1979), these findings cannot tell us whether these leadership traits assessments caused overall candidate evaluation and vote choice. This is where Study 2 comes in, which employs a survey experiment with the main goal of providing more certainty of the causality in the negativity bias in leader effects, while controlling for partisanship and pre-existing candidate evaluations by design. So, while the generalizability of these findings is more challenging, as Study 2 only examines the particular case of the US, its internal validity is strong.

4. Study 2

4.1. Data

Study 2 employs an experimental design testing the causality in the negativity bias in leader effects. We fielded a survey experiment in March 2021 among a convenience sample of US respondents through the online data platform of Amazon's MTurk. Although MTurk samples are not representative of the US population, they perform reasonably well compared to other convenience samples (Berinsky et al., 2012). The original sample consisted of 1,829 participants, but after exclusion based on failing an attention check or English not being their first language, we have a final sample of 1,705 participants. A priory power analysis with G*Power indicates that to detect small-to-medium effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.25$) with an independent sample t-test with 5% Type I error and 80% power, almost 1,800 participants are warranted. This means that our final sample is slightly underpowered. The sample consists of 50.9% men and liberals are overrepresented (48.8% Democrats; 23.4% independents; 27.8% Republicans), which is usual for this type of sample.

4.2. Design

We developed a 4*2 (plus control) post-test-only survey experiment, in which the leadership traits (competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy; Kinder, 1986) and the tone in which they are discussed (positive/negative) of a fictional candidate are manipulated. We created nine mock newspaper interviews with a fictive candidate—independent Paul Bauer—who is running for a seat in the US House of Representatives for Minnesota's 9th congressional district (note that Minnesota only has 8 districts). Participants were randomly exposed to one of the nine vignettes, which were all set up as a short introduction about Bauer by the journalist, followed by the beginning of the interview. Leadership traits were cued by a short descriptive statement by the journalist in the introductory text: "Bauer has a reputation of being dynamic and…" (for the positive trait evaluations)/"dynamic, but…" (for the negative trait evaluations). Furthermore, as a second leadership trait cue, the candidate was asked to describe which "fictional character" he would like to be "for just a single day." The idea of this second cue is that respondents would recognize the personality of the candidate by association with the personality of known fictional characters (see also Nai et al., 2023). The ninth vignette (control) did not include any descriptors related to leadership, nor the "fictional character for a day" question, but instead comprised a neutral paragraph in which the candidate introduced himself. To avoid any associations with leadership traits, the candidate only talked about his place of residence and family constellation. We are aware, however, that this might still make him relatable to some voters and potentially lead to slightly more favorable evaluations. Table 3 presents all leadership trait cues and Appendix B in the Supplementary File shows the full text of all vignettes.

Table 3. Leadership trait cues in the experiment.

Trait	Tone	Adjective	Fictional character	N
Empathy	Positive	Caring	I always had a fascination for sympathetic characters. So I would perhaps choose Jon Snow from *Game of Thrones*; he always cares about his friends and takes into account people's feelings. A fictional character with similar traits is Mary Poppins, which I also appreciate.	191
Empathy	Negative	Cold	I always had a fascination for emotionless anti-heroes. So I would perhaps choose Geoffrey Baratheon, the cruel infant king from *Game of Thrones*; he is unburdened by the feelings of other people and does what is best for him. A fictional character with similar traits is Draco Malfoy from the Harry Potter franchise, which I also appreciate.	184
Competence	Positive	Competent	I always had a fascination for smart characters. So I would perhaps choose Tyrion Lannister, the clever and astute dwarf from *Game of Thrones*; he has a great mind for strategic thinking and a strong professional ethos. A fictional character with similar traits is Sherlock Holmes, which I also appreciate.	193
Competence	Negative	Ineffective	I always had a fascination for amateurish anti-heroes. So I would perhaps choose Robert Baratheon, the unfortunate king from *Game of Thrones*; though he wasn't particularly skilled and his reign had little success, he still got to sit on the iron throne. A fictional character with similar traits is Homer Simpson, which I also appreciate.	187
Integrity	Positive	Trustworthy	I always had a fascination for honorable characters. So I would perhaps choose Ned Stark, the virtuous lord from *Game of Thrones*; he was an honest leader and always strived to do the right thing. A fictional character with similar traits is Harry Potter, which I also appreciate.	192
Integrity	Negative	Insincere	I always had a fascination for conniving anti-heroes. So I would perhaps choose Cersei Lannister, the manipulative queen from *Game of Thrones*; she reaches her goals by lying and deceiving and does whatever it takes. A fictional character with similar traits is the lead character in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, which I also appreciate.	194
Leadership	Positive	Decisive	I always had a fascination for strong-willed characters. So I would perhaps choose Daenerys Targaryen, the brave queen in *Game of Thrones*; she never hesitated to tackle problems upfront and was not afraid to make difficult decisions. A fictional character with similar traits is Black Panther, which I also appreciate.	198
Leadership	Negative	Indecisive	I always had a fascination for insecure anti-heroes. So I would perhaps choose Theon Greyjoy, the meek and faltering boy from *Game of Thrones*, who wanted to be a real leader but did not have what it takes. A fictional character with similar traits is Michael Scott from *The Office*, which I also appreciate.	184
Control	—	—	I was born in Minneapolis but grew up in a small town just outside Duluth. I studied at the University of Minnesota, where I met my wife, with whom I have two children. We are now living closer to St. Cloud, and I also really like it here. Although I admit I sometimes miss the lake, we live in a lively area, which makes up for it.	182

The candidate in the vignette was described as an independent politician, to neutralize partisanship by the experimental design. The downside of this is that we cannot test H2, which assumes that the negativity bias in leader effects is larger for out-partisan candidates. To test this expectation, we would have needed to double the sample size and manipulate the partisanship of Bauer as Democrat or Republican. Unfortunately, due to monetary constraints, this was not feasible. The hypotheses and the protocol for this study were pre-registered (see https://aspredicted.org/t5x2-m5cg.pdf) and the project received full ERB approval from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Randomization checks indicate a successful indiscriminate distribution of respondents over the nine vignettes according to their gender, age, education, partisanship, interest in politics, and populist attitudes.

Manipulations were fully successful. Respondents exposed to one of the experimental vignettes were significantly more likely to agree that the article describes the traits of the candidate than respondents in the control group (7-point scale), $t = -6.44$, $p < 0.001$, and that it was useful to form an idea about the qualities of the candidate (7-point scale), $t = -6.38$, $p < 0.001$. Respondents exposed to a negative trait vignette were significantly more likely to agree that the candidate was portrayed negatively in the article compared to the control group (7-point scale), $t = -27.32$, $p < 0.001$, and respondents in the positive trait vignettes were more likely to agree that the candidate was portrayed positively in the article than those in the control group (7-point scale), $t = 21.59$, $p < 0.001$. Lastly, exposure to the negative (positive) specific trait condition leads to lower (higher) ratings on evaluating the candidate on that specific trait, compared to the control condition. For example, respondents who read the vignette with positive empathy cues for Bauer also rated him higher on empathy than respondents in the control group. This was the case for all four traits and both positive and negative evaluations.

4.3. Measures

The dependent variables are a thermometer score for Bauer (0–100) and the propensity to vote for him if they got the chance to do so in an election (0–10). The models additionally control for the socio-demographics gender (1 = female), age, and level of education. Furthermore, they control for (strength of) partisanship (7-point scale, 0 = *strong Democrat*, 6 = *strong Republican*), political interest (4-point scale, 0 = *not at all interested*, 3 = *very interested*), and populist attitudes (based on the scale by Akkerman et al., 2024; 1 = *low populist attitudes*, 7 = *high populist attitudes*), and whether they knew the fictional characters that were used in the second leadership trait cue in the stimulus material.

4.4. Results

Figure 1 plots the effects for the models that test the direct leader effects (the full analyses of these models are shown in Table C1 in the Supplementary File). The results in Figure 1 provide full support for negative leader effects (the diamonds in Figures 1a and 1b). Exposure to a vignette in which the candidate is described as scoring high on negative leader traits significantly and substantially reduces positive evaluations for the candidate and the likelihood of voting for the candidate's party. However, contrasting our expectations and the results of Study 1, the findings do not indicate positive leader effects (the circles in Figures 1a and 1b), as exposure to a vignette that describes a candidate scoring high on positive leader traits does not affect candidate evaluations or vote choice. This already lends initial support for the negativity bias in leader effects (H1).
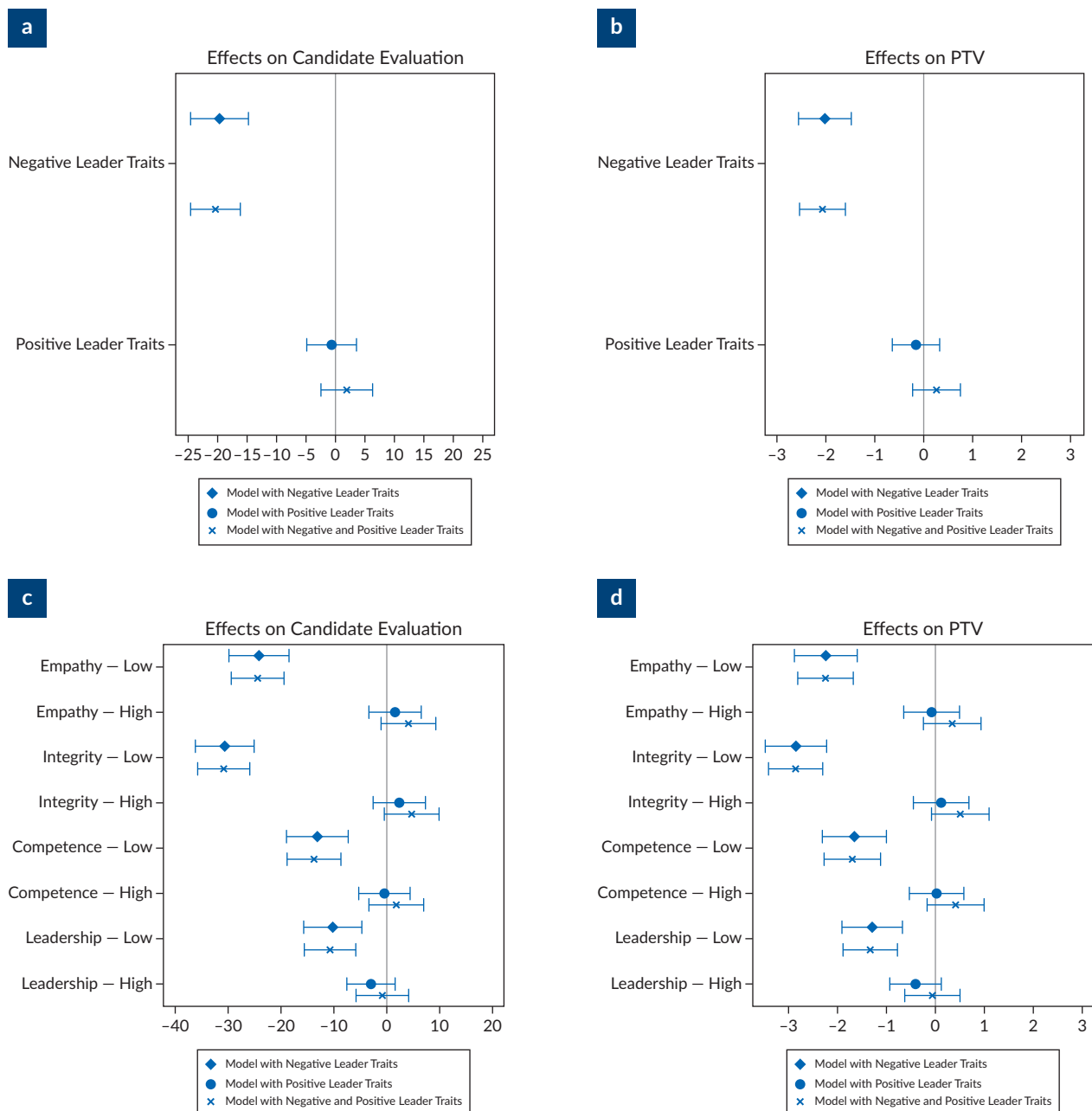
Figure 1. Effects plot of direct leader effects. Notes: Plotted are the OLS regression coefficients of the direct leader effects on candidate evaluation—(a) and (c)—and propensity to vote for the party of the candidate—(b) and (d)—with their 95% confidence intervals; these models additionally control for gender, age, education, partisanship, political interest, populist attitudes, and whether or not the respondents are familiar with the fictional characters employed in the stimulus material; the full models can be found in Tables C1 and C2 in the Supplementary File.

A formal test of the negativity bias is represented by the plotted X in Figures 1a and 1b, which tests the effects of both positive and negative experimental conditions compared to the control group simultaneously. It shows, indeed, that exposure to a vignette in which a candidate is described with negative leadership traits reduces positive candidate evaluations and the likelihood to vote for the candidate's party, whereas exposure to a candidate described with positive leadership traits does not affect candidate evaluations and vote choices.

Importantly, a test for nonlinear combinations of estimators shows that the difference in (absolute) magnitude between the two effects is statistically significant, both for candidate evaluation ($b = 18.49$, $p < 0.000$) and for vote choice ($b = 1.81$, $p < 0.000$). Figures 1c and 1d present the models in which the leadership traits are tested separately (Table C2 in the Supplementary File) and show consistent results. All negative leadership traits effects are significant and negative, while none of the positive leadership trait effects reach levels of statistical significance. All in all, we find convincing evidence that negative leader trait cues are more impactful than comparable positive ones, confirming H1.

H3 states that the negativity bias in leader effects is particularly pronounced for politically dissatisfied voters. We use populist attitudes as a proxy for political dissatisfaction and test this expectation by moderating them with the positive and negative leadership trait conditions. Figure 2 plots the marginal effects of these analyses and Table C3 in the Supplementary File presents the full models. The findings show, first, that positive leader
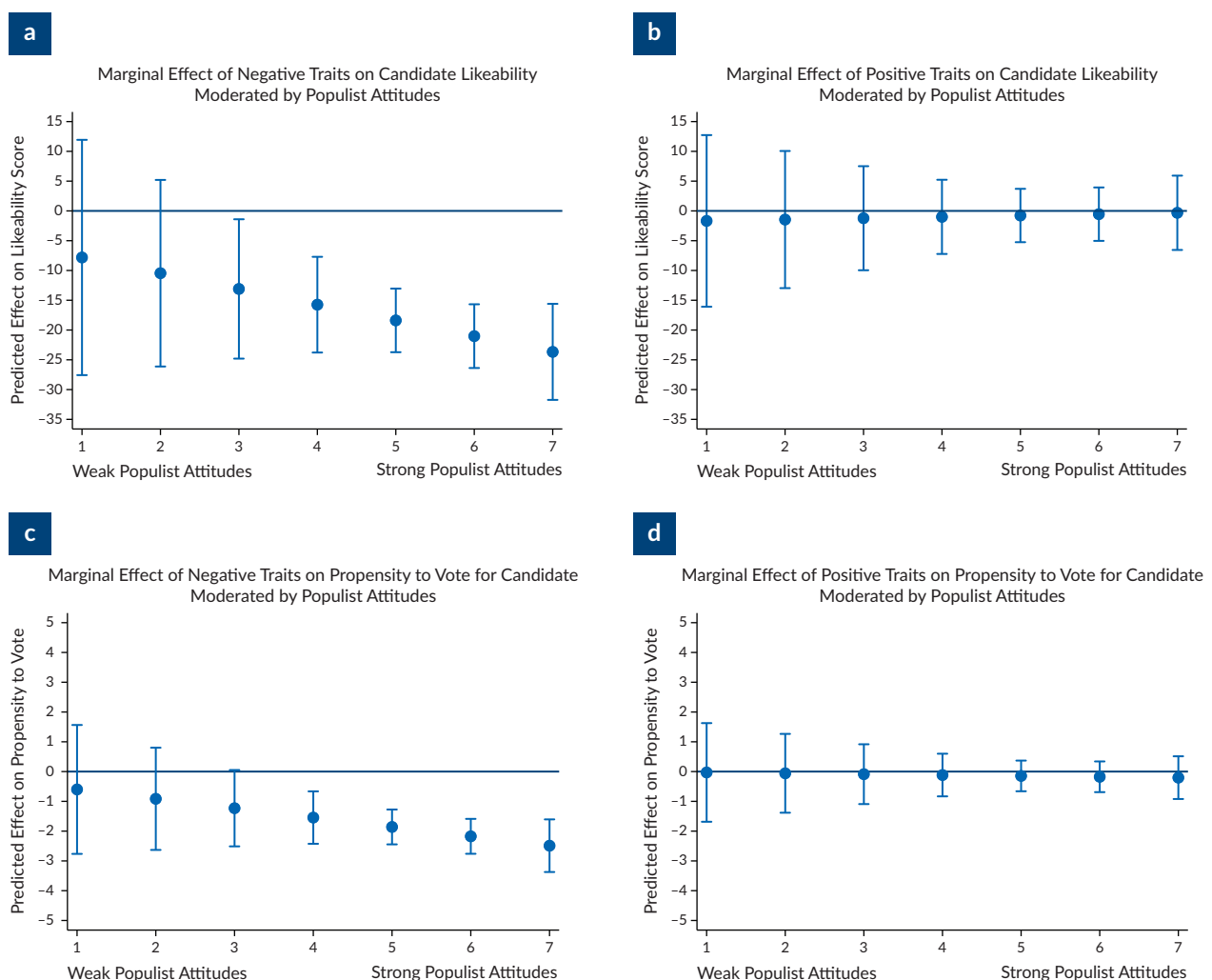
Figure 2. Marginal effects plot of positive and negative leader effects, moderated by populist attitudes. Notes: Plotted are the marginal effects of positive and negative leader effects on candidate evaluation—(a) and (b)— and propensity to vote for the party of the candidate—(c) and (d)—moderated by populist attitudes, with their 95% confidence intervals; these models additionally control for gender, age, education, partisanship, political interest, populist attitudes, and whether or not the respondents are familiar with the fictional characters employed in the stimulus material; the full models can be found in Table C3 in the Supplementary File.

effects, both on candidate evaluation (Figure 2b) and vote choice (Figure 2d), are not moderated by populist attitudes. Exposure to a vignette in which a candidate is described positively in terms of their leadership traits does not affect either outcome, irrespective of the level of populist beliefs. For negative leader effects, the findings are slightly less clear-cut. The interaction terms in the models are insignificant, but the marginal effects in Figure 2 show that only for respondents with strong populist attitudes the effects on candidate evaluation (Figure 2a) and vote choice (Figure 2c) are negative, while for individuals with weak populist attitudes, they are insignificant. This is partly explained by relatively few participants in our sample having weak populist attitudes, resulting in larger confidence intervals. However, especially for candidate evaluation, we do see a clear downward trend. Nevertheless, these findings do not lend (convincing) support for H3.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we examine the negativity bias in leader effects by triangulating data from a multi-country election survey with an experimental study among US voters. We conclude, firstly, that there is overwhelming empirical evidence for the negativity bias in leader effects. Both the survey and the experimental research show that negative leader effects are more impactful than positive ones, for both voters' candidate evaluations and vote choice. This implies that leaders do not so much incentivize voters for political support (a pull factor), but more so drive them in the camp of the opponent (a push factor). The positive leader effects were even completely absent in the experimental data of Study 2. The support for the negativity bias in leader effects is in line with a negativity bias found in other forms of political decision-making (e.g., Holbrook et al., 2001; Lau, 1982; Nai et al., 2023; Soroka, 2014).

The results on the conditionality of the negativity bias, secondly, are mixed. The negativity bias in leader effects does not seem to be larger for out-partisan candidates than for in-partisan leaders, as shown in Study 1. More specifically, negative leader effects seem unrelated to partisanship, while positive leader effects are larger for in-partisans. However, the moderation of positive leader effects on partisanship is only found for candidate evaluations, as for vote choice both positive and negative leader effects are unrelated to party identification. Thus, the role of partisanship is less clear than we expected. Additionally, conditionality upon political dissatisfaction also shows varied results. Negative leader effects seem to be more impactful for voters with low party-system support (Study 1) or strong populist attitudes (Study 2), but only for candidate evaluations, not for vote choice. So, the findings cautiously provide some indication that partisanship and political dissatisfaction have a moderating role in the dynamics of positive and negative leader effects, but this is far less clear-cut and uniform than we expected based on motivated reasoning theory.

To be sure, our results remain constrained by the boundaries of the empirical settings leveraged—for instance, the fact that the experimental evidence comes from a single exposure to mock politicians whose description builds on fictional and pop culture characters—suggesting caution when drawing broad conclusions. As a silver lining, recent developments in American politics have shown that elites do not shy away from associating themselves with fictional characters, including characters with a decidedly dark profile (see, for instance, Trump's repeated references to Hannibal Lecter on the 2024 campaign trail).

The prevalence of negative leader effects over positive ones might not be surprising. The current era of "negative politics" unfolds via high levels of negative partisanship (e.g., A. I. Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Medeiros & Noël, 2014), negative voting (e.g., Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2022a, 2022b; Weber, 2021), and

affective polarization (e.g., Garzia et al., 2023; Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020), and a political communication climate that is dominated by incivility (e.g., Rossini et al., 2021) and negative campaigning (e.g., Nai, 2020). Voters predominantly come across negative political information, which primes them to also be more strongly affected by negative than positive information in their political assessments and decision-making. It would be interesting for future research to examine whether there is a rise in the negativity bias in leader effects over time, coinciding with the coarsening of the political sphere.

In the title of this article, we pose the question: Who has a negativity bias in leader effects? Unfortunately, this is still somewhat of an open question as our findings regarding the conditionality of the negativity bias in leader effects show mixed results. We urge future studies to dive into this puzzle more and test, for instance, the role of ideological and affective closeness to the party, which might be more telling than partisanship, which constitutes something different in two-party systems like the US than in multi-party systems found in Western Europe. Moreover, it would be highly interesting to test whether the psychological make-up of voters is a factor to consider. It has been shown, for instance, that high agreeableness and extraversion, and low levels of negative emotionality, are strong predictors of negative partisanship and (the strength of) negative affect towards the out-party (e.g., A. I. Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Webster, 2018) and therefore might impact negativity in leader effects as well.

All in all, this article shows that the role of party leaders is mainly a push instead of a pull factor in elections and that partisanship and political dissatisfaction seem relevant only for candidate evaluations, not vote choice.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
All data and codes are available for replication and re-analysis at the following OSF repository: https://osf.io/FXT69/

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

Fonder From Afar: Distance, Leadership, and the Legitimacy of the EU

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Abstract

Why do people support political leadership? This age-old question is increasingly relevant in international politics and especially for the EU, which is seen as suffering from a legitimacy deficit. In EU studies, the question of legitimacy has been approached predominantly from an institutional perspective. However, in times of increased mediatisation and personalisation of politics, leaders play an increasingly important role in determining the legitimacy of politics in the eyes of the people, especially in "distant" polities like the EU. Following these insights from leadership studies, this article examines to what extent citizens' trust in the EU is influenced by their assessment of different types of EU leaders, as well as distance. A unique survey of citizens' assessments of EU leaders on five dimensions—being democratically elected, credibility, ideology, social identification, and emotions—is used to answer this question. The study unexpectedly finds that the more distant the leader, the more positive people's evaluation of their EU leadership. Moreover, the assessment of these leaders significantly and strongly correlates with the extent to which citizens trust the EU. This finding holds for all three categories of EU leaders but is strongest for the most distant leaders. No support, however, is found for the expectation that, in the case of increased distance between leaders and followers, the psychological aspects of legitimacy dominate over the more utilitarian considerations underlying people's trust in the EU.

Keywords

distance; European Union; followership; leadership; legitimacy; trust

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the EU has faced an unprecedented sequence of crises that have demanded collective and decisive leadership while at the same time exacerbating its legitimacy problems. In EU studies, the

question of legitimacy has been approached predominantly from an institutional perspective and has rarely taken into account the role of leadership. However, in times of increasing personalisation and mediatisation of politics, individual leaders—both supranational and national—play an increasingly important role in determining the legitimacy of the EU in the eyes of the people (Hubé et al., 2015; Laing, 2021). In fact, insights from leadership studies and political psychology suggest that this effect may be especially pronounced in "distant" polities like the EU by triggering (social) psychological mechanisms underlying the attribution of legitimacy (Nielsen & Capelos, 2018; Popper, 2013; Ruchet, 2011).

To answer the question of the extent to which people's trust in the EU is influenced by their assessment of EU leaders, this article combines insights from both EU and leadership studies in the attribution of legitimacy and the role of distance therein. It uses a survey of citizens' attitudes towards different types of EU leaders in nine EU member states to explore the extent to which their evaluation of these leaders in terms of their ideological views, credibility, or whether they are democratically elected—as well as (social) psychological factors like social identification and emotions—play a role in people's trust in the EU (Gooty et al., 2010; Haslam et al., 2011; van Zuydam, 2018).

The study finds that the evaluation of EU leaders across all identified dimensions—credibility, democracy, emotions, ideology, and social identification—reveals a significant and robust correlation with respondents' trust in the EU. In addition, contrary to the common assumption in EU studies that distance undermines legitimacy, our results suggest that individuals tend to view more distant leaders more favourably than their national counterparts, thereby supporting the notion that "distance makes the heart grow fonder." Furthermore, the perceived legitimacy of EU leaders significantly and strongly correlates with the degree of trust citizens place in the EU. This relationship is evident across all three categories of EU leaders, with the strongest effect observed for supranational and transnational leaders, reinforcing the idea that distance can indeed enhance legitimacy.

2. The Legitimacy of EU Leadership

The literature on the legitimacy of and trust in the EU is rich and extensive. Traditionally, this literature has been dominated by a debate on the EU democratic deficit as well as a concern for input, throughput, and output legitimacy (Beetham & Lord, 2014; Moravcsik, 2002; Schmidt, 2013). Input legitimacy derives from political participation, output legitimacy relies on the support deriving from favourable outcomes and the performance of the political system, while throughput legitimacy refers to the quality of the decision-making process in terms of accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness. Empirical studies that test these ideas show that the democratic nature of the EU, its performance, and the (liberal democratic) quality of its decision-making processes indeed affect citizens' support for and trust in the EU while they show mixed results for the effects of throughput legitimacy (De Vries, 2018; Ehin, 2008; Rohrschneider, 2002; Wratil & Wäckerle, 2023).

Studies of EU public opinion offer additional insights into why citizens do or do not support the EU. In this field, the legitimacy of the EU is generally defined as the extent to which EU citizens support their countries' (prospective) EU membership or their trust in the EU. In addition to showing that people's demographic characteristics—like age, educational level, socioeconomic status, and gender—affect their attitudes towards the EU, this literature offers a range of theoretical explanations for different forms of support for the EU (De Vries, 2018; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). Many of the demographic variables explaining support, for

instance, rely on a utilitarian mechanism of legitimacy attribution: When EU policy is seen by citizens to be beneficial to their lives or their country, they will support the system. However, the extent to which people hold a national or European identity, as well as the cues they take from politicians, the media, or their peers, also play a role (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Finally, there is an emerging literature that indicates that emotions affect people's support for and trust in the EU (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Garry, 2014; Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2017).

Recent developments in leadership studies may add a new dimension to this literature by stressing the role of leadership in the attribution of legitimacy and by highlighting the paradoxical effect of *distance* on how citizens attribute legitimacy (Popper, 2014).

Both in EU studies and the public debate, the EU is often seen as a typical example of a distant polity. However, rather than defining the term distance, evidence of its existence often relies solely on the presence of its presumed consequences: the fact that citizens' knowledge of and interest in EU affairs is limited (Hix, 2015). The psychological literature on leadership does provide several definitions of the concept, of which three are particularly relevant to the case of the EU (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Popper, 2013; Shamir, 1995). First, distance may refer to physical distance, which refers to distance in place but also in time when historical or future leaders are concerned. Second, functional distance refers to the level of hierarchy in the relationship between the leader and their followers, the number of functional layers between them, and the extent of the leader's span of control. Finally, distance is also related to the nature of the interaction between leaders and followers: How often and how direct is contact between them? Do followers ever meet the leader in person? Is there communication via email or intermediaries, or do followers only observe leaders and their actions via (social) media?

Applying this framework to the EU confirms the proposition put forward in EU studies that the EU and its leadership are more distant from its citizens than national or local politics. EU leaders convene in large conference towers in Brussels, Frankfurt, and Strasbourg and their span of control includes all member states and the entire single market. As a system of multi-level governance, many layers exist between EU decision-makers and the voice of the people, and interaction between the EU and its citizens is almost exclusively mediated indirectly through the media or social media.

However, while in EU studies the distance between the EU and its citizens is seen as a threat to its legitimacy, political psychologists argue that distance may in fact increase legitimacy. The more distant the polity, the less direct and detailed the followers' information about what is actually happening. This means that rather than basing their assessments on the performances of the polity or an objective evaluation of its benefits, they are based on their personal inferences and projections and leaders' strategic and symbolic representations of the polity (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Griffin & Ross, 1991; Meindl, 1995; Popper, 2013; Shamir, 1995). In addition, the more distant a polity, the more the most visible representatives of the system—its top leaders—become the symbolic representation of the system. This dynamic is well-known from examples of multinational companies like Apple or Tesla and how the image of these companies—their successes and failures—are attributed to their CEOs rather than the organisation and hard work of the people behind the scenes. This dynamic is known as the "romance of leadership" (Meindl, 1995), and a similar dynamic is also visible in politics, especially in the case of supranational or foreign political systems (Balmas, 2018). This dynamic is further strengthened by the increasing personalisation of politics and

fortified in times of crises when political decision-making is centralised in the hands of top political leaders (Hubé et al., 2015; Laing, 2021; Meindl, 1995; Pancer et al., 1999). Moreover, there are also objective grounds for seeing its leaders as the embodiment of the EU: National leaders play a key role in the EU's decision-making process and even at the supranational level, the EU has witnessed a clear personalisation of EU politics with the appointment of its five presidents, the High Representative, and the *spitzenkandidaten* procedure. Finally, when reporting on EU affairs, the media (tabloids in particular) tend to focus on the meetings of the high political leaders in the European Council (Hubé et al., 2015). When attributing legitimacy to the EU, we may thus expect two mechanisms to be at play that remain unexplored in studies on the legitimacy of the EU:

1. The assessment of individual leaders plays a significant role in how citizens attribute legitimacy to the EU polity.
2. Given the distance between EU leaders and the European people, we may expect the psychological mechanisms of legitimation attribution to dominate over the more functional mechanisms.

The EU also offers a suitable case to test both propositions. First, as a "leaderful" system, the EU harbours a wide variety of leaders who are evaluated differently, which allows for studying the relation of how citizens evaluate their leaders in the EU context with the legitimacy of the EU (Müller & van Esch, 2020). Secondly, the different types of leaders active in the system differ in terms of their distance from followers, which allows us to test the second proposition. For, although the literature on EU leadership often focuses on the supranational EU leaders, the national heads of state and government also exert EU leadership. Moreover, the exertion of transnational EU leadership—EU leadership of prominent foreign national leaders—has become increasingly relevant (van Esch, 2017b). These three types of EU leaders are more or less distant to the people, with the national leaders being the closest and the supranational leaders—especially the non-majoritarian leaders—the most distant.

2.1. Five Vectors of the Legitimacy of EU Leadership

Different subdisciplines in political science may add to our understanding of the legitimacy of leadership. Following EU studies, we conceptualise legitimacy as a vector, a metaphor that aligns well with the relational perspective on leadership advocated in leadership studies (Lord & Magnette, 2004, p. 184; van Esch, 2017a). Based on the literature, five vectors of legitimacy may be distinguished.

The first vector, the democratic vector of legitimacy, rests upon the role of political participation and elections in providing political leaders with legitimacy and is associated both with the idea of input and throughput legitimacy. Studies show that being democratically elected plays an important role in whether leaders are seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people (van Esch et al., 2018). Moreover, studies show that many citizens prefer the institutions at the heart of EU democracy—the national and European parliament—to play a key leadership role in the EU (De Vries, 2018). In addition to this, for many citizens in Western democracies, elections also have a more systemic effect: Even if they disagree with the outcome of the elections, they generally accept that those elected have the right to make decisions that affect their lives (Ehin, 2008). In this sense, the democratic vector of legitimacy also includes a procedural dimension, whereby the fairness of the process, rather than its outcome, fosters legitimacy (cf. Lord & Magnette, 2004, p. 187). In line with the concept of throughput legitimacy, this also means that conditions should be in place for citizens to be able to cast a well-informed vote.

A second rationale for supporting a leader lies in their credibility. Credibility is a characteristic attributed to political leaders by followers and consists of three dimensions: competence, trustworthiness, and caring (van Zuydam, 2018). Competence relates to leaders' knowledge, expertise, and skills to solve problems and make the right policy decisions. Trustworthiness traces back to the work of Weber on the legitimacy of leadership and questions to what extent voters believe leaders are honest and reliable (Weber, 1922/1958). Caring means that leaders are empathetic towards their voters' problems and that they take their interests at heart. As this last dimension overlaps with the vector of social identification (Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2014; see below), we limit our definition of credibility to competence and trustworthiness. The logic behind the vector of credibility relies on the expectation that leader's competence and trustworthiness enable them to make better decisions and deliver more effective, efficient, or just results for the people (cf. Lord & Magnette, 2004, p. 185): a transactional form of leadership associated with output legitimacy (Burns, 1978). Competence may also include technocratic expertise, a basis of legitimacy sometimes undervalued in the EU democratic deficit debate.

The third vector of legitimacy—the ideological match between leaders and followers—is often overlooked in both the literature on EU legitimacy and public opinion (Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017; cf. Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). This vector partly rests upon a functional logic, in the sense that citizens may deem those leaders legitimate who advocate the policies they prefer. However, shared values, a common moral purpose, and a shared vision or utopia forge strong bonds between leaders and followers that may endure even when leaders do not deliver. An ideological leader attracts followers by mobilising stories of ideals and aspirations, managing meaning, and stirring up powerful passions. These leaders can have great mobilising power and are associated with transformational leadership (Bennister et al., 2015; Burns, 1978). At the same time and for the same reason, ideological leadership may be a divisive force, as its power partly derives from its contrast and conflict with, and quest against, the values and visions embodied in opposing ideologies. While much of politics is imbued with ideology, in studies on EU leadership and legitimacy, it remains an understudied phenomenon. The few previous studies into this aspect of legitimacy find that the match between the ideological ideas of EU leaders and their constituents indeed contributes to the legitimacy of the EU (Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017; van Esch et al., 2018).

The final two vectors of legitimacy that may be derived from the literature are both (socio)psychological: the vector of social identification and the emotional vector of legitimacy. Identity, operationalised as European or national identity, is seen as an important determinant of support for and trust in the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Risse, 2014). Recent advances in the psychology of leadership add interesting insights and a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamic to this literature. Rather than being a characteristic of individuals, social psychology argues that followers' support for leaders is rooted in a perceived mutual belonging to a particular social group. The more leaders are seen to be prototypical of that group and advancing and standing up for the interests of the group, the more their leadership is perceived as legitimate. In this way, social identification forges strong and durable bonds between leaders and followers (Haslam et al., 2011; Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014; Steffens et al., 2020). In fact, like in a football club, followers' loyalty to a prototypical in-group leader may survive many excruciating losses (Haslam et al., 2011, p. 47). Moreover, rather than objective similarity or the actual advancement of the interest of the group, social identification is subjective and may be rooted in strategic and symbolic identity management by leaders (Haslam et al., 2023). Finally, social identity may be a divisive force and may be used by leaders to cause division and conflict between members from different groups.

Finally, emotions have been identified as a source of people's support for the EU (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Capelos et al., 2018; Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2017). Emotions are discrete feelings like anger, fear, or happiness (Fox, 2008). They affect people's evaluation of the EU in three ways: They inform attitudes directly, they influence the quality of information processing, and they affect the extent to which people engage in rational decision-making. Different discrete emotions have different effects. Anger, for instance, reduces information processing while fear fosters it (Fox, 2008; Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2017; Widmann, 2021). The specific emotions EU leaders elicit may thus have implications for the perceived legitimacy of EU leaders as well as the EU in general (Capelos et al., 2018; Sy et al., 2018).

Depending on the context, the five vectors of legitimacy have different strengths, forge bonds between different sets of actors, and may reinforce or work against each other. This raises the following questions:

1. To what extent do these five vectors indeed play a role in the attribution of legitimacy by citizens to different types of EU leaders?
2. To what extent does the assessment of leaders based on these five vectors influence the assessment of the system as a whole?
3. In distant polities like the EU, do (socio)psychological vectors of legitimacy (social identification and emotions) exert a stronger effect on legitimacy than the others?

The following section will introduce the methods used to answer these questions.

3. Methodology

To determine citizens' perception of EU leaders concerning the different dimensions of legitimacy and its effect on the extent they feel the EU is legitimate, a web-based survey was conducted amongst citizens of nine EU member states: Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the UK. These countries include more pro-European and more Eurosceptic countries and form a balanced set in terms of their economic and political power and their heads of state or government play a key role in the leadership of the EU. The survey was conducted in May and June of 2017 through a professional polling agency. Per country, a sample of approximately 500 respondents was included and selected to be representative of major background variables (gender, age, and social class; see Appendix B in the Supplementary File for an overview of the number of respondents and their background). Respondents were asked a short series of questions regarding their demographic background, their media use, and their political preferences, as well as their trust in key national and EU institutions. Subsequently, respondents answered several questions regarding four EU leaders who played a key role in EU politics at the time.

In line with the literature, the dependent variable of this study—the legitimacy of the EU—was operationalised as the respondents' answer to the question of to what extent they had trust in the EU, using the same wording as the widely used Eurobarometer poll. The EU trust question from this poll is one of the two most commonly used operationalisations for legitimacy in EU studies, making our findings comparable to those in the literature. Moreover, trust in the EU is a broader concept that fits the multidimensional nature of the legitimacy and the vector approach of the theoretical framework more closely than an assessment of EU membership (cf. Bauer, 2020). However, rather than the bivariate *tend to trust* and *tend not to trust* that the Eurobarometer uses, we used a 5-point Likert scale from *very little trust* to *very much trust* and an additional *don't know* option (defined as missing). This allows for a much more thorough analysis of the data.

To enable a first exploration of the effect of distance, respondents were asked to evaluate three different types of EU leaders that are more or less distant to them. First, their national head of state or government (least distant). Second, the heads of state or government of the two largest EU member states outside their country (more distant); these leaders were selected because, as leaders of the largest member states, they were most likely to be known by the respondents for their transnational leadership. And, third, we also included a supranational EU leader as the most distant to EU citizens: European Central Bank President Mario Draghi; due to his role in the eurozone crisis, he was a dominant actor in the public debate at the time, and as a non-majoritarian leader, he presented the least likely case for legitimate leadership according to the democratic deficit literature (Hubé et al., 2015). Due to practical constraints, we could only include one supranational EU leader. By selecting these different types of EU leaders (national, transnational, and supranational), we were able to test to what extent distance plays a role in the evaluation of leadership and its connection to the perceived legitimacy of the EU. For each of these leaders, we showed respondents a picture and the name of their function and asked them to identify their name from a list of four names (the name of another leader, a common national name, and the name of a celebrity). When respondents were able to correctly identify the leader, they were asked a range of questions about the different legitimacy rationales outlined in the theoretical section.

The credibility of the leaders was measured on two dimensions following the validated list of questions proposed by van Zuydam on a 5-point Likert scale (van Zuydam, 2018): competence and trustworthiness. To measure social identification, we constructed two questions to tap into the first main aspect of social identification, that of prototypicality (see Appendix A in the Supplementary File). By adding the two remaining questions from the van Zuydam questionnaire, we also cover the second dimension of social identification, "caring" or "doing it for us" (Steffens, Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2014). The third set of questions pertains to the ideological dimension of legitimacy and asks to what extent citizens felt the leader held a similar ideological position as them. Subsequently, we questioned the respondents to what extent they felt the leader was legitimate (or not) because they were democratically chosen (or not) on a 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix A in the Supplementary File). Finally, to determine how citizens felt about the leadership of the different leaders in the context of the EU, respondents were asked to tick one of a range of emojis displaying seven different negative and positive emotions: angry, sad, scared/anxious, undecided, happy/satisfied, joy, love (see Appendix A in the Supplementary File for the emojis we used). Emojis achieve much higher rates of familiarity, clarity, meaningfulness, and emotional intensity than emoticons and are thus to be preferred (Fischer & Herbert, 2021; Kaye et al., 2017). The selection of these specific emotions was based on several considerations. To avoid bias, the list contains the same number of negative and positive emotions with comparable levels of valence. Moreover, it contains several key emotions that have been shown to affect political behaviour differently. Finally, emotions were selected for which emojis are available that are clearly recognisable (Fischer & Herbert, 2021; Kaye et al., 2017; Luhmann, 2017; Shoeb & de Melo, 2020). Due to practical constraints, respondents were asked to complete a full assessment with two questions per vector for their national leader and answer a shorter questionnaire with only one question per vector for the foreign and supranational leader (see Appendix A in the Supplementary File).

To answer our central question, we compounded the answers for the five Likert scale legitimacy statements into an average score for leaders for each respondent. With regard to the full questionnaire, the analysis showed that each of the scale measures was sufficiently reliable (Cronbach alpha measures ranged between 0.81 and 0.94). As different emotions are theorised to elicit different effects, for the questions concerning

the primary emotions that each leader conjures up, we have transformed this question into dummy variables. For transnational leaders, this means that two of these dummy variables can have a score.

Finally, we conducted a regression analysis to establish to what extent the different forms and levels of legitimacy of EU leaders correlated with respondents' trust in the EU, controlling for three demographic variables identified in the literature as explanatory for EU support: age, socioeconomic status, and level of education. As this is an exploratory study, we have used a step-wise model with a probability of F of 0.05. This is a data-driven analysis that has several downsides. This is especially the case when differences between correlations are small as it then influences which variable is entered into the model. However, as we have no clear basis for determining the order in which variables should be added, we believe this approach provides a valuable first step in exploring the relative importance of the legitimacy of leaders at different levels of trust in the EU. As legitimacy questions were only posed when respondents recognised the leader that they referenced, and the number of respondents that recognised Draghi was more limited than the number for other leaders, the regression analyses were run both including these variables as well as excluding them. Due to list-wise exclusion for this analysis, the number of respondents is smaller for the analysis that includes the legitimacy questions about Draghi (see Appendix C-4 in the Supplementary File for the regression table excluding the questions about Draghi).

4. Findings

Before assessing whether people's attribution of legitimacy to the EU's key national, transnational, and supranational leaders indeed affects their assessment of the legitimacy of the EU as a whole, the article first presents some descriptive findings showing how the selected leaders score in terms of the five vectors of legitimacy as well as the differences amongst the different types of EU leadership.

4.1. The Legitimacy of EU Leadership

With regard to the national leaders, the results show that overall, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel is perceived as the most legitimate leader by her national constituents, followed closely by the Dutch PM Mark Rutte and Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny. The Spanish PM Mariano Rajoy, the former Italian PM Matteo Renzi, and the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán are the least legitimate in the eyes of their constituents (see Table 1). Moreover, on average, national leaders score best on the vector of democracy with an average score of 2.94, followed closely by the two dimensions of credibility: competency and trustworthiness. On the lower end of the scale, we find that national leaders score low on the two dimensions of social identification: caring and the extent to which their followers identify with them (prototypicality). Finally, the extent to which constituents feel they have the same ideological views as their national leader is relatively low.

If we compare the three types of leaders, it turns out the more distant leaders (supranational and transnational leaders) are evaluated more positively on all vectors than the national leaders (with the exception of Draghi's score on democracy, see Table 2). This is also the case for the vector of social identification, an unexpected result given the fact that the supranational and transnational leaders do not share the nationality of most of the queried respondents and given the weight national culture and identity is seen to have in EU affairs (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; van Esch & De Jong, 2019). These findings underscore the basic assumption underlying this study that distance can have a meaningful effect on the attribution of

Table 1. National leaders' scores on the vectors of legitimacy (full questionnaire).

Vectors of legitimacy	Cameron	Hollande	Kenny	Merkel	Orbán	Rajoy	Rasmussen	Renzi	Rutte	Average	Rank
Credibility: Competency	2.67	2.23	2.83	3.46	2.67	2.27	2.88	2.54	3.60	2.79	2
Credibility: Trustworthiness	2.42	2.58	2.65	3.04	2.06	2.11	2.42	2.40	2.85	2.50	3
Social identification: Caring	2.11	1.94	2.19	2.52	2.03	1.80	2.11	2.07	2.36	2.12	5
Social identification: Like me	1.86	1.81	1.91	2.52	1.64	1.64	1.74	1.88	2.25	1.91	6
Ideology	2.14	2.10	2.48	2.70	2.37	2.00	2.29	2.27	2.70	2.34	4
Democracy	2.90	3.00	3.01	3.34	2.62	2.84	3.27	2.10	3.39	2.94	1
Average	2.35	2.28	2.51	2.93	2.23	2.11	2.45	2.21	2.86	2.43	—
Rank	5	6	3	1	7	9	4	8	2	—	—

Table 2. National, supranational, and transnational leaders' scores on the vectors of legitimacy (short questionnaire).

Vectors of legitimacy	National leaders			Supranational leader			Transnational leaders		
	M	Rank	*SD*	*M*	Rank	*SD*	*M*	Rank	*SD*
Credibility: Competency	2.75	2	1.33	3.26	1	1.24	3.21	1	1.05
Credibility: Trustworthiness	2.47	3	1.30	2.92	2	1.28	2.98	3	1.07
Social identification (like me)	2.08	5	1.24	2.25	4	1.22	2.32	5	1.08
Ideology	2.24	4	1.28	2.77	3	1.23	2.70	4	1.10
Democracy	3.02	1	1.44	2.92	2	1.37	3.09	2	1.18
Average	2.51	—	1.32	2.82	—	1.27	2.86	—	1.10

legitimacy for political leaders: As distance fosters assessments based on personal inferences, projections, and the strategic and symbolic representations of leaders, it may make the hearts of followers grow fonder. In contrast to our expectations, however, like for national leaders, the scores on the (socio)psychological dimension of social identification rank last.

The tendency for people to evaluate their national leaders more harshly carries through in the emotional domain (see Table 3). This is especially the case concerning the emotion of anger. No less than 30 percent of citizens express that they feel angry towards their national leader, whereas only 13.5 and 10.7 percent feel this way about Draghi and the combined transnational leaders. At the same time, people have only slightly more positive feelings towards them. Finally, as may be expected, the second major difference is that most people do not know how they feel about the supranational and transnational leaders.

Table 3. National, supranational, and transnational leaders' frequency scores on the emotional vector of legitimacy (in percentages).

Emotional vector of legitimacy	National leaders	Supranational leader	Transnational leaders
Angry	30.0	13.5	10.7
Sad	9.9	8.2	7.9
Scared	11.1	11.2	12
Don't know	26.9	40.7	41.7
Happy/Satisfied	15.4	18.7	21.1
Joy	5.0	6.1	5.1
Love	1.7	1.6	1.4

4.2. Does Legitimate Leadership Affect the Legitimacy of the EU?

Relating these findings to the respondents' level of trust in the EU confirms the main expectation put forward in this article: People's assessment of EU leaders is strongly related to their trust in the EU. In addition, we also find support for the second expectation that all vectors of legitimate leadership play a role in people's trust in the EU: All independent variables included in the study—except feeling scared and the "not-elected" question for Draghi—correlate significantly with EU trust with high effect sizes (see Table 4). Concerning the third expectation, however, we find no evidence that the (socio)psychological vectors are dominant in determining the legitimacy of the EU: If the outlier for Draghi is omitted, we find that the ideological match between the leader and the followers exerts the strongest effect on followers' trust in the EU, closely followed by the vector of credibility (competence and trustworthiness), and trumps that of social identification and emotions. The effect of emotions is relatively weak, except for the emotion of anger. The correlations do, however, have the expected direction: Negative emotions correlate with lower levels of trust in the EU, while positive emotions correlate with higher levels of trust. Finally, confirming the latest insights in emotion science: The different negative emotions—anger, sadness, and fear—clearly have a very different effect.

Table 4. Correlation between the legitimacy of national, supranational, and transnational leaders and trust in the EU.

Vectors of legitimacy	National leaders (r)	Supranational leader (r)	Transnational leaders (r)
Credibility: Competency	0.27**	0.39**	0.40**
Credibility: Trustworthiness	0.30**	0.48**	0.48**
Social identification (like me)	0.27**	0.41**	0.39**
Ideology	0.28**	0.48**	0.52**
Democracy	0.23**	0.05	0.40**
Emotions			
Angry	−0.22**	−0.35**	−0.33**
Sad	−0.03*	−0.12**	−0.18**
Scared	0.01	−0.04	−0.07**
Don't know	0.05**	0.06*	0.04*
Happy/Satisfied	0.13**	0.20**	0.26**
Joy	0.12**	0.19**	0.20**
Love	0.09**	0.11**	0.16**

Notes: r; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Finally, one of the most remarkable findings in our study is that, overall, the effect sizes for the distant leaders (the transnational and supranational leaders) are higher than for the national leaders. This means that the perceived legitimacy of foreign leaders and Draghi is more determinative of respondents' trust in the EU than their assessment of their national leader. As our study includes many small states, and we selected the leaders of the three most powerful EU member states along with the major independent EU institution as our transnational and supranational leaders, this may reflect the perceived power of these leaders. Overall, the ranking in terms of effect sizes is the same for the transnational leaders as for Draghi, except for the vector of democracy: The ideological match between these leaders and the respondents shows the strongest correlation with trust in the EU followed by credibility, social identification, and emotions. The effects of people's emotions towards the trans- and supranational leaders on EU trust also show anger being the most consequential emotion, but for many emotions, the effect sizes are much higher than for national leaders. In fact, for transnational leaders in particular, the effect sizes for positive emotions come close to the effect sizes of anger. Finally, the fact that Draghi is an unelected official does not correlate significantly with our respondents' trust in the EU. This is a remarkable finding and raises the question of whether this finding is particular to Draghi, or whether it extends to other European Central Bank presidents, or even to other non-majoritarian leaders like the Commission presidents.

When reviewing the findings by country (see Tables C-1 to C-3 in Appendix C in the Supplementary File), several interesting deviations from the general pattern emerge, both in the size and the direction of the effects of leader legitimacy on trust in the EU. The most marked and interesting pertain to the Hungarian leader Orbán. In contrast to other leaders, the more positive the assessment of Orbán in the eyes of his constituents on all of the vectors, the lower their trust in the EU (compare Table C-1 in Appendix C in the Supplementary File). Another interesting deviation concerns the significantly lower effect sizes of the Italian respondents' assessments of Draghi on their trust in the EU compared to those of non-Italian respondents (compare Tables C-1 and C-2 in Appendix C in the Supplementary File). Finally, contrary to what may have been expected, the overall findings for the UK—which voted for Brexit shortly after this study was conducted—do not deviate from the other member states included in the study.

Finally, we tried to move beyond analysing these correlations and come up with a general model to explain the relation between the legitimacy of EU leaders and trust in the EU. To do this a step-wise model was used with a probability of F of 0.05. This type of data-driven analysis has several downsides, especially when differences between correlations are small, as it then influences which variable is entered into the model, which was indeed the case in our study. However, as there is no clear basis for determining the order in which variables should be added, it still provides a valuable first step in exploring how the different aspects of the legitimacy of EU leaders affect trust in the EU.

Table 5 shows the model including all categories of leaders. The model has a high explanatory value, explaining 40 percent of the levels of trust in the EU. As the table shows, the model that came out as the best includes aspects of all of the vectors identified as relevant in the theoretical framework except social identification. It also includes variables referring to all types of leaders, although those pertaining to the assessment of transnational leaders dominate. The heavy lifting is done by the match between the ideological ideas of the transnational leaders and the respondents. The consistent finding that ideology matters with regard to the legitimacy of the EU is interesting as it is a somewhat forgotten dimension in EU studies. Moreover, it seems societally relevant as it is one of the vectors leaders may have the most

Table 5. Stepwise regression including Draghi.

Type of leader	Variable[a]	Vector	B	Δ adj. R^2	VIF
	Constant		1.25**		
Transnational	I agree with the vision that…has for the world	Ideology	0.21**	0.27	2.51
Supranational	…is trustworthy	Credibility	0.14**	0.07	3.62
National	…was elected democratically and can therefore make decisions for Europe	Democracy	0.10**	0.02	1.68
Supranational	Angry	Emotion	−0.40**	0.01	1.74
Transnational	Angry	Emotion	−0.36**	0.01	1.52
Transnational	Sad	Emotion	−0.26**	< 0.01	1.15
Transnational	Love	Emotion	0.73**	< 0.01	1.14
National	…is trustworthy	Credibility	0.13**	< 0.01	3.29
Supranational	Sad	Emotion	−0.23*	< 0.01	1.21
Transnational	Joy	Emotion	0.33**	< 0.01	1.22
Transnational	Happy	Emotion	0.19**	< 0.01	1.38
National	…is competent	Credibility	−0.08*	< 0.01	3.20
Supranational	I agree with the vision that…has for the world	Ideology	0.08*	< 0.01	3.96
	R^2		0.40		
	F		74.01**		

Notes: $N = 1,407$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; [a] in order of addition to the model.

influence over. The ideological match is followed at a distance by the credibility of Draghi and the democratic legitimacy of the national leaders. Adding the control variables age (above 35), educational level (general secondary education and up), and socioeconomic status (can get by easily) in the first step of the model only explains 3 percent (adj. R^2 is 0.03) of trust in the EU and does not have a significant effect on the model as it stands. As the assessment questions were only posed when respondents recognised the leader that they referenced, and the number of respondents that recognised Draghi was more limited than that for other leaders, we conducted a robustness check by running the analyses including and excluding Draghi. This showed our results are robust (see Table C-4 in Appendix C in the Supplementary File).

5. Conclusion

In this article, the argument was put forward that people's assessment of EU leaders is vital to understanding the extent to which they perceive the EU to be legitimate. While in European studies the question of legitimacy has rarely taken into account the role of leadership, in times of increasing personalisation and mediatisation of politics, leaders play an increasingly important role in determining their followers' perception of the EU. Moreover, insights from leadership studies and political psychology suggest that given its "distant" nature, the effect of leadership on the evaluation of the EU political system may be especially pronounced.

The results of our study support this argumentation: The assessment of EU leaders on all dimensions identified in this study (credibility, democracy, emotions, ideology, and social identification) shows a significant and strong correlation with our respondents' trust in the EU. Moreover, distance has the expected paradoxical effect on people's attribution of legitimacy to the EU. Rather than posing a problem for

the legitimacy of the EU, as is often assumed in EU studies, our findings show that people evaluate the more distant supranational and transnational leaders more positively than their national leaders, which supports the idea that distance makes the heart grow fonder. Moreover, the level to which EU leaders are seen as legitimate significantly and strongly correlates with the extent to which citizens trust the EU. This finding holds for all three categories of EU leaders, but is strongest for the supranational and transnational leaders, strengthening the idea that distance can actually strengthen legitimacy.

The findings of this study also support the second expectation put forward in this article: That, in addition to democracy and credibility, dimensions such as the ideological alignment between leaders and followers, social identification, and citizens' emotions play a significant role in shaping the perceptions of EU leaders. All the vectors of legitimate leadership introduced in the study correlate significantly to trust in the EU and their effect sizes are quite substantial, ranging from 0.22 to 0.52. The two marked exceptions to this are the democratic vector, in the case of Draghi, and the emotional vector. In the case of the emotional vector, only the effect sizes of anger are comparable to those of the other vectors, although feeling sad, happy, and joyous about the supranational and transnational leaders also correlated considerably to trust in the EU.

No support is found for our third expectation, which proposes that in a distant polity with distant leaders, the psychological vectors of legitimacy are the dominating mechanisms determining trust in the EU. In fact, if anything, the findings suggest that the subdivision of the vectors in these categories lacks meaning (see Table 6). Of the five vectors, the ideological match between the leader and the people shows the strongest correlation with trust in the EU, closely followed by credibility and social identification. In contrast to what is suggested by the dominance of democratic arguments in public and academic debates on EU legitimacy, the democratic vector only ranks fourth. The emotional dimension—even when based only on the effect sizes for anger—ranks last. These outcomes signal that in addition to taking into account the effect of leadership, EU scholars are well advised to consider ideology in their quest to understand the mechanisms behind the legitimacy of the EU, in addition to its democratic standing.

Finally, we used the findings on our independent variables to inductively derive a model that would provide the best explanation for the levels of trust. The model explains 40 percent of the variance in our respondents' levels of trust in the EU and reflects the dominance of the ideological vector of legitimate leadership. The method we used to create the model, however, has the disadvantage that when there is limited variation in effect sizes—as is the case in our study—this influences the order in which variables are integrated into the model. So, while it provides a first indication of what mechanisms may be at play, future research will have to determine to what extent this model also provides an adequate explanation for the relation between the assessments of other sets of leaders and trust in the EU.

Table 6. Ranking of vectors of legitimacy in terms of their effect sizes.

Vectors of legitimacy	National leaders (rank)	Supranational leader (rank)	Transnational (rank)	Average (rank)
Credibility	1	2	2	2
Social identification	3	3	4	3
Ideology	2	1	1	1
Democracy	4	5	3	4
Emotions (anger)	5	4	5	5

Another drawback of the methodological design of the study is its inability to establish the direction of causality between leadership and trust in the EU. Theoretically, one might argue that the influence of leadership on trust in the EU is more plausible than the reverse, particularly given the higher visibility of (especially national) leaders compared to the workings of the EU system. However, the research design of this study does not allow us to substantiate this argument empirically. This issue is amplified because recent studies show that the design of a survey can impact findings: When respondents are asked about the EU and national politics within the same block of questions, correlations amongst these items tend to be stronger. Moreover, prior questions may prime the answers to subsequent questions (Brosius et al., 2020). In our survey, questions regarding national, transnational, and supranational leaders were presented in separate sections (see Appendix A in the Supplementary File), thereby minimising the likelihood that respondents' evaluation of the leaders was influenced by questions about EU trust. However, the questions about leaders were still posed after those regarding EU trust. Research is needed to explore the direction of causality further, preferably using an experimental design.

Notwithstanding these caveats, the findings of this study indicate that leadership is a relevant aspect that should be taken into account when studying the legitimacy of distant polities like the EU. In addition, the distant nature of the EU polity and its leaders seems to have a paradoxical effect on EU legitimacy that runs counter to what is often suggested in EU studies.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Decision-Making Preferences in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

During crises, understanding political decision-making processes and evaluating related preferences are key to the legitimacy of political decisions. Our research focuses on preferences in decision-making processes in times of crisis through the analysis of the representational style most preferred by voters: that is, whether they prefer representation of the public good by the representatives, the party lines, the involvement of experts, or the incorporation of voters' interests. Within the framework of representative democracy, these decisions are mediated by representatives whose representational style determines whose interest and opinion decision-making processes integrate. In our analysis, we examined representative styles in the context of three different types of crises: economic, social, and environmental. Our results indicate that the type of crisis is indifferent when it comes to preferred political decision-making processes, as Hungarian voters tend to favor processes where they are being consulted by the representatives across different scenarios. Representatives' commitment to party lines is disfavored when making political decisions and we observed there is no clear preference regarding the involvement of experts in political decisions in times of crisis. These observed preferences strongly contradict the prevailing "strong party discipline" in Hungary. This deviation accentuates both weakening representative linkages and the importance of the performative elements of representation feeding into the populist characteristic of Hungarian democracy.

Keywords

decision-making processes; experts; political legitimacy; representative democracy; voter preferences

1. Introduction

In times of crisis, political decisions carry extra weight, with intense debates resurfacing about who should make decisions and whose interests should be considered. In such intense periods, preferences for political

decision-making processes gain momentum, as they influence the legitimacy and the acceptability of political decisions (Arnesen & Peters, 2018). Our research centers on voters' preferences in political decision-making in times of crisis: Do voters want to be consulted, or do they prefer expert involvement? Do they trust politicians to decide what is in the public's best interest, or do they expect them to follow party lines without deviation? Within the framework of representative democracy, these decisions are mediated by representatives whose representation style defines whose voices are heard when decisions are made. Our research connects representational styles to decision-making processes and approaches the question of preferences from the voters' perspective, a bottom-up approach that has not been addressed by literature.

We argue that understanding voters' preferences for political decision-making processes in times of crisis is crucial for several reasons. First, during crises, the legitimacy of the process is an important factor in achieving adherence to the decisions: If people perceive the process as just, they tend to accept the decisions and adhere more closely to the established rules. Second, in many countries, crisis is the "new normal" for politics. While in the last decade we have witnessed periodical crises—such as the financial crisis of 2019 or the pandemic—the "crisis narrative" became a constant, especially in countries with populist leaders in populist regimes. Third, representative democracy is challenged and the growing distrust in democratic institutions calls for new solutions in democratic decision-making (Caramani, 2017), with crises adding a new layer of challenge and calling for innovative measures and transformed representation.

Regarding the alternatives for representative democracy, political scientists have observed two emerging trends: (a) the technocratic solutions, which imply the involvement of experts, and (b) the participatory solutions that imply the involvement of everyday people through direct democracy and/or deliberation, both of which have become more prominent in liberal-democratic settings (Vittori et al., 2023). Citizens' involvement (Kuyper & Wolkenstein, 2019) and/or expert knowledge (Caramani, 2020; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) frequently compensates for representative democracies' lack of legitimacy. Citizens seem to respond positively to the new forms of decision-making (Lavezzolo et al., 2021) although their preferences are mediated by various factors, including the issues that are being discussed (Wojcieszak, 2014), the design of the processes (Christensen, 2020), voters' characteristics (Coffé & Michels, 2014; Fernández-Martínez & Font Fábregas, 2018), and their historical, political, and social context (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Chiru & Enyedi, 2022).

Still, despite all the challenges and alternatives, representative democracy prevails, and many voters connect to political decision-making processes through their elected representatives. Thus, these models of decision-making not only represent different approaches to democracy but potentially co-exist, allowing representative democracy to incorporate a variety of elements. Vittori et al. (2024) tested decision-making models "combined" and included non-elected actors as decision-influencers who do not decide but rather advise the decision-making process. Their findings on the Italian public support the combined models: "Contrary to expectations, expert-led decision-making processes do not enjoy an advantage relative to parliamentary ones, but the consultation of experts boosts support for the decision-making process in some cases" (Vittori et al., 2024, p. 687). Similar findings are presented for Spain, where significant support for expert involvement can be observed, even though a considerable number of citizens prefer a system where experts serve as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, traditional political representation (Ganuza & Font, 2020).

These findings suggest that voters' expectations about decision-making processes vary and thus their expectations towards their representatives are situational. Indeed, Wass and Nemčok (2020) warn that "citizens' expectations of an ideal-type, non-contextualized role for MPs do not provide much information" (p. 333) because voters' preferences for representation are always context-dependent. It stems from the dynamic nature of representation (Dalton et al., 2011) where voters have different expectations about decision-making processes depending on the issue at hand and on the setting of the decision. Regarding issues, in the field of environmental policy, for instance, Bertsou (2022) observed a preference for decisions made by experts over decisions made by representatives. As for the setting, research into decision-making processes during the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic have shown that technocratic attitudes increased in these situations. Wratil and Pastorella (2018) identified political and economic crises as the major drivers for the nomination of technocratic prime ministers. Regarding voters, Lavezzolo et al. (2022) studied technocratic attitudes and found that technocratic attitudes have significantly increased as a consequence of the coronavirus outbreak; while Costa Pinto et al. (2018) also identify economic crises as one of the factors that encourage technocratic trends.

Our research aims to take a closer look at the functioning of representative democracy in times of crisis by understanding preferences about decision-making processes mediated by representatives. Who should representatives consult in times of turbulence? Do citizens want their representatives to consult experts or, rather, their voters? Do citizens expect their representatives to follow the party line or attempt to respect the public good and act accordingly on their own? First, we connect different decision-making processes mediated by representatives to representational styles. Second, we contextualize preferences within different crisis narratives. In line with Ganuza and Font (2020), our first expectation is that in times of crisis, the importance of expertise increases, leading voters to favor decision-making processes that involve consulting experts. Our second expectation is that the preference for expert involvement aligns with a decreased commitment to party lines. Third, we assume that contextualization matters, and thus the extent to which experts should be involved will differ according to the type of the crisis.

2. Voters' Preferences for Decision-Making Processes and Representational Models

Within the framework of representative democracy, decision-making processes are mediated by representatives who can consult different actors throughout the process. Through these consultations, we link different decision-making processes to the main representational styles and identify voter preferences by asking who representatives should talk to. The literature on representation has long distinguished between different representational styles based on "what criterion the representative ought to use when making decisions" (Önnudóttir & von Schoultz, 2020, p. 122). The basic approach has distinguished between the trustee and the mandate styles of representation (Burke, 1774), which differ in the degree of independence attributed to the politician making decisions: Should the politician decide based on their best judgment, or should they listen to its constituents (Pitkin, 1967)? The trustee style is thus framed as "independent decision-making" (Bengtsson & Wass, 2011) where representatives get elected because voters trust that they will know what is best for them, even if voters do not know it themselves. The trustee style thus prompts representatives to make decisions on their own, without consulting experts or voters, and regardless of the party line. The voter-delegate type of representation establishes a stronger connection to the public by prompting the politician to listen to their voters in the decision-making process. The role of party lines as guiding principles in representatives' decision-making prompted a third conceptualization of

representative styles: the party-delegate, where representatives follow the party line rather strictly, which translates to a strict adherence to the party program in the decision-making process. Early literature has considered the effect of context on representation and representational styles, with Wahlke et al. (1962) establishing the category of "politico," the representative who either acts as a trustee or as a delegate, depending on the situation, signaling a dynamic nature of representation where different styles can be adopted by representatives and consequently preferred by voters.

While representational styles link the choice of the decision-making process with the focus of representation, that is, who the representatives aim to answer to, our approach is different: We consider the voters' perspective and ask about their expectations regarding representational style. While voters' expectations regarding the above-mentioned representational styles have been thoroughly researched (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010, 2011; Dageförde & Schindler, 2018; Dassonneville et al., 2021), we are bringing a new element into the picture: technocratic representation mediated by representatives.

Caramani (2017) explained the emergence of technocratic representation and populist representation as a critique of party government and proceeded to conceptualize technocratic representation by triangulating these three concepts. In his attempt to understand these new forms of linkages, he applied the traditional representational models of delegate and trustee representation to populist and technocratic representation and identified how populism doubles as a mandate type of representation but functions as a trusteeship relation. While technocratic representation is a valid and viable model in itself, we argue that it can also be understood as a new style of representation where technocratic decision-making is embedded in representation through the MP who chooses experts as the principal guiding actors of decision-making. Our assumption is that it is a representational style that voters tend to prefer in times of crisis. Furthermore, based on research on technocratic attitudes that emphasize anti-party sentiment (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017), we assume that the preference for experts is accompanied by a strong disfavor for the party-delegate model in crisis settings.

Both the crisis setting and the anti-party element are reminiscent of populism and indeed populist attitudes can correlate with technocratic attitudes in two dimensions: their anti-political nature and their pro-expert sentiments (Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023). Caramani (2017) also emphasizes the parallels between populism and technocratic representational models: They both stand for the search for the one common good, which is either what people want or what experts deem necessary. Both are unmediated in the sense that there is no organization needed to collect, sort through, and prioritize interests since there are designated people—the populist leader or the experts—who construct the best solution. In this sense, both are anti-party and define themselves in opposition to the party-dominated political scene. In the case of the technocratic model, it clearly translates into a trusteeship type of linkage since the decision-making is steered by expertise. Caramani (2017) argues that, in the case of populist representation, the linkage is not that clear: While it claims to be a mandate-type representational model where the people are the guiding force, in reality, it is more of a trusteeship where the leader gets wide authorization. Caramani (2017) calls it a disguised mandate, as "populists act, in the ideal type, according to a delegate model. In reality, populists are asked to interpret and form the popular will so that ultimately, they also act according to a trustee model" (p. 63). Similarly, Diehl (2018) also documents a twist in populist representation as leaders promote their similarity to the people, positioning themselves as "one of them" while they also strive for a stronger leadership position. We argue that it is due to this twist and to the disguised nature of the populist model

that, when studying representative styles, we first need to address technocracy. This helps establish preferences for the trustee style, the voter-delegate, the party-delegate, and the technocratic style. Populism often features a mix or, rather, a pseudo-mix of these elements.

Based on the conceptual closeness of technocracy and populism, Hungary seems to be an excellent case study to analyze preferences for decision-making processes, since the country is classified as a populist democracy (Pappas, 2019) characterized by de-democratization (Bogaards, 2018), where populist attitudes prevail (Krekó, 2021) and policy-making processes display strong populist characteristics (Bartha et al., 2020). The country is in a constant state of endogenously created crises (Körösényi et al., 2016). Within this populist setting, in times of crisis there is also room, albeit limited, for expert knowledge. As Bene and Boda (2021) argue, political decision-making is constructed as the responsibility of the populist leader, with expert opinions serving "only as a crucial factual background for these 'common sense'-based political decisions." Our research asks the question then: What is expected of the other democratically elected political leaders, the representatives? In the Hungarian electoral setting, there are 199 parliamentarians, 103 of them elected in single member districts who potentially answer to their electorate. Do voters expect them to also consult experts? Do partisan sentiments show up in a dispreference for party-guided decision-making processes? Are representatives regarded as politicians entrusted with recognizing the public good and acting accordingly along the trusteeship style? Do voters still want to be consulted? We aim to answer these questions by examining Hungarian voters' preferences for political decision-making processes mediated by representatives.

To test voters' preferences regarding decision-making processes, we formulated three hypotheses mirroring our assumptions:

> H1: In all types of crises, there is a preference for the involvement of experts in the decision-making process (cf. Ganuza & Font, 2020; Vittori et al., 2024).

> H2: The type of "crisis narrative" significantly influences voters' preferences regarding the involvement of experts in decision-making processes (cf. Costa Pinto et al., 2018; Wratil & Pastorella, 2018).

> H3: Voters exhibit a preference for expert advice over party lines (cf. Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023).

3. Methodology and Case Selection

We created a vignette survey experiment to address the question of process preferences and test our hypothesis, asking participants to select between scenarios that incorporated the different representational styles.

The research design reflected the assumption that voters' expectations are contextualized, they differ depending on the problem being addressed. Our study applies a vignette survey method that allows for the examination of multiple influencing factors simultaneously, by independently manipulating variables and generating them in different steps of the process (Hainmueller et al., 2014). The vignette survey experiment was chosen for its ability to capture the complexity of voters' preferences, addressing interactions between variables, such as the type of crisis and the preferred type of representational process. By varying each

attribute separately in the vignette stories, this method assesses both independent and interactive effects simultaneously.

The vignette formulated for this research aimed to investigate various representational models and decision-making processes. We presented respondents with a pair of vignettes—two hypothetical scenarios about specific crises. After presenting the scenarios, we asked the participants the following questions: "In the course of their work, do politicians often have to make decisions on controversial issues?" "In the event of conflict, where should good politicians focus their decisions?" In each story, we manipulated three different variables. The first of these variables could take on two distinct values, the second one could take three, and the third one could take four different values. Hypothetical stories looked like the following:

1. *Kálmán* pointed out that in a *social crisis*, the *common good* is particularly important. In a crisis situation, the *public interest* takes precedence.
2. *Katalin* pointed out that in an *economic crisis*, the *interests of the voters* are particularly important. In a crisis situation, the *interests of the people* come first.
3. *Kálmán* pointed out that in an *economic crisis*, a *unified party program* is particularly important. In a crisis situation, *party discipline* takes precedence.
4. *Katalin* pointed out that in an *environmental crisis*, *expert advice* is particularly important. In a crisis situation, *expertise* is the priority.

The expressions in italics indicate the variables, with the last two underlined expressions forming the third variable. This leads us to a $2 \times 3 \times 4$ arrangement with 24 possible scenarios. This design consists of three attributes with a total of nine levels (see Table 1). For the complete list of vignette stories used in our survey experiment, see the appendices.

The conjoint survey experiment was conducted in November 2022. The focus of the research was on the different dimensions of representation including descriptive, substantive, and procedural elements, asking how the different facets of representation resonate with voters due to the constant crisis narratives and populist framework. This objective emphasizes the critical role of the representative by exploring voters' expectations about how representatives should carry out or, in populist terms, perform their representative role. The procedural aspect of the study focused on representative styles determining whether elected

Table 1. Variables and their values in survey vignettes.

Variable	Values of the variables
Sex	Male
	Female
Type of crisis	Economic crisis
	Social crisis
	Environmental crisis
Important considerations, interests	Public good (trustee)
	Party program (party-delegate)
	Experts' considerations (technocratic style)
	Voters' interests (voter-delegate)

leaders should represent their voters (voter-delegate) or the public's interest independently (trustee style), their party (party-delegate), through whose platform they are connected to their constituents, or follow the experts' advice (technocratic style).

We used a questionnaire-based method of individual querying in an online setting. The sample size comprised 1,200 respondents representative of the Hungarian population with respect to age, sex, region, type of settlement, and educational background. This approach provided a broad and inclusive data collection that is reflective of the basic demographic aspects of Hungary.

To analyze the results of our vignette survey experiment, we used several different software programs. For basic operations and analyses, such as querying frequencies and creating charts, we used SPSS. For the average marginal component effect (AMCE) analyses, we used the R statistical software package and Python. AMCE captures the average effect of changing one attribute level with all the other attributes unchanged. In our research, AMCE shows, for example, how the preference for important considerations and interests vary according to the presented crisis type.

4. Results

To thoroughly test our hypotheses, we did not only analyze the dataset as one unit consisting of an original sample of 1,200 respondents. To get a deeper insight, we divided the original sample into three smaller subsamples, each corresponding to a specific type of crisis: economic, social, and environmental. This division created three distinct groups, within which we applied separate AMCE analyses so that we were able to get a better understanding of how voters' preferences change according to the crisis type.

In case of an economic crisis, our findings revealed that Hungarian voters show a preference for having less experts involved in the decision-making process compared to voters' interests, which was considered the baseline; however, these results are not statistically significant. Conversely, decision-making based on party programs is clearly rejected by our respondents, with the data showing negative, statistically significant results: The estimated effect on voter preference is −0.552, with a standard error of 0.054, and a p-value of less than 0.001. This indicates a strong disfavor towards partisan influences within the decision-making process. Interestingly our respondents did not dislike the trustee model but rather showed a preference, albeit statistically not significant, for integrating public interest defined independently by the representative into the decision-making process. Figure 1 and Table 2 show the detailed results.

In case of a social crisis, preference patterns among Hungarian voters show a somewhat different pattern compared to that observed in an economic crisis. During a social crisis, our respondents demonstrate a more sordid rejection of experts, party lines, and the public interest as defined by the representatives compared to incorporating voters' interests in the decision-making process. In this scenario, all three results are statistically significant.

Analyzing the impact of including experts in the decision-making process shows a negative effect, with an estimated effect of −0.295, with a standard error of 0.055 and a p-value of less than 0.001. In the case of party lines, the estimated effect on voter preference is −0.606, with a standard error of 0.048 and a p-value of less than 0.001. Taking into account the public interest as defined by the representative shows an estimated

effect of −0.145, with a standard error of 0.0546 and a *p*-value of less than 0.001. All three of these variables indicate a strong statistical significance, emphasizing a strong disfavor from our respondents. Figure 2 and Table 3 show the detailed results.
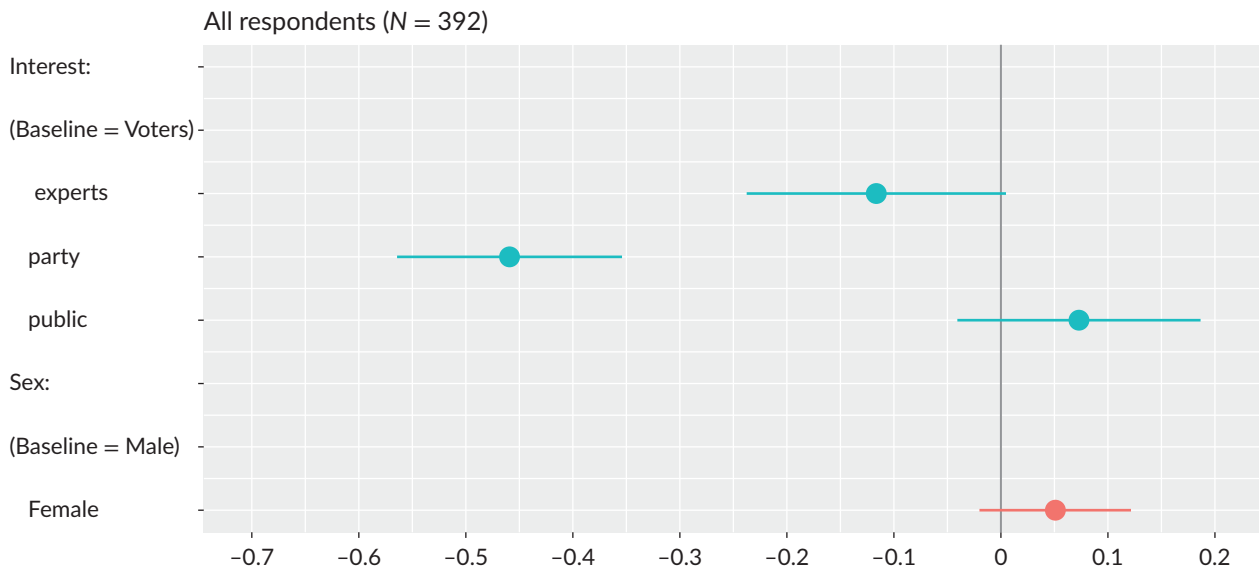

Figure 1. AMCEs on preferences in times of an economic crisis.

Table 2. AMCEs on preference in times of an economic crisis.

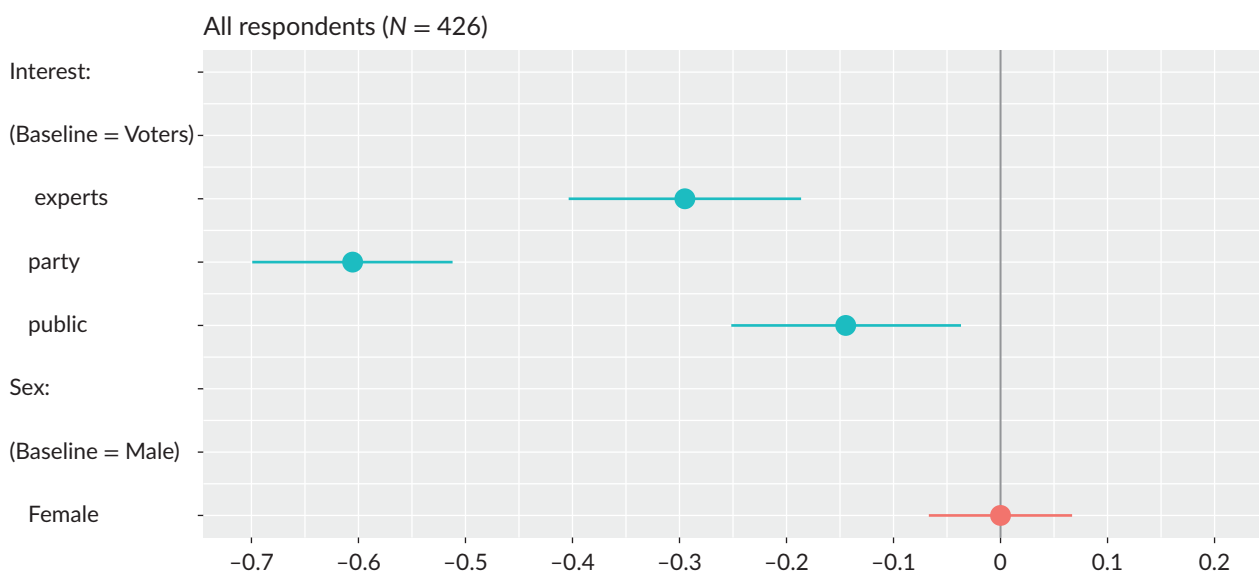| Attribute	Level	Estimate	Std. Err	*P*-value
Interest	Experts	−0.1166	0.0618	0.059
Interest	Party	−0.4594	0.0535	<0.001 ***
Interest	Public interest	−0.0728	0.0579	0.209
Sex	Female	0.0507	0.0361	0.160

Figure 2. AMCEs on preferences in times of a social crisis.

Table 3. AMCEs on preferences in times of a social crisis.

Attribute	Level	Estimate	Std. Err	P-value
Interest	Experts	−0.2952	0.0552	<0.001 ***
Interest	Party	−0.6056	0.0477	<0.001 ***
Interest	Public interest	−0.1449	0.0546	<0.001 ***
Sex	Female	0.0000	0.0341	0.993

Results connected to an environmental crisis exhibit similarities to those observed in the case of a social crisis. In this situation, our study finds that respondents consistently reject the inclusion of experts, party lines, and the public interest defined by the representative in the decision-making process. Interestingly, among these, rejection of party commitment stands out as the only factor that is statistically significant, with an effect of −0.5515, a standard error of 0.0543, and a p-value of less than 0.001. This again underlines a strong statistical significance. Figure 3 and Table 4 show the detailed results.

Based on these results, our first hypothesis is rejected; respondents in our sample tend to reject the inclusion of experts in the political decision-making process, or at least do not show a statistically significant preference for them. As for the contextual effect of crisis types and the commitment to party lines, we could observe rather similar trends emerging for all three subsamples. Hence, we may deduce that the type of crisis has no
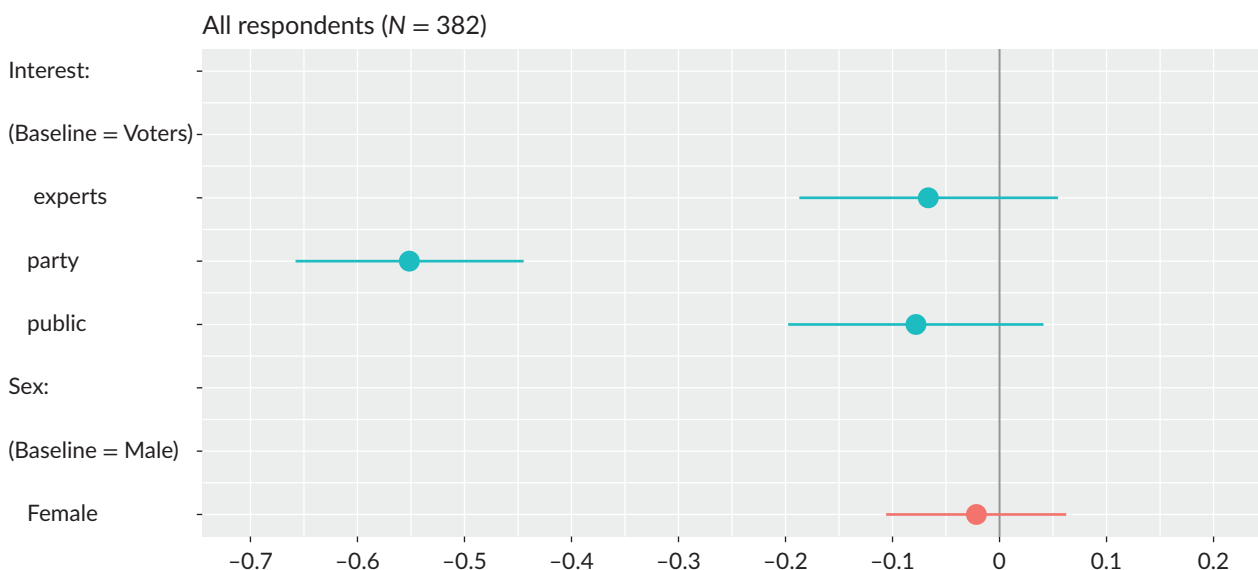

Figure 3. AMCEs on preferences in times of an environmental crisis.

Table 4. AMCEs on preferences in times of an environmental crisis.

Attribute	Level	Estimate	Std. Err	P-value
Interest	Experts	−0.0667	0.0615	0.278
Interest	Party	−0.5515	0.0543	<0.001 ***
Interest	Public interest	−0.0781	0.0605	0.197
Sex	Female	−0.022	0.0428	0.607

significant effect on the preferences of the respondents and parties are disfavored. We can further solidify these results by testing our hypotheses (H2 and H3) on the original sample.

Upon examining Figure 4 and Table 5, which present the results of the AMCE model of the original sample, we can see that respondents in our survey experiment in general show a statistically significant aversion to incorporating partisan interests in the decision-making process. Interestingly, they also have similar views on the inclusion of experts and on prioritizing the public interest embodied by the representatives. Respondents demonstrate the strongest preference for considering voters' interest in the decision-making process.

These results suggest that the type of crisis does not significantly influence voters' preferences regarding the involvement of experts in decision-making processes, although, in an environmental crisis, expert
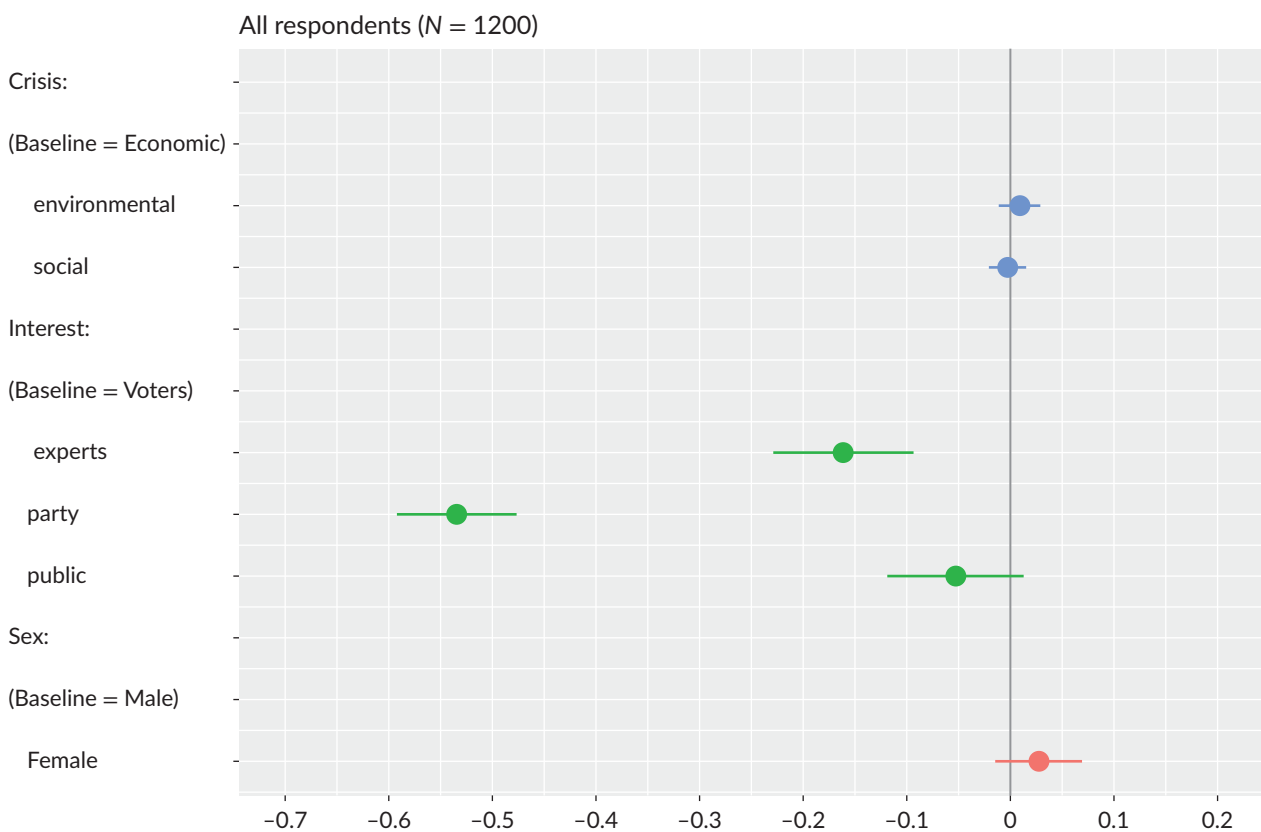

Figure 4. AMCEs on preferences in the decision-making process.

Table 5. AMCEs on preferences in the decision-making process.

Attribute	Level	Estimate	Std. Err	z value	Pr(> |z|)
Crisis	Environmental	0.0091	0.0099	0.919	0.36
Crisis	Social	−0.0027	0.0093	−0.290	0.77
Interest	Experts	−0.1612	0.0345	−4.672	<0.001 ***
Interest	Party	−0.5342	0.0295	−18.126	<0.001 ***
Interest	Public interest	−0.0527	0.0335	−1.574	0.012
Sex	Female	0.0274	0.0213	1.287	0.20

involvement appears to be more acceptable. However, these findings are not statistically significant, resulting in the rejection of our second hypothesis.

Our third hypothesis is supported by our results, although we need to emphasize its complex nature. Our respondents in the sample exhibit a preference for expert advice over party lines and thus, while they exhibit the expected anti-party sentiment, they do not fill the representative gap by bringing in the experts. Both parties and experts are generally rejected by voters in favor of including voters' interests in the political decision-making process.

5. Discussion

Based on our findings, the Hungarian electorate prioritizes voters' opinions above all else which translates into the preference for the voter-delegate style of representation. Simultaneously, our respondents show a strong aversion towards party programs (the party mandate style), which was expected. This aversion contrasts strongly with the reality of the highly centralized Hungarian political arena. There is little room to maneuver among the strong parties and party patronage rules over the power structure (Meyer-Sahling & Jager, 2012). Additionally, political loyalty and party discipline are strong and expected, with authoritative party leadership, making Hungary "an extreme case for charismatic leadership and populism" (Metz & Plesz, 2023, p. 321) while cooperation across party lines is halted by populist polarization. Although voters appear to have little faith in their representatives to define the public good (trustee style), they are also opposed to including experts (technocratic style) in the decision-making process. This result is rather stable and does not vary according to the crisis frame applied, with only one exception: When the context of the decision is framed as an environmental crisis, the involvement of experts seems to be more acceptable, although this result is not conclusive. Voters do not seem to expect their representatives to handle crises based on inputs from experts, maybe because even at the top level of politics the preference for technocratic representation is only used to further support the regime and contribute to its legitimacy. While these results do not support the presence of technocratic preferences, they are only valid in mediated decision-making processes. Thus, they do not refute preferences for direct expert involvement, either in framing public policies or shaping governmental decisions.

What to make of this strong preference for consulting citizens during decision-making? At the level of representatives, it is a clear message about the voter-delegate: Representatives are supposed to represent. They are expected to monitor and take into consideration their constituency's interests. However, we do know that elected Hungarian politicians do not actually work in a constituency-oriented way even if they promise to do so (Papp, 2018), which, on the one hand, shows the defective functioning of Hungarian democracy and indicates weakening electoral linkages, and, on the other hand, signals how performative politics can alter perceptions.

Altered perceptions are not new to democratic functioning as Ilonszki noted in 1998 representation in Hungary seems to show a well-polished picture, although behind this lies a more disenchanting reality where weak electoral linkages and a substantial representational deficit are documented (Ilonszki, 1998). Since then, the populist regime has incorporated even more performative elements among which the national consultations process is worth mentioning in relation to our results as its use is framed as a channel to listen to voters' opinions. In this regard, the strong preference for the voter-delegate style is answered through a

string of pseudo-participatory measures and the occasional involvement of experts. Despite the lack of democratic content, these performative elements contribute to the legitimacy of the regime and strengthen the representative linkage between the political elite and the voters. The highly personalized politics of Hungary might overshadow the lack of proper institutional functioning.

Our research is lacking in this aspect as it does not inquire about preferred institutional (or other) settings for the decision-making processes. How voters want to express their opinions is a question worth pursuing in future research.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

Legitimacy First: Marine Le Pen's Visual De-Demonisation Strategies on Instagram

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Abstract

Recent research on populist visual communication has found a predominance of positivity in the way the populist radical right (PRR) communicates on Instagram. This counters the understanding of PRR actors as "dark" communicators, relying on appeals to negative emotions and attacks against perceived enemies and wider outgroups. This article tests the novel conceptual framework of "visual de-demonisation" that has been proposed to capture the interplay between populist strategic communication, radical right mainstreaming, and positive content on visual social media. This article uses Marine Le Pen's Instagram account (2015–2021) as a case in point, to illustrate the dynamics of visual de-demonisation and unpack how the three angles of the strategy (legitimacy, good character, and policy) are performed visually. The study offers two contributions to the literature on populism and leadership. First, it expands theory-building around visual de-demonisation by operationalising the framework, testing its empirical application, and producing further theoretical considerations to support concept development. Second, it contributes to debates on the mainstreaming of the radical right, by empirically unpacking its visual performance and evidencing the role of legitimacy-signalling as a prominent concern of populist leaders interested in de-demonising.

Keywords

de-demonisation; Instagram; legitimacy; Le Pen; populist radical right; visual communication

1. Introduction

The idea that an image is worth a thousand words finds particular resonance in social media research on politicians' self-presentation. Social media allow direct communication with the public and when it comes to

sharing visuals such as photos, videos and "stories," politicians retain full control over the carefully curated image they wish to disclose to the public.

Visual-centred social media platforms have witnessed incredible growth and this growing popularity has not gone unnoticed: politicians are increasingly using them as a political tool to manage their persona, provide visual diaries of their campaigns, and mobilise supporters by projecting authentic and trustworthy images (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017). For this reason, scholars have recently started to investigate the use of visual social media, such as Instagram and TikTok, as tools for political communication (see e.g., Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2024; Grusell & Nord, 2020; O'Connell, 2018; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

Social media, including visual platforms, provide the perfect logic for populist communication because they enable unmediated access and a direct relationship with the public (Engesser et al., 2017). Populism denotes a thin ideology centred on people-centrism, anti-elitism, and the appeal to popular sovereignty (Mudde, 2004). In communication terms, populist features are manifested in ideology-infused key messages that praise and stress the people's virtues, blame and discredit the elites, and demand popular sovereignty (Ernst et al., 2017).

Combining populism with authoritarianism and nativism, the populist radical right (PRR) is the most successful variety of populism in Europe (Mudde, 2007). Scholars have recently started to pay close analytical attention to their visual communication on social media, finding mixed results. On Instagram, some PRR leaders emphasise their professional images, while also providing peaks at their private lives; others maintain a more negative and hostile style (Bast, 2021). The projection of professionalism and ordinariness relies on positive content: in building this type of image, populists communicate competence, trust, hope, authenticity, and familiarity. Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2024) have shown that the prevalence of positive content in populist visual communication is particularly evident on TikTok. On this new platform, heavily oriented to new and young generations, PRR actors are rebranding themselves as funny, approachable, connecting, and caring individuals.

These findings are puzzling because they counter the established understanding of PRR actors as "dark" communicators, relying on strong appeals to negative emotions, such as anger and fear, and attacks against perceived enemies and wider outgroups (Nai, 2021; for a review on populism and emotions see Bonansinga, 2020; Verbalyte et al., 2022, 2024). Bonansinga (2024) has recently argued that the use of positive content in PRR visual communication can be better understood through the lenses of "visual de-demonisation."

Bonansinga (2024, p. 4) conceptualises visual de-demonisation as a three-fold strategy that helps radical parties improve their image by emphasising their legitimacy, the good character of the leader, and their ample policy platform. While all politicians strive to present themselves in a positive light, her work stresses that this dynamic serves a specific function in populist politics: the desire to de-demonise and communicate legitimacy and integration into the party system. This is because populist communication is split between a desire for distinctiveness and a wish to perform competence, seriousness, and professionalism (Curini et al., 2024). In line with this nascent scholarship, the present article suggests that, while populist parties may continue to signal their distinctiveness from mainstream actors via discourse, they have an incentive—provided by visual social media—to portray their leaders as credible, caring, and "normal" politicians.

Building on Bonansinga's (2024) conceptual framework for visual de-demonisation, this article illustrates the empirical application of the concept by analysing Marine Le Pen's Instagram account from its opening in 2015 to 2021. Le Pen represents an ideal case study that allows us to examine her visual communication during the crucial transition of her Front National into the new and re-branded Rassemblement National (RN). By focusing on a qualitative visual analysis of Marine Le Pen's posts, this article unpacks the visual content of her de-demonisation strategy, exploring how the different aspects of Bonansinga's (2024) framework are performed visually.

The application of the visual de-demonisation concept offers crucial insights into understanding how Le Pen communicates with her followers on Instagram and why her profile appears very different and considerably less hostile than on other platforms. The analysis shows that Le Pen focuses most of her visual de-demonisation efforts first and foremost on building legitimacy. Glimpses at her character are also offered, in posts featuring interactions with targeted subjects such as children, pets, and the elderly to underscore qualities such as care and compassion. Finally, references to policy themes suggest that Le Pen has also tried to communicate broad policy interests, going beyond the traditional anti-immigration stances attributed to her party, hence performing a fully-fledged visual de-demonisation.

The article provides two contributions to the literature on populism and leadership. First, it expands theory-building efforts around the novel concept of visual de-demonisation by operationalising and empirically applying the framework, and detailing what specific content comes attached to different visual de-demonisation strategies. Building on the analysis, the article produces further theoretical considerations to support concept development. Second, it contributes to debates on the mainstreaming of the radical right, by empirically unpacking its visual performance and evidencing the role of legitimacy-signalling as a prominent concern of populist leaders interested in de-demonising.

In the next sections, the present article will introduce the theoretical background and the concept of visual de-demonisation, before proceeding to its operationalisation, then delving into the analysis.

2. Populist Communication and Visual Social Media

Research on visual social media as tools for political communication is part of a wider research agenda on the power of visuals in politics. Visuals are important for political communication because they elicit strong emotional reactions (Brader, 2005). Compared to text, visuals are easier to process thanks to the quick associations they prime and are also more memorable (Stenberg, 2006; for a review see Dumitrescu, 2016).

Research on Instagram as a tool for political communication has focused on strategy and content. Studies have revealed that, in strategic terms, politicians tend to use the platform in similar ways as other social media. That is, they mostly broadcast their issues, showing the depth of their engagement with the policy domain; they also use the platform to promote their candidacies and to a lesser extent, to mobilise their followers (Filimonov et al., 2016; Russmann & Svensson, 2016). Overall they interact quite little with their supporters, showing that their presence within the platform is mostly to open a channel of communication without reciprocation.

In terms of visual content, studies have shown that politicians tend to emphasise their professional images, corresponding to what Grabe and Bucy (2009) labelled the "ideal candidate frame." For the authors, this means

visualising competence and trustworthiness via the use of professional images that show the account holder at work, engaging with peers, being interviewed, and posing with international leaders at specific events. Several studies across the globe have confirmed this finding, providing evidence for the predominance of the ideal candidate frame in the 2016 US presidential primaries (Munoz & Towner, 2017), in the self-presentation of Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019), or in the 2018 Swedish general election (Grusell & Nord, 2020). Some studies have confirmed that this strategy is successful with audiences in generating visual attention and forming impressions (Lindholm et al., 2021). However, Brands et al. (2021) found that, in the US and Netherlands, politicians showcase a humanised and relatable version of themselves, more than their authority and legitimacy, with a number of studies in other contexts showing this strategy to be particularly popular with followers (see e.g., Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Larsson, 2019; McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020).

This variance has similarly surfaced in the first studies to tackle the question of political communication on Instagram from the perspective of PRR actors. For example, Sampietro and Sánchez-Castillo (2020) noticed that Vox's leader Santiago Abascal uses sports and his private life to showcase an authentic, positive, and inspiring image. Looking at a range of leaders, Bast (2021) found a variegated picture, with important differences. While most PRR leaders adhere to the ideal candidate frame and emphasise statesmanship, some others, such as Nigel Farage, offer glimpses at their private life to build an informal image alongside their professional role, and project their authenticity and approachability. However, other leaders, such as Geert Wilders, maintain an aura of negativity on their accounts, as their content features hostility, attacks, and overall negative campaigning. Despite his controversial persona and hostile discourse, Donald Trump did not focus his Instagram communication on nativism or negativity during his first presidency. According to Dobkiewicz (2019), the former US president—now re-elected for a second term—attempted to self-present as a tough but good leader, emphasising inclusivity through pictures and mobilising patriotism.

Expanding the toolkit of visual analysis to the video-based app TikTok, Albertazzi and Bonansinga (2024) have shown that in the case of the Gen-Z-oriented platform, PRR content is almost exclusively positive. The authors found that negative content such as hostile references and attacks is negligible, and in most cases, still comes attached to funny content resulting in the production of TikTok videos that utilise memes and sarcastic or derisive content to denigrate the elites.

Scholars have recently called for more research on populist visual communication, to better conceptualise this under-researched area (Moffitt, 2022a) and specifically enrich our understanding of radical right mainstreaming (Bonansinga, 2024). As Curini et al. (2024, p. 15) put it, PRR parties:

> Have been forced to work out ways in which they can communicate their radical right ideological bona fides, while at the same time seeking to demonstrate that they are no longer "just" upstart challenger parties, but rather credible parties who want to be taken seriously. While there is an existing literature on how PRR parties attempt to communicate this through their policy platforms, organizational changes or their discourse (see Akkerman et al., 2016), there is a much smaller literature on the role of their visual communication.

Indeed, the strategies of radical right mainstreaming that have received the most scholarly attention to this date are those aimed at the dilution of radical discourse, the expansion of the policy platform beyond

immigration, and the strategy of collaboration with established parties (Akkerman et al., 2016; Mayer, 2013; Moffitt, 2022b). As scholars have noted, these strategies have contributed to the self-presentation of radical right parties as less radical, less niche, and more "coalitionable," and, hence, to their de-demonisation (Ivaldi, 2014). However, the ways these actors utilise visual self-presentation strategies to de-demonise is still an under-researched area (see Caiani, 2024, for a broader review of the visual politics of the radical right).

The next section unpacks the recently proposed concept of visual de-demonisation, which brings together studies on populist leadership and communication to capture how radical leaders are weaponising professional and personal content to rebrand themselves.

3. Operationalising Visual De-Demonisation

Bonansinga (2024) argues that the PRR's predilection for positive content on visual social media can be better understood through the conceptual lenses of visual de-demonisation, understood as a three-fold strategy comprising a legitimacy, good character, and policy angle. This framework builds on existing research establishing legitimacy, credibility, and policy diversification as key elements of radical right mainstreaming and de-demonisation (see e.g., Mayer, 2013), while originally delving into how these strategies can be performed visually. It further builds on the literature on self-personalisation that has observed how the media focus has increasingly shifted "from the politician as occupier of a public role to the politician as a private individual, as a person distinct from their public role" (Van Aelst et al., 2012, p. 214). The framework thus complements and extends existing scholarship by shedding light on the role that visual strategies, image management, emotions, and storytelling play in processes of mainstreaming and de-demonisation.

Following Bonansinga's (2024, p. 4) conceptual framework, the "legitimacy" angle of visual de-demonisation builds the party's credibility and trustworthiness by projecting "an image of the radical right leader as a competent and skilful political actor, capable of guiding the country." This is what scholars have labelled the "hard side" of personalisation, which focuses on representing professionalism and competence (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019). Empirically, this would mean presenting the politician: (a) in a professional or public context, such as at work or during an official trip; (b) wearing formal clothes, notably a suit; (c) interacting with targeted groups projecting endorsements, such as crowds or institutional actors; and (d) performing work-related activities, such as giving a speech or being interviewed.

A visual de-demonisation strategy, however, is not solely oriented on establishing legitimacy, and the two should not be equated. Legitimation is one of the desired processes engineered by visual de-demonisation practices, ultimately supporting the concerned radical right actor in achieving mainstream status and widespread acceptance. However, according to Bonansinga's (2024) framework, it is not the only one. Radical right actors interested in improving their image and visually de-demonising also seek to communicate credibility and broad policy interests beyond immigration.

Therefore, the second angle of visual de-demonisation (the "good character" sub-strategy) goes beyond legitimacy to establish credibility, trustworthiness, and relatability. It strives to showcase the radical right leader "as authentic, approachable and credible because 'normal'" (Bonansinga, 2024, p. 5). Scholars have labelled this the "soft side" of personalisation, as politicians focus their self-presentation on their informal

persona and "average" self (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019). It can be operationalised as a strategy comprising: (a) a private or informal context, such as the leader's home or outdoors; (b) wearing informal clothes such as jeans; (c) interacting with targeted groups suggesting intimacy and closeness, such as family and specific social groups (e.g., older people and children); and (d) performing non-work-related activities, such as eating and drinking.

Finally, the third sub-strategy of visual de-demonisation, the "policy" angle, was described as "entail[ing] the visual (re)presentation of the number of issues the leader cares about" (Bonansinga, 2024, p. 5). Empirically, we expect posts to feature verbal mentions of policy themes, showcasing areas of policy work that the leader intends to prioritise and pursue once in office.

Building on Table 1, the present article suggests that the policy angle should not be considered in isolation, as it can help reinforce the legitimacy or character side of visual de-demonisation strategies. Insights from the nascent literature on gender, image, and the radical right, point out that gender stereotypes extend to the policy domain, depending on what issues are stereotypically associated with each gender (Bast et al., 2021; Brands et al., 2021). Specifically, education, welfare and family are considered "softer" policy issues and are labelled "feminine" because they supposedly communicate that politicians "care" about their communities (Lee & Lim, 2016). In contrast, policy issues such as defence and security are considered "harder" policy areas because they communicate confidence and leadership, and are therefore stereotypically labelled "masculine" (Lee & Lim, 2016). This suggests that the gendered dimension of policy cues can steer visual de-demonisation attempts towards the legitimacy or the character strategy. A focus on feminine issues would communicate care, a quality at the centre of the "good character" strategy. On the other hand, a focus on masculine issues would project competence and statesmanship, the qualities radical right leaders aim to project when employing a legitimacy-oriented strategy.

Table 1. Operationalisation of visual de-demonisation strategies.

Visual de-demonisation strategies	
Legitimacy	• Professional/public context • Formal clothing • Showcase of endorsement groups • Work-related activities
Good character	• Informal/private context • Informal clothing • Showcase of intimacy groups • Non-work-related activities
Policy	• Mentions of policy areas/themes

4. Marine Le Pen: An Illustrative Case Study

With the aim to contribute to theory-building around visual de-demonisation, the author analysed the Instagram account of Marine Le Pen, the presidential candidate of the re-branded RN, formerly Front National, which boosts nearly half a million followers (as of October 2024). Le Pen constitutes what the theory labels an ideal or typical case study (Gerring & Cojocaru, 2016) because, as party leader, she expressed a desire to de-demonise both her party and her image. When led by her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen,

the party was involved in several antisemitic scandals and overall perceived as a racist and dangerous political force (Mayer, 2018). This case thus illustrates the content of the visual de-demonisation construct.

Instagram posts were retrieved via the Instagram API, from 2015 (the year her account was opened) to 2021, with a total sample of 1069 posts. This enabled the examination of a period of time covering the re-branding of RN, as well as campaign and non-campaign periods (i.e., the 2017 presidential and legislative elections, and the 2019 European Parliament elections), alongside the global pandemic. Videos and slideshows were excluded, as the analysis of multiple images and video scenes would require an ad hoc methodology. A random sample of 25 posts per year was selected, resulting in an in-depth qualitative analysis of 175 posts. The unit of analysis was the entire Instagram post, including the image, its caption, and any emojis, tags, or hashtags.

The analysis was carried out in two steps: First, I applied the operationalised visual de-demonisation framework to classify whether posts fell under the category of legitimacy, good character, or policy. In order to understand the relevance of this content vis-à-vis hostile discourse, the study noted any reference to negative campaigning, based on whether posts featured anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-elite, anti-vax, and anti-expert content. These are broad categories that generally capture the "enemies" of populist communication. Second, I qualitatively analysed posts to explore in-depth the specific types of professional or private settings on display, the activities performed, the groups and individuals featured, the types of interaction, and clothing.

5. Le Pen's Visual De-Demonisation Strategy

The analysis revealed a focus on legitimacy-oriented visual posts, featuring professional contexts, work-related activities, and interactions with crowds of voters, the media, and other political leaders. This is in line with other studies that noticed Le Pen's heavy focus on projecting a statesmanship image on Instagram (Bast, 2021). These posts indeed appeared as the norm on Le Pen's account, except for 2020. Likely due to the pandemic and the restrictions on movement and gatherings in the year 2020, posts performing legitimacy via interaction with others and professional contexts were less common in that period. At the same time, images showcasing private and more informal contexts, and outdoor spaces appeared more frequently.

Images falling into the legitimacy category focused heavily on representing Le Pen as a skilful leader both domestically and internationally (see Figure 1). Domestically, she was portrayed as a "beloved" leader by using images featuring large crowds at every appearance. In such posts, she was often presented while hugging supporters or taking selfies with them, blurring the lines between showcasing legitimacy and approval, while also communicating a good character (see Section 6 for further elaboration on these overlaps). Her Instagram account appeared in sync with the overall visual strategy of the party, which as Dumitrescu (2017) has noted, focuses on personalised campaigning and communicating "closeness." Le Pen's account projected competence by sharing photos that showed her visiting power plants, economic fora, and schools, hence presenting herself as a politician in touch with various sectors. Internationally, Le Pen was portrayed as a globally "recognised" leader. This recognition was signalled by images showing Le Pen engaging in international trips, being welcomed by prime ministers and party leaders across Europe for official institutional visits and international congresses. Le Pen was also shown attending media interviews in a variety of locations, from Italy to Britain or Japan. This type of image acts as a media endorsement (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017), hence signalling that the RN presidential candidate is a "trusted" leader whose opinion
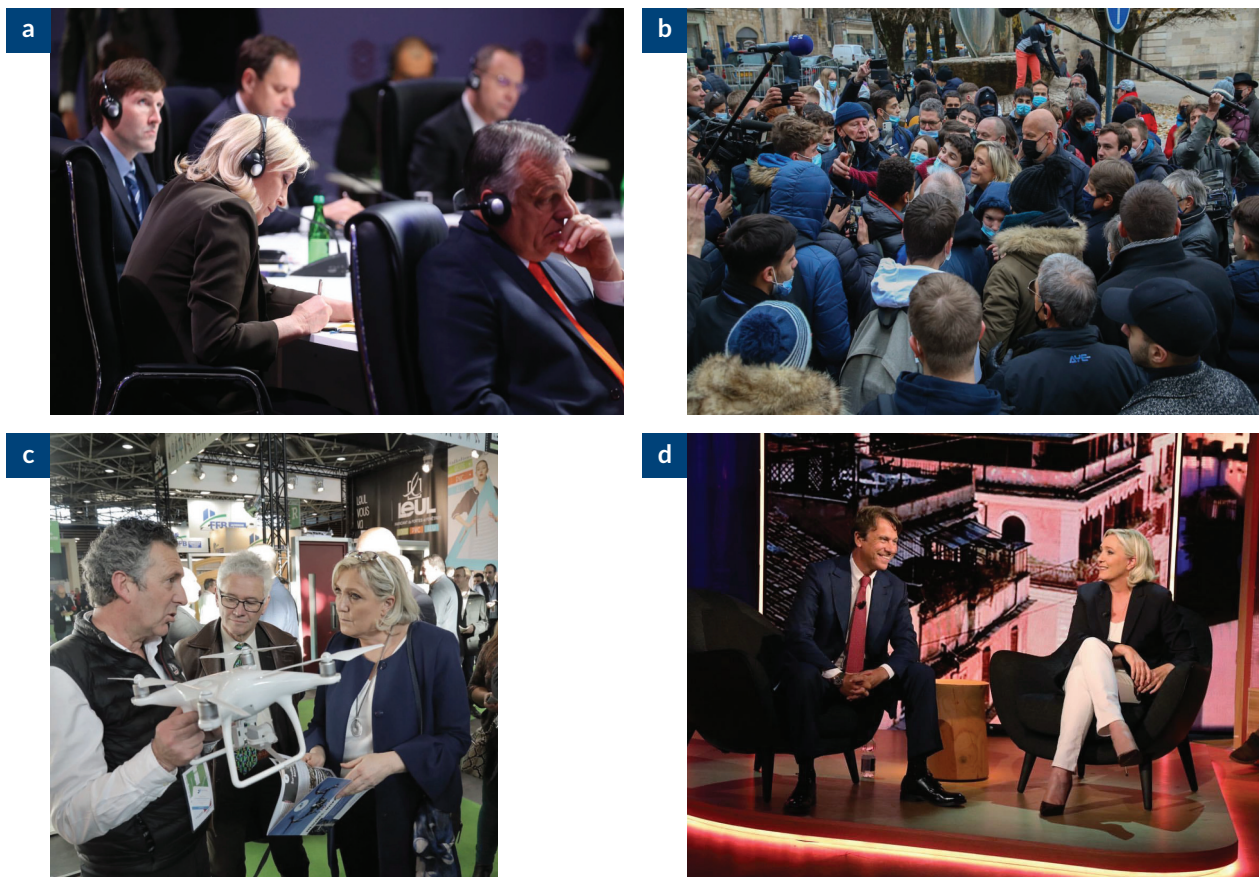
Figure 1. Examples of legitimacy-oriented visual de-demonisation: (a) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 4 December 2021; (b) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 25 November 2021; (c) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 14 February 2019; and (d) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 8 October 2018.

is sought out by established outlets across the globe. This appears as an example supporting Wajner's argument (2022, p. 422) that "international legitimacy can be used as a source of domestic legitimation."

However, there was friction and incoherence between the normalised image Le Pen attempted to project and the "alliances" she visualised on Instagram. In fact, the other politicians featured in her posts to enhance her image as a respected leader were very often representatives of PRR parties. Among these were: Matteo Salvini (Lega, Italy), Santiago Abascal (Vox, Spain), Heinz-Christian Strache (FPÖ, Austria), Viktor Orbán (Fidesz, Hungary), André Ventura (Chega, Portugal), Mateusz Morawiecki (PiS, Poland), Tomio Okamura (SPD, Czech Republic), Veselin Mareshki (Volya, Bulgaria), Tom Van Grieken (Vlaams Belang, Belgium), and Geert Wilders (PVV, The Netherlands). Two posts also featured Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's former strategist.

Given the small sample under examination, this is certainly a strong representation of radical leaders and a controversial strategy for Marine Le Pen for two main reasons: On the one hand, RN's presidential candidate showcases her international trips to meet fellow politicians in Europe, projecting the image of a leader who is respected, well-connected and welcome, if not celebrated, abroad. This is what the literature labels a "populist transnational performance" which helps populists gain legitimacy by mobilising the transnational sphere (Wajner, 2022). On the other hand, however, Le Pen's posts establish a clear and visual link with controversial figures who embody the extreme rhetoric and practices she supposedly wishes to clear from

her party. This incoherence is at the heart of what Curini et al. (2024, p. 3) label the "Janus face of populist visual communication": populist parties and leaders desire to establish themselves as mainstream actors, while at the same time attempting to stay true to their identity as anti-establishment actors, going "tough" on crime, and breaking the taboos of political "correctness."

Overall the showcase of legitimacy took place by emphasising the approval of large crowds and the endorsement of media and political personalities. This aimed at establishing Le Pen as a respected leader and a viable option for the presidency.

Although a less popular strategy, Le Pen has also increasingly turned to Instagram to showcase her qualities as a caring, kind, and approachable politician. Posts in this category showcased her in private, informal, or outdoor settings (such as her home, the market, bars, restaurants, or the beach) and featured activities where she was not performing work duties. Among these, were posts that focused on food and drinks (for example drinking coffee or picking a dessert), playing with her cats and puppies, hiking, and interacting with limited groups of supporters, as opposed to large crowds (see Figure 2).

Animals and specific social groups are usually utilised by politicians to project qualities such as tenderness, sensitivity, and care. In Le Pen's case, cats, children, the youth, and the elderly, took up this role. These subjects seemed to be used strategically to communicate the image of a caring woman, a mother, and a

Figure 2. Examples of good character visual de-demonisation: (a) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 28 October 2021; (b) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 8 August 2020; (c) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 23 November 2019; and (d) @marine_lepen, Instagram post, 2 September 2018.

compassionate individual. Indeed, when these groups appeared in the pictures, the latter were most commonly also featuring contact and interaction, such as hugging, kissing, laughing together, and taking selfies, all visual representations of warmth, proximity, and empathy (Bast et al., 2021). Given the positive affect cues generated by smiling and the caring inspired by these image types, this is likely the content that puts Le Pen most in sync with the norm infrastructure of the platform.

While most of the posts showed Le Pen in formal clothes such as dark suits, several images presented her in jeans or hiking clothes, often in posts that were appreciative of nature and landscapes, both in metropolitan France and the overseas territories. Although a minority, these posts particularly stood out given the predominance of professional pictures, because they appeared to craft a humanised and relatable image of Le Pen, underscoring her ordinariness and potentially generating feelings of closeness in the audience.

Finally, the analysis looked at the policy-oriented angle of visual de-demonisation and found a total of 60 mentions of policy areas and themes, which were coded inductively as they appeared (see Table 2).

Table 2. Policy themes.

Theme	Frequency
EU integration	14
Industries and workers	13
Rights and liberties	9
Security and defence (including migration and terrorism)	7
Anti-globalisation and sovereignty	4
Commemoration	4
Education	3
Comment on breaking news events	2
Overseas territories	2
Covid-19	2

The most common theme concerned EU integration, and featured posts showcasing state visits to other EU member states, and calling for a Europe of Nation, a typical trope of RN's discourse (Lorimer, 2020). The second most common theme concerned what was labelled "industries and workers," as these posts called for solidarity and protection for a range of professions, from miners to firefighters. The latter category was weaponised often, using the indisputable heroism of firemen to lend Le Pen legitimacy by proxy, as she presented herself as the "heroine of heroes" (Freistein et al., 2022). Posts also featured visits to farming sites, sector-specific federations, or innovation labs, underlining how these would be policy priorities for a Le Pen presidency. Finally, the third most common theme concerned "rights and liberties," capturing a series of posts celebrating women's rights, defending the freedom of the press, and particularly calling for the recognition of animal rights, in line with the party's increasing interest in this topic (Goodliffe, 2018; Schwörer & Fernández-García, 2023). Research on RN's policy positions similarly confirms that the party has widened its policy platforms over time to include an increasing proportion of socioeconomic issues, which ultimately made up 36% of its 2022 programme as opposed to 17% in 2002 (Zhang & Tang, 2024).

Interestingly, and to a certain extent incoherently, the themes owned by the PRR, such as the critique of immigration, globalisation, and Islam, appeared as minimal mentions in the sample. More generally, the hostile,

racist, and anti-system attacks that are traditionally attributed to Le Pen's party were almost negligible, and no anti-vax or anti-expert content was present altogether despite the examination of the pandemic period. Following Ivaldi and Pineau (2022), this may be an indication of Le Pen's desire to "triangulate" the party's policy positions, becoming more liberal on social and family issues while maintaining far-right values on cultural issues. This further suggests that visual social media are perhaps used strategically to communicate the positive side of this policy triangulation, while the rest is left for other channels.

Overall the policy themes in the posts under examination spanned across different sectors, creating a balance of what the literature has labelled feminine and masculine issues. Part of the themes fall in the category of feminine issues, such as education, rights, and liberties; however, there were also mentions of defence, terrorism, and references to some industries from energy to transport and farming, which are usually considered masculine issues (Brands et al., 2021). This balance in projecting both masculine and feminine virtues is typical of Le Pen, as she has strived to present herself as a "daughter," "mother," and "captain" embodying the stereotypically feminine values of family and care, and the masculine attributes of authority and leadership (Geva, 2020a, 2020b).

Her policy signalling has two implications: First, it suggests that Marine Le Pen is attempting to showcase that her policy interests are wide, and her policy platform can go beyond the cultural and symbolic dimension of politics. In other words, her strategy attempts to respond to critics who dismiss the PRR are mere anti-immigration parties. Second, the balance between feminine and masculine issues points to a policy platform that is equally split between "hard" and "soft" issues that communicate a leader is both competent and caring enough to address both. It is important to note that her policy-related posts did not go in-depth about her proposals and were, most of the time, general references to the theme she "cherishes." However, this still signals to the public that there is much more to uncover about the party, and hence can function as an invitation to follow and learn more.

6. Discussion

This study has shown how the visual de-demonisation framework applies to the case of Marine Le Pen. Le Pen appears as a skilled communicator on Instagram, who has embraced the aesthetic, personalistic, and positive core of the platform. Her account is highly personalised, as she appears in virtually all posts. It uses plenty of close-ups that signal closeness to the audience; it also combines more private and amateur shots, including selfies, with professionally taken pictures. This suggests the visual side of the platform has been fully weaponised; however, other aspects are misused or ignored altogether. For example, although most posts contain hashtags, Le Pen fails to use them for the purpose of post circulation and virality. On the contrary, they are used in the place of geotags to indicate geographical locations (e.g., #Paris). Only during electoral campaign times, more context-specific hashtags were used, based on the election taking place (for instance, #regionales2015, #Législatives2017, #Municipales2020, and #Européennes2019). Overall it appears she has partially embraced the norms that structure communication and expectations on Instagram, without fully exploiting the platform's affordances in terms of virality and circulation.

Despite these shortcomings, Le Pen communicates professionalism and good leadership and suggests that her policy platform is close to the interests of ordinary people. This is combined with a positive image of the leader shown in friendly and relatable settings, in close physical contact with citizens and showcasing her

personal qualities of empathy and care. Therefore, by integrating elements of professionalism, ordinariness, and policy signalling in her Instagram strategy, Marine Le Pen is performing a visual de-demonisation that focuses, although in differential ways, on establishing her legitimacy, proving her good character, and showcasing her broad policy goals. Based on Bonansinga's (2024) framework, Le Pen is performing a fully-fledged visual de-demonisation that prioritises signalling legitimacy.

For younger generations, who constitute the majority of users of the platform both in France (Statista, 2024a) but also globally (Statista, 2024b), and have not been exposed to the old Front National of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the new RN can appear as a viable option. This means that her visual de-demonisation strategy enables Le Pen to sanitise her image both in the eyes of users who know the party and are willing to take a second look, and in the eyes of young users who begin to form their political identities and opinions before they head to the polls for the first time. The concept of visual de-demonisation is therefore useful to better understand Le Pen's increasing appeal to the electorate, especially the youths.

Conceptually, the study has highlighted several ways in which the novel visual de-demonisation framework can be improved. The empirical application has shown that the three central strategies of visual de-demonisation should not be considered as strictly separate but rather intertwining. First of all, the analyses showed that clothing is not a useful variable to differentiate between projections of competence and showcase of ordinariness. A number of posts featured Le Pen wearing formal clothes, such as blazers and heels (operationalised as elements of the legitimacy strategy); however, those same posts showed her in intimate moments, such as a coffee break with colleagues and friends, hence offering a personable image as part of the good character strategy. Moreover, the analysis evidenced how interaction with large crowds cannot be solely taken as a performance of legitimacy and approval. As some posts in the sample showed, Le Pen was often visualised interacting with the crowd, for example hugging supporters and taking selfies, which was initially operationalised as a showcase of the good character strategy, because of the closeness, warmth, and authenticity these actions project. Finally, the gendered dimension of policy-signalling, with its distinction between feminine and masculine issues, communicates stereotypical qualities that may at times be in contrast with the other attributes cued by the same image. For example, the analysis noted some instances in which masculine policy references to certain industries or security and defence (a stereotypical projection of competence and professionalism), were accompanied by outdoor settings, informal clothing, or warm interactions with targeted groups (i.e., a display of good character). Therefore, the preliminary evidence offered by this study suggests that visual de-demonisation may be better conceived as a single strategy comprising micro-dynamics that build and intersect with one another, altogether contributing to providing a well-rounded image of the populist leader as a legitimate and personable politician, interested in a wide range of policy areas.

7. Conclusion

This article has applied the novel concept of visual de-demonisation to the case of French radical right leader, Marine Le Pen, to empirically test the relevance of this new construct and contribute to theory-building. While scholars have previously concluded that broadcasting is the most used strategy on Instagram, this article builds on the new scholarship suggesting that for PRR parties, the option to visually de-demonise is also an important strategic goal of their presence on the platform. The empirical analysis has shown that there is an identifiable strategic utility in the way the Marine Le Pen uses the platform. Le Pen has harnessed Instagram's positive

aura to de-demonise both her party and her own image. For Le Pen, Instagram is a political communication tool that helps her visualise different aspects of professionalism to project the idea of a respected, competent, and legitimate leader. This is matched with glimpses of her character, which portray the person behind the politician as a caring, loving, and approachable individual. Moreover, the near-complete absence of negative content suggests that the platform is almost exclusively envisaged as a space to abandon hostility in favour of positive and aesthetic content.

As PRR parties and leaders continue to gain traction across Europe, this article has highlighted that the visual de-demonisation strategy can appear to populists as a viable way forward to address the dilemma pointed out by Curini et al. (2024) of maintaining an anti-establishment and radical appeal while seeking governability and further integration into the party system. Visual de-demonisation enables those PRR actors interested in improving their profile, to present themselves in a new and positive light. This could be particularly useful to reach groups the PRR traditionally struggles to attract, such as women and youngsters, which represent the majority of users on most visual social media (Bonansinga, 2024). Visual de-demonisation has, therefore, a strategic utility for the PRR, and holds considerable potential for contributing to its mainstreaming.

This article provides two contributions to the literature on populism and leadership: First, it has produced empirically informed theoretical considerations that contribute to further developing the new construct of visual de-demonisation. By detailing what specific content comes attached to different visual de-demonisation strategies and mapping the areas of overlaps, this article has refined our understanding of visual de-demonisation as comprising intersecting micro-dynamics rather than strictly distinguishable strategies. Second, it has contributed to debates on the mainstreaming of the radical right, by empirically unpacking its visual performance, hence complementing and extending studies that have focused on discourse and party competition. By doing so, it has highlighted legitimacy-signalling as a prominent concern for populist leaders interested in de-demonising, opening the way for further research to unpack for whom this is the case and under what conditions.

To further test the validity of the visual de-demonisation construct, future research should compare a wider sample of populist parties with differential interests in de-demonising. Future studies should also examine the impact of this strategy, and to what extent the different aspects of visual de-demonisation are successful in shifting the audiences' perception of these parties and with what impact on voting behaviour. Additional unanswered questions remain, particularly in relation to left-wing populism. Although these actors do not share the nativist and racist stances of the radical right and are perceived as generally less dangerous for democracy, they are still often stigmatised as radical and problematic (the example of Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France being a case in point). Future research should explore to what extent left-wing populists similarly engage with practices of de-demonisation, and with what strategies, variance, and effects.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Twenty-First Century Autocrats and Their Followers: A Comparative Inquiry

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Abstract

Leadership and followership have long been considered to be defining features of democratic politics. However, more recently, both conceptual redefinitions and real-world developments have put issues of leadership and followership in regimes from beyond the family of established liberal democracies center-stage. This article looks into the nature of authoritarian leadership and followership from a comparative perspective and in light of theories of democratic political leadership. As the inquiry suggests, the rise and nature of leadership activities in contemporary authoritarian regimes reflects both the turn towards more competitive types of autocracy and the aspiration of many authoritarian powerholders to be seen as democratic. At the same time, some of the most spectacular manifestations of autocratic leadership relate to democratic rather than established authoritarian regimes. While followers of autocratic leaders can control their leaders only to the extent that a regime provides mechanisms of vertical accountability, authoritarian followers, even in established autocracies, are not in all regards less important or powerful than their democratic counterparts. Many authoritarian followers do not just support autocrats, but actively attack and chase non-followers or followers of other leaders, and thus play an independent role in the legitimation or de-legitimation of leaders and regimes.

Keywords

authoritarian; autocracy; autocrats; followers; followership; leaders; leadership

1. Leadership and Followership Across Political Regimes

Despite the inherent tensions between leadership and democracy (see e.g., Kane, 2007), leadership has been widely considered as a principal feature of democratic governance (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 639), rather than

autocratic rule. In fact, eminent authors in the field, such as Burns (1978), suggested reserving the very term leadership for particular manifestations of agency committed to improving the human condition, strictly distinguishing the latter from instances of mere power-wielding. This obviously marked the beginning, rather than the end, of the leadership debate in modern political science. Ever since the conceptual discovery of bad or toxic leadership (Helms, 2012a, 2014; Heppell, 2011; Kellerman, 2004; Lipman-Blumen, 2005), leadership is no longer understood as any kind of morally advanced activity, intrinsically devoted to increasing the overall amount of happiness, which is at the centre of Burns' famous concept of "transforming leadership" (Burns, 2004). There is good and bad leadership, as well as everything in between, and leadership analysis is largely about distinguishing between leaders' goals and means, and assessing the combination of both regarding its intended and unintended effects (see e.g., Mearsheimer, 2011; Nye, 2008).

Further, leadership, both good and bad, has been acknowledged to include, by definition, followership. As Keohane authoritatively contended: "there cannot be leaders without followers" (Keohane, 2010, p. 13). More than that, mainly as a result of large-scale technological and cultural change, followers have significantly gained influence and power across the board (see Kellerman, 2012). Issues of followership have long been ignored in the study of political leadership and deserve more attention for the sake of more substantive and complete assessments of leaders and leadership. This is the central premise that the various contributions to this thematic issue share with each other.

Last but not least, and of special importance concerning the purpose of this article, the realist turn in leadership studies implies that leaders and leadership can be found both across and beyond the family of democratic societies (see e.g., Huskey, 2016; Maseti & Gumede, 2011; Patapan, 2022). Subject to the more specific characterizations to be developed in this article autocratic political leadership is understood here as a form of leadership that combines an authoritarian style with actions that display a tangible disregard for the defining features of democratic government. Importantly, there is not always a perfect fit between the nature of leaders and leadership on the one hand, and the type of regime they are operating in on the other. While in authoritarian regimes autocratic leadership prevails by definition, with possible instances of democratic leadership typically being confined to areas and levels beyond the control of national leaders (such as within parties and associations representing the opposition), there is good reason to associate democracies with democratic forms of leadership. However, authoritarian leadership can emerge and flourish in democracies just as in autocracies (see also Shaw, 2022). It is an empirical question to what extent, and under what conditions, established democracies are sufficiently resilient to stand autocratic leaders and leadership without being transformed into an authoritarian regime (see Weyland, 2024). The US under the presidency of Donald Trump (2016–2020) provides a case in point for that second option; while Hungary, starting out as a liberal democracy just about half a generation ago, experienced the birth of an electoral autocracy over the course of Victor Orbán's second premiership (since 2010).

While there have always been autocratic or quasi-autocratic leaders in democratic systems, e.g., party leaders of extremist parties (see e.g., Zaslove, 2004), a hallmark of the present and more recent past is that genuine autocrats can now also be found among the national leaders of countries that once have been established democracies. Overall, the leadership and followership of autocrats operating in democratic contexts share more with those of other autocrats in authoritarian regimes than with their democratic counterparts in democratic systems. In fact, the regime type would seem to be of limited importance in its own right. It fits the bill that, during the presidency of Donald Trump (2016–2020), the president of the US

became not just a committed endorser of, but also a role model for leaders in authoritarian regimes around the globe (see e.g., Baptist & Clark, 2024; Garrity & McGraw, 2023; Walt, 2020)—a feature that has intensified rather than withered ever since. That said, Trump's case is not entirely unprecedented. If on a lower scale, and in a more gentle way, it was foreshadowed a quarter century earlier by four-time Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (see e.g., Newell, 2018).

Twenty-first-century autocrats operate in an era marked by advanced levels of personalization, polarization, and post-truth (see Naím, 2023, p. XV), in which at the same time democracy persists as a powerful ideology. These features apply to both autocrats in democratic contexts and their counterparts in authoritarian regimes, though the implications thereof are much more dramatic for the latter. Unlike Hitler, even many of the worst kinds of present-day dictators feel pressure to allow elections to take place, however unfree and unfair they may be. This requires a particular leadership effort in the electoral arena, in addition to a wealth of other leadership activities, and the mobilization of potential supporters. From this perspective, it is clear that contemporary autocrats are not all the same, even if their regimes may fare similarly in continuous typologies of authoritarianism (see Lindstaedt, 2023, pp. 106–107). Compared to autocratic leaders formally holding an electoral office, which usually involves a certain amount of leadership-like outreach activities, the rule by military officers in military regimes or monarchs in absolute monarchies rests on categorically different foundations (see e.g., Geddes et al., 2018; Lindstaedt, 2023). Other things being equal, in particular, military officers tend to be rulers rather than leaders, though there is no hard-and-fast rule for valid assessments across the board.

For all the ambiguities highlighted above, leadership and followership could still be argued to be more at home in democracies than in authoritarian regimes—if only because the very idea of followership implies an element of voluntariness and freedom of choice (whom to follow or not; see Metz, 2024, p. 439), which marks a defining feature of free and democratic societies. For good reason, coercion and legitimacy have long been considered fundamentally opposite modes of rule, separating tyrannies from democracies (see Barker, 1990). From that perspective, the systematic use of coercion would seem to make committed followers in non-competitive authoritarian regimes largely dispensable, and genuine followership—involving followers "creating change and changing leaders" (Kellerman, 2008)—impossible. Unsurprisingly, followers and issues of followership have been widely ignored even in the most sophisticated research on autocratic leadership and the informal power constraints that leaders face (see e.g., Fakhri et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024).

This article seeks to revisit the nature of autocratic leadership, with a particular focus on followers and followership, and on how these affect the legitimacy of leaders and their regimes. By legitimacy, we mean the capacity of a leader or regime to be seen as appropriate and proper in society. In real-world politics, legitimacy is fought over, with different actors seeking to legitimize or de-legitimize actors, actions, or structures (see Nullmeier et al., 2012; Tannenberg et al., 2021). The central goal of this inquiry is to better understand the nature of autocratic leadership in the advanced twenty-first century, the status of followers, and the difference they may make. Specifically, we shall argue that followers of autocratic leaders can be considerably more powerful than widely assumed. In order to put autocratic leadership and authoritarian followership in perspective, we shall revisit the concept of democratic political leadership in Section 3, which will then be used as a yardstick of comparison.

The next section sketches out the changing nature of authoritarian regimes, which is designed to prepare the ground for further developing the argument that leadership and followership have significantly gained

importance even in many authoritarian regimes. In the sections to follow, rather than offering any particular case study testing the argument, we shall draw on scattered evidence from different regimes in order to substantiate the theoretical assessment put forward empirically.

2. The Changing Nature of Authoritarian Regimes

Political thinking about democratic and autocratic regimes has changed a lot over the past generation of scholarship. In contemporary comparative politics, the study of democratic and autocratic regimes has long come to be dominated by notions of a continuum stretching from liberal democracy (via electoral democracy and electoral autocracy) through closed autocracy (see Lührmann et al., 2018). Also, there is a growing acknowledgment that countries may move back and forth along this continuum, and thus find themselves in different categories even within just a few years. As the prominent diagnosis of a "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) suggests, the overall global trend in the more recent past has been clearly towards the autocratic end of the continuum, if starting from very different locations. This general assessment is shared also by most authors that have voiced skepticism about the more particular argument of a third wave. The group of "autocratizers" includes both former liberal or electoral democracies turning into electoral autocracies as well as electoral autocracies turning into ever-sinister types of autocracy (see Nord et al., 2024). Quite a few current national leaders, such as Hungary's Victor Orbán or India's Narendra Modi, originally set out as unsuspicious, democratically elected leaders before eventually turning themselves into the political heads of regimes that are now generally categorized as electoral or competitive autocracies. These developments come as a distinct challenge to the established scholarly wisdom that executive leaders in autocracies "are selected by any means other than free and fair elections" (LaPorte, 2020, p. 695). Indeed, the initial winning of a democratic mandate marks a distinct feature characterizing many autocrats in the post-modern era of authoritarianism.

Given the global appeal of democracy as a distinct set of values and procedures, many contemporary autocrats operating in established authoritarian regimes have shown a notable interest in introducing certain elements of rule that may be superficially reminiscent of democracy, while the motives for doing so are usually about reducing insecurity and stabilizing their regime rather than liberalization or democratization. The "menu of autocratic innovation" in contemporary regimes beyond liberal democracy has largely centred on attempts "to cultivate the pretence of accountability without permitting the actual practice of it" (Morgenbesser, 2020, p. 1053). The most basic measures of this kind are holding elections and formally allowing opposition parties to join the race—both of which tend to carry considerable benefits to autocrats in terms of information and control, though also certain risks, such as unintended gains in public attention for opposition leaders (see Cunha et al., 2022; Knutsen et al., 2017).

A more particular feature characterizing recent developments in many autocratic or autocratizing regimes has been a personalist turn (see e.g., Anceschi et al., 2024; Escribà-Folch & Timoneda, 2024; Grundholm, 2020), i.e., an increasing importance of personalist rule and the transformation of different types of regimes into personalist autocracies. While Hungary, Turkey, and Russia under Orbán, Erdogan, and Putin, respectively, developed into personalist autocracies out of electoral democracies, China under Xi Jinping represents the most important example of an established one-party dictatorship gradually being transformed into a personalist dictatorship. However, importantly, categorizing a regime as personalist does neither imply that institutions are of little or no importance nor that leadership is exercised by only a single person. There

is no effective leadership or rule in the absence of reasonably strong institutions, even in personalist regimes (see Baturo et al., 2024, p. 326), and popular notions of all-mighty leaders going it alone are nearly as unrealistic for personalist autocracies as for any other regime (Brown, 2014). Indeed, even the most power-centralizing absolutist rulers of the past did not really rule on their own (Blondel, 1982, pp. 45–46).

There seems to be a distinct logic of regime stability and support characterizing contemporary personalist or personalized autocracies. For one thing, even obvious violations of rules may harm the leader in charge only marginally among supporters. A study on election fraud in Putin's Russia found that "while fraud revelations cause regime supporters to adjust their views on the regime, their opinions about Putin remain largely unaffected," which implies "that dictators can maintain popular support among their political base while manipulating elections" (Aarslew, 2024, p. 1978). At the same time, personalist autocracies have experienced considerably higher levels of repression (Keremoğlu et al., 2022). This is because autocratic regimes have to fight opposition and resistance in the most uncompromising way whenever they feel attacked at their core. Other things being equal, there is a greater chance in leader-centred autocratic regimes that anti-regime protests are to be repressed at any cost because they directly challenge the regime's central legitimacy base and public discontent cannot be externalized and credibly blamed on other actors or sources.

Many autocracies of the past relied strongly on coercion and force. Contemporary autocracies still use threats of repression, and carry out acts of repression, but as "even credible threats of repression are costly," they are employed sparingly and "reserved for moments when collective action is most likely" (Carter & Carter, 2022, p. 671). Apart from recurrent threats of repression, and actual incidents thereof, contemporary authoritarian regimes have developed complex legitimacy regimes and strategies of legitimation (see Mauk, 2024; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). While performance (e.g., stability or economic growth) is one potential source of legitimacy among others that largely speaks for itself, personalist rulers have to make a special effort to create reasonable support by cultivating followers and followership. Indeed, the structural reason behind the rise of new forms of authoritarian leadership is the rise and spread of electoral and especially personalist autocracies.

Before we look into the politics of contemporary autocratic leadership and followership, the next section briefly revisits the concept of democratic political leadership, which will be useful for contrasting selected key features of both forms of leadership.

3. The Concept of Democratic Political Leadership Revisited

There is little consensus on what constitutes democratic political leadership. While good democratic leadership has been argued to rest on authenticity, effectiveness, and responsibility (Helms, 2012b), this set of criteria does not lend itself easily to a comparison of democratic and autocratic leadership. After all, while autocratic leadership is rarely if ever responsible, it can be marked by authenticity and effectiveness, which undermines the discriminatory power of these criteria for a comparative assessment. By contrast, for the purpose of this article, a short but important article by Teles (2015) marks a useful starting point. The central point of reference for discussing democratic political leadership in that article is leadership in the private sector, rather than in authoritarian regimes, which provides an excellent opportunity for reassessing the nature of autocratic political leadership, taking advantage of Teles' criteria, in Section 4 below.

Teles' first feature concerns the existence of "conflicting sources of leadership," and "the need to combine authority leadership with legitimacy leadership" (Teles, 2015, p. 29). As the author contends: "the political leader is not solely dependent on formal authority given by election and appointment to a particular public role (authority by office holding), but also needs approval and acceptance, which will contribute to the leader's legitimacy" (Teles, 2015, p. 30).

The second hallmark of democratic political leadership singled out by the author is "non-ascribed followership" (Teles, 2015, p. 30): The "people" are nearly completely "unknown" to national political leaders, "and certainly most of them are not faithful and loyal followers" (Teles, 2015, p. 30).

Teles' third element is "follower dependency": In democratic contexts, "followers are shareholders....They hold all powers: they appoint the leader, follow him or her, assess his or her decisions, 'feel' the consequences of his or her actions and decide on his or her stay in office" (Teles, 2015, p. 30).

The fourth characteristic of democratic political leadership suggested relates to "complexity and diversity," or the need to operate in "multi-contextual settings" (Teles, 2015, pp. 30–31). In contrast to the typical demands of private sector leadership, political leadership requires leaders to tackle a wealth of dispersed, complex, and divergent issues, stretching across all kinds of fields of public policy, often simultaneously and in deeply conflicting settings. This challenge is responsible for what Teles identifies as a fifth defining feature of democratic political leadership: a notable amount of "ambiguity" in what leaders say and do. The settings provide a structural incentive to leaders "to adopt more indistinct and vague actions," as this "allows greater opportunities to adapt in the future and more chances to satisfy different individuals and to guarantee an excuse in case of failure" (Teles, 2015, p. 31).

The next two features identified are, again, closely related to each other: For one thing, democratic political leadership is about "conflict promotion": "Political leaders are—more often than not—promoters of conflict (…), *expected* to generate disagreement and divergence" (Teles, 2015, p. 31; emphasis in the original). This can be seen as both a reflection and a result of the "limited acceptance" of democratic political leaders: "The fact that the political leader is not accepted by all followers, right from the beginning of his or her 'consulate,' poses different problems from those of the private sector" (Teles, 2015, p. 31).

An eighth attribute of democratic political leadership that stands out in particular when compared to private sector leadership, but which also echoes the "authority/legitimacy" issue (i.e., Teles' first feature) is its "mandate-given" nature (Teles, 2015, p. 31). Political leaders operating in democratic contexts need the "consent from those they govern," which "requires the mobilisation of individuals and groups to build consensus and acceptance" (Teles, 2015, p. 31). Finally, Teles draws attention to the "political and administrative tension": the fact that "politicians operate within the constraints set by the tension between political and administrative spheres" (Teles, 2015, p. 31).

Some of the distinctions sketched out above are more intriguing than others in our context. The following three suggested features of democratic political leadership, highlighted as distinctively different from leadership in the private sector, would seem to denote features of political leadership more generally, including leadership in authoritarian settings: (a) the need to operate in multi-contextual settings, and (b) to be deliberately ambiguous at times to reserve a reasonable room for maneuver is nothing that fundamentally

separates autocratic leaders from democratic leaders. Also, (c) all political leaders depend on bureaucracies and administrations when seeking to give direction to government, though autocrats are likely to be even keener to control the bureaucracy, as "permitting autonomy may be seen as weakness and failure" and, thus, "authoritarian rulers will be willing to use more Draconian methods to enforce accountability than would be true in democratic regimes" (Peters, 2021, p. 3).

This leaves us with six features of democratic political leadership that are useful for gauging the nature of contemporary autocratic leadership (i.e., conflicting sources of leadership; non-ascribed followership; follower dependency; limited acceptance; conflict promotion; and the mandate-given nature of democratic leadership). Several of those issues specifically concern the status and role of followers and followership, while others frame them in particular ways. We shall use these different suggested features as signposts for our assessments offered in the next section.

4. A Comparative Perspective on Authoritarian Leadership, Followership, and Legitimacy

By highlighting conflicting sources of leadership as a crucial characteristic of democratic political leadership, Teles reminds us that democratic leaders cannot bank on authority flowing from holding a particular office alone. This is in line with the recent work of other scholars who have specifically looked into the conditions that allow office-holders to actually exert leadership, including the enforcement of contested and unpopular decisions. However, there is room for alternative conceptualizations. For example, rather than distinguishing authority from legitimacy, Bennister et al. (2015) focus on identifying different sources (skills, relations, and reputation) that feed the authority of an incumbent beyond mere office-holding, i.e., in terms of their capacity to act. This concept-driven exercise identifies an empirically variable combination of resources, which the authors refer to as an incumbent's "leadership capital," subject to change over time. While leadership capital usually includes elements of input legitimacy—such as in particular democratic support from electoral contests, be it intra-party or general elections, or a compelling leadership rhetoric designed to garner public support for a particular decision—leaders may compensate certain weaknesses in this area by displaying particular strengths in others (see Helms, 2016). Indeed, whenever—and however—political office-holders bring about major decisions that are being perceived as effective and viable solutions, this may create legitimacy, or more specifically "output legitimacy," a concept originally put forward in the context of EU governance (see Scharpf, 2009). Thus, in terms of Bennister et al. 's (2015) conceptualization of authority, legitimacy—rather than representing a separate "source of leadership"—can flow from a leader's authority, or more precisely from his or her personal political authority.

What is true for democratic leaders applies in even more apparent ways to autocratic leaders or, more specifically, leaders in authoritarian contexts. Office-holding as such tends to be of conspicuously limited importance in many authoritarian regimes. Many autocrats are not powerful because they hold any particular executive office; they rather hold office because they are powerful. In authoritarian regimes, "there is less clear congruence between formal offices and de facto sources of authority" (LaPorte, 2020, p. 696). For example, Vladimir Putin represented the apex of power in Russia even during his second stint as prime minister (2008–2012) when the institutionally much more powerful office of president was temporarily left to a handpicked loyal caretaker, Dimitri Medwedew, to avoid an open constitutional crisis about the breach of presidential term limits. Some authors have suggested that "if Putin chose to become minister of transport, the minister of transport would rule Russia" (Fish, 2017, p. 70).

Especially in personalist regimes, legitimacy may flow to a considerable extent from the charisma of a power- or office-holder. However, to make a difference, charisma must be perceived and acknowledged by others. Indeed, charismatic leadership belongs to the realm of relational rather than personality-centred approaches to leadership (see 't Hart & Uhr, 2008, p. 11; Subedi & Scott, 2021, p. 488). Also, the centrality of an individual incumbent for the legitimacy regime of a given autocracy obviously does not preclude the importance of additional sources of legitimacy, such as a strong economic performance. The more leadership is understood as a result, rather than a process (see Grint, 2010, pp. 8–11)—a position that even some democratic leaders, such as former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, have famously postulated as the ultimate yardstick for assessing government performance ("*Entscheidend ist, was hinten rauskommt*")—the more it can create legitimacy by securing certain standards of policy performance even in the absence of much input legitimacy.

A related question concerns the possible net effects of charisma in autocratic leaders: Can strong charisma create some legitimacy in the absence of open, fair, and transparent decision-making or welcome results? There is reason to believe it can. More than that, there can even be a quasi-schizophrenic distinction among followers between their hero leader and the regime, though the regime may still to some extent benefit from the leader's glory. This phenomenon is not new; it marked a striking feature of Adolf Hitler's infamous personality cult:

> The cult provided protection against disillusionment with the system. People blamed the party, not the leader. The more disenchanted they became, the more they characterized Hitler as a man kept in deliberate ignorance by his underlings…. "If only Hitler knew" became a popular expression. (Dikötter, 2019, p. 55)

Recent research suggests that contemporary personalist regimes tend to display weaker forms of a cult of their leader's personality than their historical predecessors. While historically, leaders in personalist regimes were often presented as superhumans operating in a sphere of their own, the introduction of direct national elections in many contemporary authoritarian regimes has provided a strong incentive for leaders to portray themselves as "men of the people" (Baturo et al., 2024, pp. 314–315). A personality cult that characterizes many contemporary autocratic leaders, if usually on a lower scale than in the past (with notable exceptions, such as North Korea, see Vu, 2022), is not to be confounded with mere popularity (see Sundahl, 2023). The more important thing to note is that autocratic leaders actually can be popular (see Guriev & Treisman, 2020). Comparative politics has only just begun to uncover the complex dynamics driving this phenomenon and its implications. However, even by what we know as yet, there can be no doubt that popularity matters. As Buckley et al. (2024, p. 1051) found: "perceptions of incumbent popularity might themselves inflate incumbents' approval levels."

Teles' emphasis on the mandate-given nature of democratic leadership and the mandate-based authority to lead is no doubt compelling. That said, it is not fully being lived up to even by all contemporary democratic regimes or leaders for that matter. There has been a longstanding debate about (if or) to what extent directly elected presidents in presidential regimes can claim a mandate to govern. For Dahl, presidential mandates in the US have been little more than a myth (Dahl, 1990), and the more recent trend has been towards further weakening credible claims of a presidential mandate (see e.g., Azari, 2014). However, especially in many parliamentary democracies that have experienced takeover prime ministers (Worthy, 2016)—i.e., candidates

following a departing prime minister from the same party between two elections, especially in systems with no parliamentary investiture vote for a new government—there is no clear-cut mandate for the new chief executive to govern the country. At least, there is no personal mandate that, in an era of advanced personalization of politics, tends to be considered increasingly important by many voters. Still, there are major differences between democratic and autocratic regimes regarding this issue as well.

While autocratic leadership in authoritarian regimes is clearly not of a mandate-given nature—at least if the focus is on a democratic mandate emerging from free and fair elections—contemporary autocrats are usually firmly committed to creating the impression that they do have a right to rule the country. This can include the winning of semi- or less competitive elections, but may also flow from other sources, such as primogeniture in absolute monarchies (as to be observed across much of the Middle East) or a constitutionally codified supremacy of the ruling party in one-party regimes (e.g., China, North Korea, or Vietnam). Of all different kinds of authoritarian regimes, personalist regimes have the greatest need for mobilizing the public to lend support to the leader, which is usually pursued by a particular follower-seeking leadership effort (see e.g., Brunkert & von Soest, 2023). China under Xi Jinping provides arguably the most impressive recent case in point of how the silent transformation of an established one-party regime into a more personalist regime was accompanied by a particular leadership effort (see Nesbitt-Larking & Chan, 2024; Shirk, 2018).

Very much unlike democratic leaders, autocratic leaders in authoritarian regimes are clearly not expected to generate disagreement and divergence. If at all, the exact opposite is true. Autocratic leaders operating in authoritarian contexts seek to create the illusion of unity, and actively oppress other opinions and views that threaten to challenge the regime's official narrative—which is exactly what their diehard supporters expect them to do. Interestingly, this may be valued even by more indifferent individuals and groups, not belonging either to the regime's outright supporters or opponents. To some extent, it seems, there is a deep-seated desire of societies, first identified and specified in the *History of Political Thought* by Thomas Hobbes, for security and stability, even if this may come at the expense of freedoms and diversity, which tends to be systematically exploited by modern autocrats (see Patapan, 2022, pp. 962–963).

In politics, both democratic and autocratic leaders have to deal with the issue of a non-ascribed followership. Followers must be won or sometimes groomed; the aim is to secure the greatest possible followership from a larger population of people. This separates political leadership even in fundamentally different regimes from leadership in the private sector, where leaders can be the owner of a given enterprise with staff members being expected to be loyal followers, and CEOs being able to dismiss those unwilling to follow. This notwithstanding, it is obviously possible to distinguish between caring and inspiring leaders, and autocratic leaders even in the private sector (on the latter, see e.g., Harms et al., 2018).

The sphere of politics is different. At the same time, there are important differences between democratic and authoritarian agents and structures. In democratic regimes, potential followers are essentially voters that competing leaders seek to convince to support them (and their parties) at the polls. In authoritarian regimes— with elections being much less central in terms of authority and legitimacy—followers are not necessarily, or not in the first place, voters. There can be followers even in closed autocracies with no regular elections taking place. Under the surface, many autocracies are marked by a latent struggle between different would-be leaders who all may have followers of their own, which may challenge the present powerholder, and therefore have to be co-opted into the existing regime to guarantee its persistence (see e.g., Gerschewski, 2023; Svolik, 2009).

That said, the related suggested feature of democratic political leadership—namely that leaders tend to enjoy limited acceptance, i.e., that they are not accepted by all followers—is even more true for leaders of authoritarian regimes. Specifically, non-followers are most unlikely to accept an autocratic leader who usually declares them official enemies of the regime who are actively being discriminated against and often chased or expelled. Moreover, even followers, to the extent they exist, may not truly accept the leader in the narrower sense of the term. As Kellerman highlighted, some followers follow mainly out of fear of the consequences of not following (Kellerman, 2008, pp. 56–61). Further, very much unlike the political process in democracies, politics in autocracies usually does not allow "antagonism to be expressed freely, with the opposition occupying important and relevant positions and characteristically having a constitutional right to a legitimate place in the 'governing bodies'" (Teles, 2015, p. 31).

Finally, then, there is the feature of follower-dependency that stands out as perhaps the single most important feature of democratic political leadership. Contrary to popular contentions, even democratic leaders are not dependent on their followers all the time, though. It is well possible, perhaps even desirable, to pursue responsible rather than purely responsive leadership (see e.g., Sartori, 1987, p. 170), and face the electorate's verdict in an act of retrospective voting only at the end of a term. Still, overall, democratic political leadership is indeed a conception in which the authority to lead depends on sufficient support of followers (though many of whom will be conditional and temporary backers). This is fundamentally different in authoritarian regimes in which leaders are not really empowered by followers and, as a consequence, much less vulnerable to possible followers withdrawing their support. More specifically, there is no established conception of autocratic leadership and rule that would assign followers the status of the principal in an imagined chain of delegation (on the chain-of-delegation in representative democracies, see Strøm, 2000).

This is not to say, however, that the followers of autocratic leaders are necessarily less important in any respect. In fact, under certain circumstances, the contrary would seem to be true. Some of the most impressive examples relate to autocratic leaders in democratic or mildly autocratic regimes, such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsenaro, or Narendra Modi. Their followers had a deeply emotional bond with the leader that was fueled by their leader's perceived unique charisma, supported by a sophisticated social media management effort that eventually turned voters into followers (see Cesarino, 2020). As Naím suggests, in many cases (especially relating to populist leaders in hybrid regimes), it seems justified to speak of fans, rather than supporters or followers, which carries distinct implications:

> Much like sports fans or music fans, political fans build their sense of identity largely through their identification with their favorite celebrities. Fans perceive attacks on the celebrities that organize their identity as attacks on them first and foremost. They defend the celebrities to defend themselves. (Naím, 2023, p. 58)

This type of unconditional, super-loyal followership, which typically closely corresponds to leaders' insistence on unconditional commitment and loyalty (see George, 2024; Goldsmith & Moen, 2024), may provide autocratic leaders, especially those operating in the context of genuine authoritarian regimes, with a particular legitimacy reserve. After all, to have committed followers is better than not, at least in terms of status and prestige, even though followers in many authoritarian regimes cannot really claim to truly empower their leaders. At the same time, the very same followers—in particular when leaders have managed

to turn from challengers into incumbents—tend to de-legitimize the regime that those leaders have installed by reinforcing its exclusionary nature. Specifically, neither autocratic leaders nor their followers (to the extent they exist) have any respect for non-followers or followers of other leaders. Even in democratic regimes, the size of the satisfaction gap between winners and losers at elections and beyond is inversely related to the democratic quality of a given regime (Nadeau et al., 2023). In the theory and practice of autocratic leadership, there is usually no room whatsoever for the principle of losers' consent (Anderson et al., 2005). Importantly, authoritarian followers may play a distinct and largely independent role in undermining the acceptance of a given regime among minorities. A particularly delicate example relates to the deadly mob attacks on cattle traders, beef-eaters, and dairy farmers by fringe Hindu groups in India a few years ago, which were perceived by many to have been inspired by the aggressive anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Modi government (see Siyech & Narain, 2018).

Some of the most intriguing patterns concerning the losers' consent theme have been observed in hybrid regimes, such as Bolsonaro's Brazil:

> The core takeaway from the losers' consent argument is that losers pose a greater risk to democracy than winners. Yet...authoritarian winners' support for the political system is at best contingent. If an authoritarian incumbent who retains popular support refuses to adhere to democratic norms in subsequent contests, this contingent support may dwindle, with authoritarian winners increasingly favoring antidemocratic machinations. (Cohen et al., 2023, p. 273)

And as opposition actors begin to consider themselves as permanent losers, autocratization dynamics may soon reach a point of no return.

Especially in established authoritarian regimes, autocratic leaders have good reason to reduce the need for consent by non-followers to an absolute minimum, which often involves mercilessly hunting down its most prominent and exposed opponents. After all, while this does not normally incur any costs in terms of electoral legitimacy or political leverage, there are obvious gains in terms of performance-related sources of legitimacy, such as in particular increased levels of public order, safety, and stability—or perceptions thereof—that are likely to bind followers even closer to their leader. Indeed, it has been shown that dictators do benefit from greater perceived public safety in terms of greater personal popularity (see Guriev & Treisman, 2020).

5. Conclusion

Leadership, understood as a particular form of agency and a social relationship that is neither good nor bad *per se*, comes in countless shapes and forms. That said, it is possible and useful to distinguish between contrasting core features of democratic and autocratic leadership. Different types of regimes provide different conditions for exerting political leadership but do not have any determining effects. While there is little if any room for democratic leadership in autocracies, with even political oppositions to autocrats not necessarily representing committed democrats (see Helms, 2021), several contemporary democracies have produced and witnessed particularly impressive and influential examples of autocratic leaders and authoritarian leadership. It is interesting to see how the shared exposure to global trends—such as the latent recognition of democracy and the rule of law as valuable currencies on the international stage—has left a mark on the actions of autocrats from different regimes. The mimicking strategies of genuine dictators

(Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2015) have found an equivalent in the activities of many autocrats in democratic systems that eagerly present themselves as the real saviors of democracy, as no one did more unashamedly than Donald Trump.

The politics of followers and followership in authoritarian contexts differs no less strongly from democratic standards than autocratic leaders and leadership themselves. Perhaps most importantly, many die-hard followers of autocratic leaders are every bit as uncompromising and authoritarian as their leaders. Further, while followers of autocratic leaders in established authoritarian regimes can rarely claim to empower and control their leaders, as autocracy is by definition not of a mandate-given nature, autocratic followers are not in all regards less important or powerful than their democratic counterparts. In many regimes beyond liberal democracy, a considerable part of the pressure put on non-followers and minorities comes from fanatic followers, which can make them one of the regime's most valuable resources.

Again, some of the most fascinating features relate to autocratic leaders and their followers from democratic contexts with established vertical accountability regimes. Just like their democratic contenders, those leaders are ultimately empowered by their followers who can decide contests for power at the polls; and these followers' desires and demands may well be the driving force behind a leader's big public gestures and his or her electoral success. This has been observed already for the complex relationship between Silvio Berlusconi and his supporters (see Chirumbolo & Leone, 2014), and may apply to an even greater extent to Donald Trump. As Smith contends: "Trump…is less an architect of Trumpism than its reflex. However effectively he performs in the public arena, he remains an emissary, personifying a social movement that preceded him and will survive him" (Smith, 2024, p. 813), which obviously does not preclude that toxic leadership can fuel further followers' expectations and demands. Crucially, authoritarian followers' expectations of their leader are typically not confined to absolute loyalty to them but extend to showing unrelenting hostility to their adversaries, which effectively turns followers into key agents of pernicious polarization (McCoy & Somer, 2019). As the global contest between democracy and autocracy rages on, with even some of the most consolidated democracies experiencing major incidents of democratic erosion and backsliding, that kind of followers definitely deserve much more attention from both scholars and practitioners than they have received in the past.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Cogitatio

ARTICLE

Making Russia Great Again? Vladimir Putin's Changing Sources of Legitimacy 2000–2024

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Abstract

This article analyses the changing sources of President Vladimir Putin's legitimacy during his quarter century at the apex of power in Russia. To reveal the shifting underpinnings of Putin's legitimacy, I examine the central themes of his five presidential election campaigns, from March 2000 to March 2024. Public opinion data is used to assess the relationship between these campaign themes and the priorities of Russian voters, as legitimacy rests on shared values between ruler and ruled. I argue that the main sources of Putin's legitimacy have shifted during his long tenure, especially since his 2012 return to the presidency, after four years as prime minister. Putin first won the Russian presidency by positioning himself as a soft nationalist reformer, intent on integrating with the West, and wrestling wealth from Russia's oligarchs. Twelve years later, Putin turned his ire on international enemies, claiming the role of Russia's champion against a hostile West and fifth column within—themes pursued with greater vigour following Russia's incursions in Ukraine since 2014. In addition, Putin has doubled down on conservative appeals, including support for the Orthodox Church and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. Appropriation of Russia's role in WW2 has also been a source of legitimacy throughout Putin's leadership, but one put to different uses over time. Putin's legitimacy has been further bolstered by his stewardship of Russia's economy, which has remained relatively stable, even in the face of sanctions, since 2014. I conclude that Putin's longevity in office rests not only on increasing state repression, but also on his success in reorientating Russian social values to suit his changing political needs.

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1. Introduction

On 17 March 2024, Vladimir Putin claimed a fifth presidential term with a landslide victory in a tightly stage-managed election, condemned by the West as neither free nor fair ("Amid 'repression and intimidation,'" 2024). To celebrate his win, the next day, Putin appeared before cheering crowds at an open-air concert in the Red Square marking the 10th anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea ("Putin greets Moscow," 2024). The choice of an election date so close to this anniversary was no coincidence. Today, Putin's popular appeal rests in large part on his mobilisation of nationalist symbols and narratives (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016; Laruelle, 2009; March, 2012). But how genuine is Russian public support for Putin?

This article analyses the changing sources of Putin's political legitimacy over his quarter century at the apex of power in Russia. Legitimacy is defined as the common belief that an institution or leader has the right to govern (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p. 1108). When this right is widely challenged, social order breaks down. This article argues that Putin's legitimacy rests predominantly on his personal charismatic leadership. Throughout his long tenure, Putin has successfully sold himself to Russian voters as the only leader with the strength to maintain order and stability at home and to defend Russia's interests abroad (Petersson, 2021, p. 22).

The vehicles used to mobilise support for Putin's leadership, however, have evolved over time. In his early campaigns for the presidency, Putin relied predominantly on populist appeals, emphasising his firmness in fighting the domestic forces undermining national stability and honour. Earthy-toned pledges to "wipe out" Chechen terrorists, crack down on unruly oligarchs, and rebuild Russia's international prestige, first won Putin the presidency in March 2000 (Burrett, 2020; Zassoursky, 2004). High levels of economic growth from 2001–2008 sustained genuinely high approval ratings for Putin (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Although Russia's economic success in this period was buoyed by global economic conditions, nonetheless, at home, Putin received the credit (Wilson, 2021). But as economic growth began to slow—owing to the falling price of oil exports on which Russia's economy depends—Putin's public support began to slip. After notionally
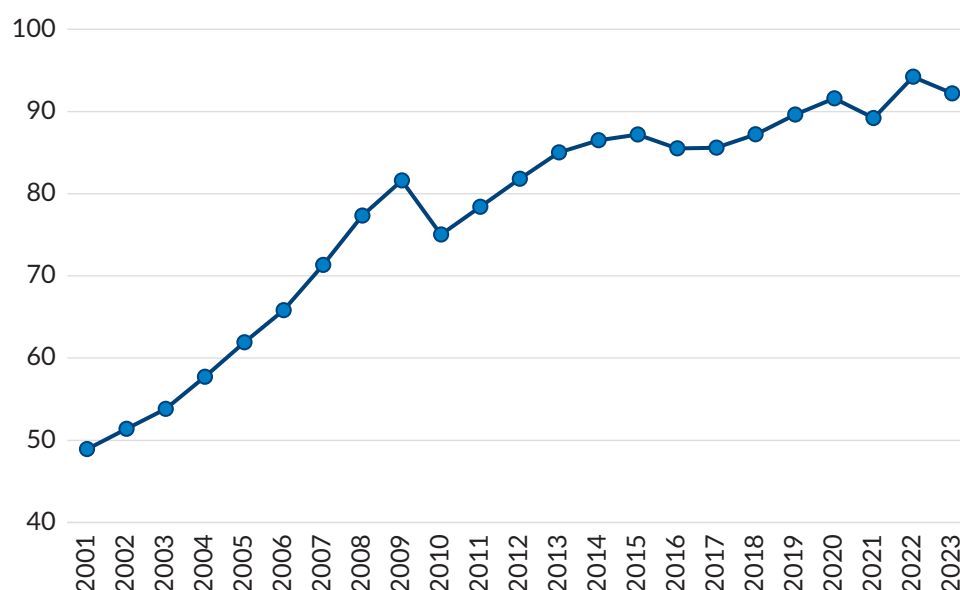

Figure 1. Russia's GDP between 2001–2023 in trillion roubles (World Bank, 2024).
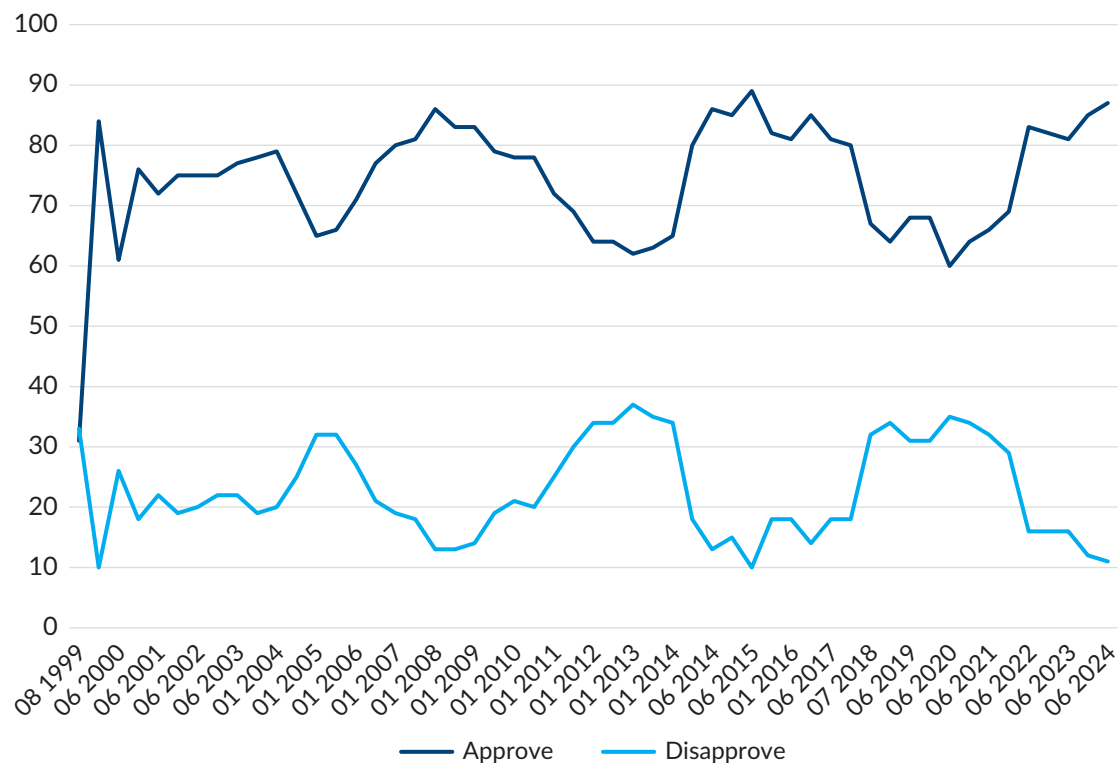
Figure 2. Putin's approval in percentage between 1999–2024 (Levada Center, 2024d).

transferring power to President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, Putin's 2012 campaign to return to the presidency took a dark turn, focusing on nationalist themes and grievances. As Russia's constitution mandates that the president can serve no more than two terms consecutively, at the end of his second term in 2008, Putin had vacated the presidency in favour of Medvedev. Putin continued to wield ultimate power, however, by serving as Medvedev's prime minister, before controversially returning to the presidency in 2012. Reinstalled in the Kremlin since 2012, Putin has built his legitimacy on three crisscrossing nationalist narratives: glorification of the military, social conservativism, and an existential battle for survival against the West. Putin's charismatic leadership thus rests on his perceived role as the nation's defender against internal and external enemies determined to emasculate Russia.

Putin's legitimacy, however, is not sustained by charisma alone. Although Russia's economy never regained the dynamism of Putin's first two terms, nor has there been a return to the economic chaos of the 1990s. There is no doubt that Russia has become wealthier during Putin's quarter century in power. Overall, the economy has grown in 20 out of 24 years since 2000, and in terms of purchasing power parity, Russia's economy is now the fourth largest in the world ("Russia's economy surpasses," 2024; World Bank, 2024). Whether or not he deserves it, Russian voters credit Putin with Russia's economic successes, regarding him as a steady steward of the economy—especially compared to what came before (Wilson, 2021, p. 84). Since 2022, government investment in the military-industrial complex has boosted growth, translating into higher wages and lower unemployment (Rosenberg, 2024). Russia's economy has adapted quickly to the pressures of war, with sanctions thus far having a limited effect on Putin's legitimacy, despite high inflation and under-investment in non-military sectors of the economy.

Drawing on public opinion data, this article argues that Putin has persuaded many Russians to accept his version of reality, which posits Russia as a besieged fortress under attack from a hostile and hypocritical West. But survey data also suggests that many Russians would prefer a different reality, hoping for improved relations with the West and an end to the war in Ukraine. In January 2024, in a survey by the research project *Chronicles*, 51 percent of respondents said they would like to see improved relations with the West, while 40 percent said they would support withdrawal from Ukraine without Russia meeting its war aims (Chronicles Project, 2024). Although in February 2024, 68 percent of Russians reported wanting Putin to remain president beyond the upcoming election, only 18 percent followed the presidential campaign closely, with 36 percent not following it at all. Hardly a sign of enthusiasm for the incumbent president (Levada Center, 2024c). In December 2023, 54 percent of Russians reported dissatisfaction with their standard of living, with inflation as the main concern (Goncharpov, 2024). This article, therefore, finds that although Putin's charismatic leadership continues to sustain his legitimacy, many Russians have doubts about the results of his more than two decades in power.

This article is composed of four sections (excluding the introduction and conclusion): The first section discusses definitions of legitimacy and the reliability of measuring this phenomenon using public opinion surveys coming out of Russia, given the increasing authoritarianism of the Putin regime since 2012. The second section analyses Putin's personal qualities and image as sources of his charismatic legitimacy. The third section focuses on populism and economic performance as the foundations of Putin's public support during his first two presidential terms. Finally, the fourth section analyses the nationalist themes that have increasingly buttressed Putin's legitimacy since he returned to the presidency in 2012.

2. Political Legitimacy and Public Opinion in Russia

Sociologist Max Weber famously argued that a regime has legitimacy when citizens are willing to obey its authority, and in so doing, lend its leaders prestige (Weber, 1964, p. 382). Weber further identifies three ideal types of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational (Dreijmanis, 2007). In the latter type, legitimacy rests on adherence to constitutional rules and regularised modes of political representation (Weber, 1964, p. 215). Putin clearly does not adhere to the rule of law, as demonstrated by his frequent jailing of political opponents and emasculation of Russia's courts and independent media (Burrett, 2019). Although Putin's regime clearly flouts the spirit of Russia's constitutional order, Sakwa (2010, 2021) and Lewis (2020) argue that institutional frameworks, nonetheless, continue to impose constraints that structure the conduct of politics. Indeed, Putin takes great pains to performatively adhere to constitutional norms. Elections, although tightly managed, take place regularly at the federal, regional, and local levels—although Putin did replace elected regional governors with his own appointments from 2004 to 2012 (Campbell & Ross, 2008). While globally, abolishing presidential term limits is the most common strategy for would-be autocrats, Putin has instead retained power by installing a loyal replacement (Medvedev) and then through constitutional amendments extending and resetting his term limit—including via a national referendum in 2020 (albeit one termed by the election monitoring organisation Golos as the "most manipulative vote in the country's history") (Trudolyubov, 2020). In following the constitution in words, if not in spirit, the Putin regime seeks legal-rational legitimacy. But the regime's actions—manipulating elections, cronyism, and politically motivated prosecutions, to name but a few—undermine its own legitimating discourses.

This article, therefore, argues that Putin's leadership is closer to the charismatic than legal-rational type. Charismatic leaders are seen by supporters as possessing extraordinary characteristics, with a mission and

vision that inspires loyalty. Hutcheson and Petersson (2016) argue that charismatic elements have been features of Putin's rhetoric and political performance from the outset of his presidency, epitomised by depictions of him as a man of action. Sperling (2016) concurs, arguing that Putin's legitimacy rests on a "cult of personality" presenting him as a hypermasculine leader who will not allow Western countries to bully Russia. Indeed, recent polling data suggests Putin remains personally popular with Russian voters. A survey conducted in June 2023 found that 52 percent of Russians strongly supported Putin, while 31 percent had nothing bad to say about the president, and only 14 percent held negative opinions about his leadership (Levada Center, 2023b).

Although Russia's state-backed media gives the impression that nothing happens in the country without the president's intervention, Putin is not the only decision maker who matters in contemporary Russia. Gill (2016) and Hale (2017) contend that Putin governs via a combination of personal, institutional, and corporate networks. In what has been termed the "power vertical model," Putin's authority derives from his patronal position at the apex of these networks, which channel power towards the Kremlin (Tsygankov, 2014). The power vertical model maintains that under Putin, autonomous power centres are firmly controlled, leaving Russians with no discernible alternatives to the current regime (Treisman, 2017). An alternative paradigm takes the opposite view, highlighting the often chaotic and ineffective workings of Putin's ostensibly centralised system, the failings of which were made painfully clear by the state's bungled response to Covid-19 (Blackburn & Petersson, 2022). Although federalism has been eroded during the Putin years, regional and other horizontal forces retain enough power to complicate the policy process and inhibit the consistent application of decisions taken by the central government (Sakwa, 2020).

Most scholars rightly observe that there are elements of both chaos and control in the manner in which Russia is governed today (Monaghan, 2014; Sakwa, 2021). Sakwa (2021) uses the concept of heterarchy to explain how governance in Russia is based on a dynamic combination of organisational elements (institutional, regional, and social) with the potential to be ranked in different ways depending on the political context. Heterarchy is a counterpoint to hierarchy, which emphasises how the relative power between different elements of a system strengthens or diminishes as the dynamics of their interactions change (Sakwa, 2021 p. 226). A heterarchy approach thus rejects the idea of a static model of governance dominated either by chaos or control in favour of a viewpoint that emphasises complexity, contradiction, and flux. The heterarchic nature of Russia's governance is instrumental in sustaining Putin's charismatic leadership. The charismatic leader is ultimately perceived as a bulwark against chaos. Protecting Russia from domestic forces threatening national unity and from the dangers posed by external enemies are the performative bedrocks of Putin's charismatic legitimacy (Lewis, 2020; Sharafutdinova, 2020).

Regardless of the true nature of power distribution within the Russian system, Putin has consistently enjoyed significantly higher approval ratings than other senior government actors and institutions (Gill, 2015). Even when facing public protests against unpopular policies—such as pension reforms in 2018—Putin's personal approval ratings have slipped less than those of his government (Levada Center, 2020a; Logvinenko, 2020). In the pensions case, Putin placated public unrest by softening his reforms, and in so doing, revealed some of the weaknesses of the system constructed around his leadership. Putin's special bond with the Russian people is essential to the legitimacy of the regime as a whole. The pension's episode highlights the problem of relying on charismatic legitimacy, which is by nature transitory, as the devotion on which it is based inevitably fades in light of the transactional politics that become necessary for a leader to

sustain power in government (Dreijmanis, 2007; MacGregor Burns, 1978). During his 25 years in office, Putin has avoided fatally losing his charismatic legitimacy by knowing when to reverse tack. But Putin's legitimacy is built on more than just charisma.

Putin's legitimacy also rests on what has been termed "output" and "input" sources. Output legitimacy refers to a leader's performance in power—their ability to guarantee a minimum standard of economic well-being for a broad spectrum of society. Presiding over rapid GDP growth during his first decade in power, Putin was widely seen as "delivering the goods" on the economy, convincing the population to turn a blind eye to the weakening rule of law (Gel'man, 2010). Input legitimacy, in contrast, is more long term and builds on common values and beliefs shared between ruler and ruled (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p. 1108). No longer able to deliver rapidly improving incomes and living standards, since 2012 Putin has increasingly relied on manipulating Russians' beliefs and perceptions about the world to engineer support for his leadership (Burrett, 2019). This is not to deny that "Putinism," a doctrine that advocates conservative values and the need for a strong state to protect against foreign foes and internal chaos, resonates with many Russians (Loftus, 2022, p. 2). Russia's exceptionalism and unique role in the world are important pillars of post-Soviet national identity (Laruelle, 2009). Putin's restoration of Russia's role on the world stage after the humiliation of the 1990s has boosted national self-esteem (Sakwa, 2011; Tsygankov, 2019). Yet maintaining the social consensus he embodies has become increasingly challenging for Putin.

Persuasion can only go so far in reinforcing his legitimacy, even if based on shared values and beliefs, when daily life reveals the reality of flawed government decision-making, declining state capacity and increasing economic hardship. Putin's fourth term from 2018–2024 was particularly challenging. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed serious limitations in the capacity and performance of Russia's state apparatus (Blackburn & Petersson, 2022). Usually omnipresent on Russian television screens—meeting ordinary people up and down the country—Putin spent the pandemic bunkered in the Kremlin. His lack of empathy for those threatened by the virus and its economic consequences pushed Putin's approval rates to new lows in 2020 (Levada Center, 2020a). Putin's reaction to his dwindling ratings was to introduce new "fake news" laws to silence the journalists and others exposing the state's chaotic pandemic response (Luxmoore, 2020; Prince, 2020). Facing societal dismay at the cost in blood and treasure of his full-scale war in Ukraine, since February 2022 Putin has resorted to all-out state repression alongside persuasion to sustain his grip on power (Mozur et al., 2023; Troianovski & Safronova, 2022).

Russia's descent into authoritarianism under Putin was at first slow and stealthy, beginning with measures to gradually curtail media freedom and to replace elected officials with appointed ones during his first two presidential terms (Burrett, 2011). When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, state restrictions on independent media, intolerance of political opposition, and strict oversight of the courts increased in intensity. In the months following the 2022 Ukraine invasion, virtually all independent media outlets closed or moved into exile, while anyone who criticised Putin's "special military operation" was jailed. Civil society was smashed, with 14,000 protesters arrested in the weeks after the invasion began (Stoner, 2023, p. 7).

In this context of repression, is it possible to trust public opinion data coming out of Russia? Although it is challenging to conduct reliable opinion polls in today's Russia due to a lack of institutional transparency, independent Russian polling companies have gathered similar results to their Western counterparts regarding Putin's popular standing. These organisations include Gallup, Pew, the Levada Center, Russian Field, and the

Chronicles Research Project. It must be noted, however, that Putin's high approval ratings do not necessarily equate to genuine popularity, even when reported by reliable organisations. Approval can be given due to a perceived lack of viable alternatives. Furthermore, given Putin's authoritarianism, fear may limit what Russians are willing to say publicly about political topics (Pachikova & Kolobaeva, 2023). Organisations like the Levada Center, however, have been using the same methodologies and asking the same survey questions since the start of Putin's presidency—before his turn to authoritarianism. More recent findings are consistent with earlier research across a broad range of topics, suggesting the data is reliable.

3. Putin's Personal Image and Charisma

Building a cult of personality as a mode of legitimacy has been a Russian tradition from Peter the Great to Joseph Stalin. Putin is part of this tradition, mobilising support for his administration with a cult around his leadership, rather than through shared ideological positions (Burrett, 2019; Goble, 2015). Putin is a charismatic leader with a flair for drama. The PR-images of Putin presented by Russia's media are notorious: biker, hockey star, crooner, bare-chested horse rider, and, most dramatically, tamer of tigers (Burrett, 2017; Sperling, 2016, p. 137). But as Max Weber theorises, charisma is less about supply than demand. Charismatic leadership is usually found in times of turmoil, when it appears to offer a way out of crisis. For Weber, while the charismatic leader may indeed have exceptional skills, equally they may not, in reality, possess the qualities their followers perceive. Charisma is in the eye of the beholder (Bell, 2011, p. xxv). The key to the phenomenon is that followers believe their leader is extraordinary (Bell, 2011, p. xxvii). When Putin became president in 2000, after more than a decade of economic and political chaos, Russians wanted to believe that he was the hero for whom they had been waiting (Burrett, 2017).

Putin took over the Russian presidency following President Boris Yeltsin's surprise resignation on New Year's Eve 1999. As Yeltsin's prime minister, Putin became acting president, placing him in pole position to win the March 2000 presidential election. Putin's popularity was boosted by his successful execution of the second Chechen war, which was ignited by the Chechen invasion of Dagestan in August 1999. It was the outbreak of war that compelled Yeltsin to promote the little-known Putin from head of the security services to prime minister. In his new role, Putin was able to capitalise on the patriotic emotions created by the Chechen conflict, with jingoistic reporting of the war on state-backed media helping him build his public image as a strong leader (Burrett, 2020; Zassoursky, 2004).

Prior to his appointment as prime minister, Putin was a relatively unknown figure outside Russian political circles. When he came to office in August 1999, only two percent of Russian voters identified him as their preferred candidate to replace Yeltsin (Burrett, 2020, p. 195). But Putin's obscurity was an electoral asset, allowing him to create his public persona from scratch. TV images showing him planning tough action against Chechen terrorists, taking part in judo competitions, and flying fighter jets, transformed Putin from a rather dull state security officer into the strong leader Russians desired (Burrett, 2020). Basing his 2000 presidential campaign on the ambiguous slogan "Great Russia," Putin was able to satisfy the expectations and interests of diverse constituencies. In the March presidential election, Putin won by a wide margin, gaining votes from Russian nationalists, post-Soviet communists, and neoliberals alike (Burrett, 2011, 2020).

Despite being the preferred presidential candidate of the Yeltsin ruling elite, Putin established himself as a "man of the people" with displays of machismo and crude language (Sperling, 2016). When Russia was hit by

a wave of terrorist bombings in October 1999, Putin did not restrain his anger, vowing: "We'll catch them in the toilet, we will wipe them out in the sh*thouse" (Burrett, 2020, p. 193). Since then, the Russian president has regularly laced his speeches with vulgarisms. At an international press conference in 2002, Putin bizarrely offered an inquisitive journalist a circumcision in response to a particularly pointed question (Burrett, 2020; Strauss, 2003).

Toughness has always been central to Putin's charismatic image (Burrett, 2017). But in response to his waning popularity in his third term, masculinity and militarism became more obvious elements of Putin's PR strategy (Burrett, 2017; Somiya, 2014). Putin is portrayed as Russia's saviour, the embodiment of the country's strength and its defender against Western powers seeking to emasculate Russia (Sperling, 2016). To bolster his legitimacy at home, Putin aggressively exerts power abroad. Interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014 and 2022), and Syria (2015) demonstrate Russia's international influence under his leadership. Hostile Western responses to Moscow's provocations rally Russians around their president, seemingly confirming Putin's claims that Russia is in an existential battle for survival against the West. Creating a permanent backdrop of impending crisis is thus essential to the functioning of Putin's charismatic legitimacy. The sources of the crisis must be seen as emanating from abroad, as admitting to domestic crises would contradict Putin's claims to have restored political order, economic stability, and the rule of law (Malinova, 2022).

4. Putin's Populism and Economic Performance 2000–2011

When running for the presidency in 2000 and 2004, Putin's election campaigns focused on battling the economic chaos he inherited from Yeltsin. Russia's oligarchs—who had accumulated billions by appropriating state assets in the 1990s—were first on Putin's hit list. In the aftermath of Russia's 1998 financial crisis that devastated the living standards of ordinary Russians, the oligarchs were an obvious target. At a meeting with Russia's business elites a month before the 2000 presidential election, Putin made it clear that under his leadership there would be no more free riding (Burrett, 2020; Goldman, 2004, p. 36). In his statement—widely reported on Russian television—Putin told Russia's tycoons that they would no longer get away with flouting government regulations. Putin warned that elites taking excessive and illegal rents out of the economy "threaten our very existence" (Putin, 2000). In an interview on *Radio Mayak* a week before voting, borrowing the language of his Soviet predecessors, Putin spoke of his aspiration to "liquidate the oligarchs as a class" (Burrett, 2020; Reddaway, 2001, p. 27).

The war against the oligarchs was again a theme of Putin's presidential election campaign in 2004. A survey in 2003 demonstrated that 84 percent of voters believed that the oligarchs had acquired their wealth illegally (Naryshkina, 2004). To engage voters in an election that was seen as a foregone conclusion, a high-profile target was needed to demonstrate the authenticity of Putin's pledge to end the parasitic relationship between the oligarchs and the state. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest businessman and owner of the oil giant Yukos, made himself the obvious choice when he accused Putin of improprieties over the sale of another energy firm, Severnaya Neft, to state-owned Rosneft. Khodorkovsky further demonstrated his intentions to enter the political fray by buying the newspaper *Moskovskie Novosti* (Latynina, 2003). But Khodorkovsky's foray into politics was abruptly ended when in October 2003, he was arrested at Novosibirsk airport and charged with tax evasion and fraud. The dramatic nature of Khodorkovsky's arrest was deliberately designed to create a media frenzy that would elicit maximum support for the move among ordinary Russians. The storming of

Khodorkovsky's private jet provided footage that reminded audiences of his vast wealth and connection to the much-derided privatisation bonanza of the 1990s (Burrett, 2020).

As well as making an example of the oligarchs—albeit selectively as his cronies were allowed to keep their ill-gotten billions—Putin was helped in his first two terms by favourable economic tailwinds in the global economy (Wilson, 2021). High global oil and gas prices assisted Russia's rapid recovery from its 1998 financial crisis. Between 2000 and 2008 national GDP almost doubled, growing from 49 to 81 trillion roubles (Figure 1). Although the energy-dependent economy was hit significantly by falling global demand following the 2008 financial crash, the reserves built up during the boom years provided Russia's economy with a soft landing. Furthermore, Putin used his influence over the media to create a discourse blaming Western capitalism and globalisation for the economic downturn (Feklyunina & White, 2011).

Public perceptions of economic performance are closely correlated with levels of support for those in power, in both authoritarian and democratic systems (Burnell, 2006; Chen, 2003). Fortunately for Putin, most Russians did not feel substantially worse off as a result of the 2008 financial crash. One year after the banking crisis began in the US, 58 percent of Russians reported that their everyday economic situation had remained the same over the previous year, while 34 percent said it had got worse, and seven percent saw an improvement (Levada Center, 2016). Although a majority reported stability in their own economic situation, many more were concerned about a possible economic crisis engulfing Russia at the start of 2009 than one year before. Fear of economic crisis jumped from 22 percent in February 2008 to 59 percent in January 2009, but this number had fallen back to 30 percent by January 2011 (Levada Center, 2016). Counterintuitively, the proportion of Russians naming "improving living standards" as one of Putin's successes increased between 2008 and 2010, from 36 to 40 percent (Levada Center, 2014). As Putin began campaigning to return to the presidency in 2012, public perceptions of Russia's economic performance were stable, if not as optimistic as during his first two presidential terms.

Putin's personal ratings did not drop as a consequence of rising public concerns over the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis, with his approval hovering between 88 and 78 percent during the 12 months from August 2008 (Figure 2). Russia's military incursion into Georgia in August 2008, perhaps accounts for Putin's high approval ratings during this period, as Russians "rallied around the flag" at a time of national crisis— albeit one manufactured by the Kremlin. Despite the stable economic backdrop, Putin's announcement that he would seek a third presidential term in 2012 saw his approval tumble to a new low of 63 percent. Voters who had ignored Putin's creeping authoritarianism during his first two presidential terms could no longer pretend his intention was anything other than to build a personalistic system of power devoid of genuine institutional checks and balances. As mass protests demanding "Russia without Putin" began to attract tens of thousands of participants following fraudulent parliamentary elections in December 2011, official discourses in support of Putin's leadership shifted. Major changes included a renewed focus on domestic and international "enemies" and a growing concentration on the West as Russia's main other.

5. Putin's Nationalism and Conservatism 2012–Present

After successfully neutering the Yeltsin elite and consolidating his power during his first two terms, the biggest obstacles to Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 were voter apathy and cynicism (Burrett, 2020). High voter turnout was essential to renewing his mandate. But after more than a decade in power, Putin

could hardly campaign as the champion of the little guy battling an entrenched elite. To rally support in 2012, therefore, Putin shifted his ire to domestic and international forces supposedly bent on overturning his legacy. State-controlled media was deployed to vilify those staging protests against Putin's return to power as a privileged elite in the pocket of the US (Krastev & Holmes, 2012, p. 44). This was not the first time that Putin had invoked an American bogyman or the spectre of a "fifth column" within to rally support for his leadership (Burrett, 2020). Foreshadowing events in 2022, during Ukraine's 2004-2005 Orange Revolution, Putin had accused the US of fostering discontent by funding anti-government NGOs. He did not, however, accuse the US of encouraging regime change within Russia itself until 2012, when his government introduced a new law requiring all NGOs receiving overseas funding to register as foreign agents (Elder, 2013). In 2007, Putin made an impassioned speech at the Munich Security Conference accusing the US of "forcing its will on the world" and of threatening global security with its foreign policy actions (Yasmann, 2007). Although there are examples of Putin invoking external enemies earlier in his first two terms, however, it was not until after 2012 that hostility to the West became a consistent theme of his rhetoric (Burrett, 2020).

In fact, Putin had come to office in 2000 hoping to integrate with the West as a route to Russia's modernisation, economic growth, and international revival. In an open letter published on 30 December 1999, Putin stated that democracy and market economics were the only routes to improved living standards, calling these principles "the highway by which the whole of humanity is travelling" (Putin, 1999). As part of his integration strategy, Putin successfully courted US President George W. Bush, who infamously claimed to have searched his Russian counterpart's soul and found him "straightforward and trustworthy" (Baker, 2013). At home, Kremlin strategists used his relationship with Bush to highlight Putin's growing international stature and his restoration of Russia's prestige. On the eve of the 2004 presidential election, Russian voters saw foreign policy—including improving relations with the West—as the area in which Putin had achieved the most progress in his first term, contributing to his 80 percent approval ratings (Burrett, 2019; Levada Center, 2014).

By 2012, strengthening Russia's international prestige was one of the few policy areas in which Russian voters continued to positively appraise Putin (Levada Center, 2014). Since the 2008 financial crisis, economic pessimism has steadily climbed, especially among younger Russians. Crucially, Putin's reputation for fighting corruption and reigning in the oligarchs had fallen sharply. In March 2004, 34 percent of Russians had cited combating corruption as one of Putin's main accomplishments, but by February 2012 this was down to 10 percent. Following the opposite trajectory, in July 2001 only 15 percent believed the oligarchs held sway over Putin, a decade later the number had jumped to 42 percent (Levada Center, 2014).

To help Putin reconnect with voters ahead of the 2012 election, the Kremlin stepped up its focus on nationalist themes. To be sure, patriotism had been central to Putinism from the outset of his presidency. But while in 1999, Putin stressed that pride in one's country must be "free from the tints of nationalist conceit and imperial ambitions," in 2012, his rhetoric became increasingly divisive (Putin, 1999). Already on the night of his triumphant return to the presidency, Putin was characterising his political opponents as an "enemy within" attempting to "undermine Russian statehood and usurp power" (Medvedev & Putin, 2012). Scholars thus generally concur that nationalism and the invoking of external enemies have become more important to Putin's performative legitimation strategies since 2012 (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016; Malinova, 2022; Petersson, 2021; Sharafutdinova, 2020).

The Putin regime's attempts to bolster its legitimacy through nationalist appeals have been built on three main pillars: pride in the state, glorification of the military, and respect for traditional values, embodied in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (Burrett, 2019). Throughout Putin's tenure, military achievements have been deployed to promote patriotism across Russia's diverse citizenry, especially Soviet victory in WW2 (Hoffmann, 2021). When asked what events in national history make them most proud, more than 80 percent of Russians consistently cite defeating the Nazis in WW2 (Levada Center, 2020b). As a result, official ceremonies to mark national military holidays and anniversaries have become major events in Putin's Russia (Burrett, 2019; Hutchings, 2008; Hutchings & Rulyov, 2008). In the lead-up to the 2012 election, the Putin-Medvedev government turbocharged efforts to promote patriotism, passing legislation standardising history education to "create a positive image of modern Russia in the world and among Russians themselves" (Izvestia, 2012). To maximise his patriotic appeal, Putin chose Russia's annual celebrations marking victory in WW2 to make his first triumphant visit to Crimea after the territory was annexed by Russia from Ukraine in March 2014 (Burrett, 2019; Luhn & Walker, 2014).

Putin has also invoked WW2 to legitimise his 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Fedor, 2017). During his Victory Day speech in May 2022, Putin told Russian soldiers back from Ukraine that they were "fighting for the same thing their fathers and grandfathers did," for "the motherland" and the defeat of Nazism (Putin, 2022b). Putin and his Russian-media attack dogs repeatedly paint Ukraine's leaders as neo-Nazis perpetrating genocide against the country's Russian speakers ("Naryshkin Sravnil Situatsiyu," 2022). On 16 March 2022, Putin gave a long speech alleging that the "neo-Nazis" in Kyiv, with the help of NATO, were preparing nuclear and biological weapons to use against Russia (Putin, 2022a).

Putin has similarly used the ROC as a platform for boosting his legitimacy (Admiraal, 2009; Burrett, 2019). During his tenure, the ROC has increased its role in the military, schools, and national commemorations. In his 2000 Christmas address, Putin proclaimed the Orthodox faith as the "unbending spiritual core of the entire people and state" (Malykhina, 2014, p. 53). Closely identifying Orthodoxy with the Russian state helps Putin to defend his interference in other former Soviet countries—especially Ukraine which is also predominantly Orthodox (Admiraal, 2009, p. 209; Burrett, 2019). Promoting the ROC therefore serves both Putin's domestic legitimacy and foreign policy objectives. Since 2012, Putin has also increasingly promoted narratives about Russia as Europe's last defender of traditional values, including social conservatism (Tolz & Harding, 2015, p. 476). In March 2012, a homophobic law banning the promotion of homosexuality to minors was passed in Putin's home city of St. Petersburg; this added to existing laws passed in multiple Russian cities, effectively outlawing gay rights, rallies, and the distribution of literature referring to homosexuality. In January 2013, the Russian parliament passed a nationwide ban on homosexual "propaganda" by 388 to 1 (Sperling, 2014, p. 73). Despite a small but increasingly visible domestic LGBTQ+ movement, Russia's cultural soil was fertile for political legitimation strategies based on homophobia. In March 2015, 77 percent of Russians said they supported legislation banning "homosexual propaganda," while 84 percent were against equal marriage (Levada Center, 2015).

Traditional values were also invoked to demonise the West, which has been increasingly presented as a hostile "other" since 2012. Since the outset of his presidency, Putin has blamed others for Russia's ills (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016). In his third term, the West, and especially the US, replaced the oligarchs as the main enemy vilified by Putin to rally the nation behind his leadership. Western tolerance of LGBTQ+ rights and other forms of diversity were presented as a source of Western weakness by Putin and his

propagandists working in Russia's state-backed media. A documentary broadcast by state television entitled *The Rape of Europe* (*Pokhishcheniye Evropy*), for example, portrayed Western Europe as paralyzed by tolerance and threatened with self-induced extinction because of mass immigration and the legalization of same-sex marriage.

The Ukraine crisis that erupted in February 2014 gave Putin the perfect opportunity to further cement nationalist and anti-Western feelings as the main pillar of support for his leadership—a strategy he would turbocharge following the 2022 full-scale invasion (Kaltseis, 2023; Mykhnenko, 2022; Treisman, 2014). In a speech in January 2015, for example, Putin claimed that pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine were not only fighting the Ukrainian army but also a NATO-sponsored "foreign legion" (Burrett, 2019; Sperling, 2016, p. 17). Putin's Ukraine strategy quickly paid dividends. In March 2014, 89 percent of Russians reported approval for Putin's annexation of Crimea (Levada Center, 2024a). Thanks to his personal embodiment of a resurgent Russia, Putin improved his approval ratings during the worst economic downturn since the 1990s. Despite US-led sanctions that tipped Russia's economy into recession in 2014, Putin's approval rating remained around 80 percent (Burrett, 2019; Levada Center, 2023b).

In 2016, Russian-US relations took a further nosedive when Washington accused Russia of using social media to manipulate American perceptions of the presidential race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. At home, Putin's media proxies portrayed Washington's accusations of Russian election interference as evidence of American paranoia, hypocrisy, and Russophobia (Burrett, 2018). Polls show that Russians do not like the US, which is seen as the least friendly country towards Russia. In May 2023, 72 percent of Russians believed the US was unfriendly, with 77 percent reporting negative feelings towards Washington (Levada Center, 2023a). Interfering in US politics, therefore, helps Putin, not only by exacerbating divisions within American society, but also by reinforcing domestic narratives of the Russian president's vital role in defending Russia's interests against a hostile West (Burrett, 2018). Furthermore, by playing on Russians' resentment toward the US, the Kremlin deflects domestic anger over the economic distress caused by Western sanctions. In March 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, 53 percent of Russians were concerned or very concerned about the impact of sanctions (Levada Center, 2023c). Attitudes towards the US, however, have not always been hostile. Back in 2000, when Putin first became president, 69 percent of Russians held a positive view of the US, while only 23 percent felt negative towards it (Levada Center, 2023a). Russian public hostility to the US has grown in line with Putin's increasingly hostile foreign policy towards Western nations. Whether public opinion about the West has been influenced by Putin's propaganda or has become more negative independent of the Kremlin's rhetoric is not important. The point is that the public and their president are united against a perceived common enemy, a bond bolstering Putin's legitimacy.

The threat of a hostile West was further employed to bolster support for Putin in the 2018 presidential election. Russian television warned voters that support for Putin was the only thing protecting the country from obliteration by the West. Social media spread rumours of Western plans to meddle in the election, while state media alleged that more than a dozen countries had launched cyberattacks against Russia (Burrett, 2021; Polyankova, 2018). Putin's presidential opponents were accused of being in the pay of foreign powers. The Russian parliament claimed those campaigning for a voting boycott were receiving funds from Western governments to spoil the election (Burrett, 2021; "V Sovfede Zayavili," 2018).

State-backed media also framed the March 2018 assassination attempt in the UK against exiled former GRU officer Sergei Skripal to support Putin's narrative of a hostile enemy at the gates. On 4 March, Skripal was found in critical condition, unconscious on a park bench in Salisbury, along with his daughter Yulia, who was visiting from Moscow. British investigators concluded that novichok, a Soviet-era military-grade nerve agent had been used to poison them. On 12 March, British Prime Minister Theresa May stated that it was "highly likely" that Putin's regime was responsible for the poisoning (Barry & Perez-Pena, 2018; Burrett, 2021). The British government was accused of using the Skripal case to spread anti-Russian propaganda to shore up its security partnerships ahead of its departure from the EU. Appearing on state-backed television, political scientist Caroline Galacteros accused the UK government of using the Skripal case to "return the UK to the European family" (Burrett, 2020, p. 199). By stoking voters' resentment towards a hostile Western government, the Kremlin achieved its desired outcome. Election turnout reached a respectable 67.5 percent, with Putin winning 76 percent of the votes cast in 2018, enough to claim a legitimate mandate. After the election, Kremlin strategists thanked Western leaders for marshalling support behind Putin. His campaign spokesman Andrei Kondrashov thanked the British government for guaranteeing "a level of turnout we weren't hoping to achieve by ourselves" (Burrett, 2020, p. 199).

Despite winning 78 percent of the vote in the March 2018 presidential election, Putin's approval ratings soon took a dive in response to widespread public anger at government plans to raise the retirement age. Anti-Putin protests broke out across the country, with 85 percent of Russians opposing pension reform (Levada Center, 2018). Putin's approval ratings dropped from 82 percent in April 2018 to 66 percent in October (Figure 2). The president's approval ratings continued to slide over the next two years, reaching a record low of 59 percent in April 2020 over his government's poor handling of Covid-19. Upbeat coverage of gleaming hospitals with plentiful supplies of protective equipment on state-backed television was contradicted by reports of death, chaos and corruption on social media and in Russia's relatively free regional media ("For Russia regional coverage," 2020). By bringing together information from across Russia, social and local media revealed the scale of the pandemic's impact, which the government was keen to downplay in order to hold the scheduled 2020 referendum that would allow Putin to reset his term limits and stay president potentially until 2036 (Luxmoore, 2020). As had become the norm by 2020, Kremlin disinformation about the origins of Covid-19, and later about the efficacy of vaccines, focused blame on the US. Conspiracy theories also centred on Ukraine, as Putin intensified his information war against Russia's neighbour in 2019 (Mozur et al., 2022).

Putin's war in Ukraine is perhaps the best example of the significance of his foreign policy achievements to his domestic legitimacy. His February 2022 full-scale invasion ended Putin's four-year approval slump, catapulting his rating back above 80 percent, where it has remained (as of September 2024). Even before his 2022 invasion, Putin framed tensions with Ukraine as a standoff with the West over NATO's Eastward expansion, demanding a veto over Kyiv ever joining the military alliance (Talmazan, 2022). Denied the quick victory he anticipated, Putin increasingly cast the Ukraine war as an epic battle for survival against the West (Dress, 2023). Psychologically, it is more palatable for Russians to think of the war as a confrontation against the global hegemon, as opposed to the invasion of a smaller neighbour—a sentiment exploited by Putin. Framing the war as a battle against the US and NATO helps the Russian president reinforce his domestic image as Russia's resolute defender. Addressing the Federal Assembly after a year of war, Putin decried that the US had "enslaved" Ukraine and claimed that Washington was clamouring for Moscow's defeat to plunder Russian resources: "Over the long centuries of colonialism, diktat and hegemony, they got used to being

allowed everything, got used to spitting on the whole world," Putin said. He added, "We are defending human lives and our common home, while the West seeks unlimited power" (Putin, 2023). Although it is hard to accurately gauge public opinion, data from independent pollsters suggests that the majority of Russians, to some degree, support Putin's Ukraine war and his contention that the US is responsible for escalating the conflict (Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2022).

Two years into the conflict, 76 percent of Russians said they still support war with Ukraine, but this headline figure is misleading (Levada Center, 2024a). Aside from the obvious fact that respondents might fear the consequences of openly opposing Putin's war, at the start of 2024, 58 percent said they would support an immediate truce with Ukraine. Furthermore, only 33 percent believed increased military spending should be the government's budget priority, while only 17 percent supported a new mobilisation (Chronicles Project, 2024). These latter figures suggest that although Russians support their country and its troops, most would prefer an end to the war.

A gap appears to be opening between Putin and the Russian people over the war in Ukraine, relations with the West, and the government's economic priorities. Despite more than a decade of anti-Western propaganda by the Kremlin, in January 2024, 51 percent of Russians said they would favour improving relations with the West (Chronicles Project, 2024). Given current Western sanctions on Russia over its aggression in Ukraine, the only way to achieve better relations would be to end the war. Although Putin appears to have convinced Russians that the West is their enemy, many appear to wish it were otherwise. On the economy, 83 percent of Russians want their government to focus on solving domestic problems such as inflation and unemployment, while only 56 percent think this is a priority for Putin (Chronicles Project, 2024). Reflecting this concern about government priorities, only 29 percent believe Putin represents the interests of ordinary Russians (Levada Center, 2023b). Despite war and sanctions, however, Russian public confidence in the domestic economy is high and has been growing steadily since Putin began his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Goncharpov, 2024). Expectations of increasing unemployment, for example, fell from 52 percent in April 2022 to 16 percent in February 2024 (Levada Center, 2024b). Although sanctions initially caused a fall in Russia's GDP, increases in public spending in war-related industries, along with high oil revenues, led to a quick recovery. Furthermore, Russia is exploiting loopholes in Western sanctions to access critical technologies, banking services, and arms via third countries. The impact of sanctions on ordinary Russia is, therefore, less severe than might be expected. Putin's economic management, while not highly regarded, is good enough not to undermine his legitimacy. And for now, that is sufficient to keep him in power.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that despite growing authoritarianism and war, Vladimir Putin has maintained his domestic political legitimacy, reflected in his high approval ratings for most of his 25 years at the top of Russian politics. Initially, Putin's popularity rested on his economic delivery, restoration of Russia's international prestige, and populist battles against Chechen terrorists and Russia's oligarchs. His decision to return to the presidency for a controversial third term, coupled with an economic slowdown, however, led to a fall in Putin's approval ratings shortly before parliamentary elections in December 2011. As the legitimacy of the power system Putin had constructed rested on maintaining his charismatic connection with Russian voters, his declining popularity threatened the future of the wider regime. To reinflate his flagging popularity, Putin increased his nationalist rhetoric and overseas adventurism, first in annexing Crimea (2014) and then

with a surprise intervention in Syria (2015). Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election and reaction to the assassination of Sergei Skripal in 2018 can also be read in the context of Putin's need to demonstrate Russia's international power to domestic audiences.

Framing Russia's aggression and interference as self-defence against Western threats, allows Putin to repeatedly reassert his essential role as guarantor of Russia's national survival. Controversial pension reforms in 2018 again sent Putin's popularity into decline, a malaise exacerbated by government lies and incompetence in managing the coronavirus pandemic from spring 2020. Putin's popularity only recovered following his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, demonstrating the importance of nationalist causes to his charismatic leadership, which is the main foundation of his legitimacy.

More than two years since the war began, despite Russian casualties in the tens of thousands, Putin retains his popular support. Many Russians agree with Putin that Russia is in an existential battle for survival with the West. For those who do disagree, conformity is the safest option, given the criminalisation of dissent since 2022. Putin's fate is now tied to the outcome of his war with Ukraine which shows no sign of fast resolution. Even if Putin secures a victory in Ukraine, in the form of a permanent territorial transfer, the long-term prospects of his regime are built on shaky foundations. Lacking a clear successor, the present system is contingent on Putin's personal longevity. Beyond Putin, it is difficult to see how the system maintains its cohesion. Although a successor could inherit Putin's mantle as the nation's protector and guardian of traditional values, the inter-elite cooperation that has sustained political stability for the past quarter century rests on long-held personal connections to the current president. The elites' loyalty to Putin is based on his role as a trusted arbiter of their factional disputes, rather than on deference to his constitutional role as head of state (Burrett, 2011; Sakwa, 2021). Whoever follows Putin will likely seek to mimic his charismatic leadership—despite the caveats above—rather than constructing a genuinely legal-rational basis for legitimacy. As the regime's security relies on aggressive behaviour and the maintenance of foreign enemies, despite Russian public preferences for rapprochement, it is unlikely that Russian-state hostilities towards the West will change in the foreseeable future.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

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