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EDITORIAL

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The Complex Challenges of Modern Leadership: A Scholarly Overview of Ethics, Democracy, and Political Leadership

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Abstract

Considering how 2025 compares with 2020, which was described as one of the worst years ever in part because of the Covid-19 pandemic and other challenging events, sharpens our appreciation of the complexity of modern leadership. The nine articles within this thematic issue adeptly engage with the collection's main themes of ethics, democracy, and political leadership at the theoretical and empirical level. As a group, the authors present an impressive range of specific examples of political leadership as well as citizen-based social action. The complexity found in exercising competent, democratic, ethical leadership in today's political context is a common theme across these works. As well, the continuing importance of trust in the exercise of leadership signals the necessity for more academic scholarship on this topic.

Keywords

comparative politics; democracy; ethics; government; leaders; leadership; politics; populism; trust

1. Introduction

Five years ago, I was privileged to serve as the academic editor for an earlier *Politics and Governance* thematic issue, one devoted to "Leadership, Populism, and Power" (de Clercy, 2020). It is remarkable to return to that issue and consider the state of the world at the time. There were several large challenges to democratic leaders that year, a year which some writers argue ought to be considered the worst one ever (Lindsay, 2020). The WHO declared the Covid-19 outbreak a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020, and governments around the world responded to this unanticipated event (WHO, 2025). As the year wore on, leaders faced large tasks in reassuring frightened citizens, prioritizing vulnerable groups, and spurring their administrations to oversee the acquisition of scarce medical supplies

like swabs and ventilators. Populations were masked and immobilized. Workplaces, schools, and public meeting spaces emptied, economies diminished, and many states faced fiscal difficulties.

At about the same time, there was much tension among European leaders as Britain departed from the European Union on January 31, 2020. This was a contentious event that was realized four years after the Brexit vote. Prime Minister Boris Johnson sought to reassure anxious citizens by predicting that the end of the United Kingdom's 47-year membership would usher in "real national renewal and change," although on the continent, leaders expressed skepticism about this rosy prediction ("Boris Johnson promises Brexit," 2020).

In American politics, 2020 was the final year of the first Trump presidency. International attention was focused on the Republican President's impeachment trial. The United States House of Representatives impeached Trump on two charges: abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The impeachment trial opened on January 16 in the Senate, and on February 5, the president was acquitted on both articles, mainly by Republican senators (Fram, 2020). In the election nine months later, Democrat Joe Biden won the presidency, although Trump refused to concede the election. The levels of trust among Republican voters in their electoral system plummeted in the wake of this election, and some analysts warned that Trump's behaviour would encourage authoritarian leaders in other parts of the world (Bruen, 2020).

Looking back, the events of 2020 clearly demonstrated the large challenge of exercising democratic leadership facing political leaders. Democratic leaders managed large-scale change, public fear, and controversy in the context of an unfolding pandemic and a host of related economic, political, and social issues that were a consequence of Covid-19. As a scholar of political leadership, I appreciate the enormous leadership challenges that 2020 presented. Yet, compared with the state of the world in 2025, I have to admit that, to my mind, 2020 arguably appears to be a simpler time.

Many complicated and troubling events that face us now were still in the offing. As examples, in 2020 Russia had not yet invaded Ukraine (2022), the events of October 7th leading to the Gaza war had not yet begun (2023), artificial intelligence had not yet been democratised for the masses (2022), the second Trump presidency had not yet been inaugurated (2025), and the international trade regime had not yet been disrupted by punishing trade wars (2025). It is quite a comment on the state of our world today to look back five years and conclude that the leadership environment of 2025 is the more complicated one. This comparison sharpens my appreciation of the truly significant hurdles facing today's political leaders.

There is another way in which comparing 2020 and 2025 is a helpful, clarifying exercise for those interested in studying leadership. Setting aside the question of which period is more complex, focusing on these two periods underscores the pressing need for effective, ethical leadership in modern democracies. Leaders then and now must navigate a myriad of complex issues within a rapidly changing context marked by rising authoritarianism, declining public trust, a turn toward political extremism, enduring economic and racial inequality, critical climate change events, and economic instability. Now more than ever, much power and responsibility rests on the shoulders of our political leaders. And so the necessity to understand leaders and apprehend the nature of modern leadership is also more pressing and more urgent.

In contemplating the rich array of studies presented in this issue, there is evidence of the complexity facing today's leaders within every single study. Each of these analyses represents significant aspects of leadership that merit our close attention. Let me state as well how impressed my co-editor, Susan Dieleman, and I are with the scope of the research studies we received in response to the call for papers inviting the submission of new research on "Ethics, Democracy, and Political Leadership." The contributors utilized many different methodological approaches in their work, and there are studies with dense theoretical insight alongside careful empirical analysis of specific sets of parliamentarians and party leaders.

At the outset of this project, I hoped that this thematic issue would, in its final form, represent some of the latest research being undertaken, and I am so pleased that this goal was achieved. Alongside the established scholars who have contributed their expertise to this issue, it is exciting to publish the very latest research authored by scholars at an early stage of their careers. There is certainly room for new theories, new analyses, and new topics. Finally, as one of five endowed Jarislowsky Chairs in Trust and Political Leadership, which were created two years ago with the intention to improve research and teaching about ethics and political leadership, I am delighted that three of my fellow chairs—Susan Dieleman, Michael MacKenzie, and Stéphane Paquin—contributed to this issue.

To preview the thematic issue for readers, in the following sections, I discuss the studies in light of this thematic edition's three main themes. While the nine studies generally touch upon all of these thematic elements and the interplay among them, some authors put more focus on one of the three themes as compared with the others.

2. Ethics

It is worth reminding ourselves that the extensive canon of knowledge about political leadership accumulated across time and cultures has focused much attention on what is good leadership, how to shape ethical leaders, and how to challenge unethical ones. This owes to the nature of leadership as "a process of influencing others; it has a moral dimension that distinguishes it from other types of influence such as coercion or despotic control." (Northouse, 2022, p. 440.) Several studies in this collection directly engage the moral dimension of leadership. Martinsson (2025) asks which virtues, and why these ones in particular, are most important for politicians. Martinsson interviewed 74 Swedish parliamentarians and analyzed their views using a structured multi-level coding approach. He presents three main claims: First, the cardinal virtue in the Swedish parliament is the ability to separate ideas from those who hold them. This virtue is considered to be key to building political trust in the legislature and the polity. He notes, secondly, that virtue pluralism is essential within parliamentary and party groups. A third conclusion from the research is that the virtues espoused by his interviewees can be categorized into five main themes. Martinsson (2025, p. 2) concludes that "the institutional structure and context of a political system…shape the virtues politicians value in themselves and their colleagues."

In their contribution, Pérez-Escolar et al. (2025) focus on the ethical deficiencies marking the Vox party's 2023 election campaign in Spain. Noting that Vox's populist presence, particularly since 2013, has reshaped the country's political landscape, in this study, they analyze the party's 2023 election communications to test whether candidate rhetoric in 15 accounts on the social media platform X reflects the country's regional diversity or constitutes a hate-based mobilization strategy. Among their findings, the authors underscore that

a significant portion of the party's communications reference hate narratives or target migrants and ethnic minorities. They conclude, "the ethical implications of these findings are significant. The growing prevalence of hate speech, both explicit and implicit, poses a direct threat to the integrity of democratic institutions and social harmony" (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2025, p. 18).

With a similar focus on the ethical aspects of populist leadership, but with specific attention to the events surrounding the removal of the Law and Justice Party from power in Poland in 2023, Kuczyński (2025) presents a unique perspective on how to build and fortify democratic opposition. The author carefully delineates the emergence and interplay of social and civic activism, which illustrates the process of learning politics by social actors, divided into successive stages. He concludes:

> Poland's experience from the last decade shows that significant protection against authoritarianism and populism is provided by the constant activity and vigilance of leaders of democratic social movements and civic initiatives, provided they are able to mobilize their supporters to act in the next parliamentary and other elections. (Kuczyński, 2025, p. 15)

3. Democracy

The second theme guiding the research contributions centers on democracy, and four of the studies fully engage the connection between democracy and leadership. As with Pérez-Escolar et al.'s study (2025) and Kuczyński's (2025) focus on resistance to right-wing populism, Paquin (2025) frames his analysis in a context marked by declining public trust and the rise of populism. He observes there is a lack of knowledge concerning the relationship between anti-establishment populist radical-right parties and democratic accountability mechanisms such as "open government" policies that fortify transparency and institutional integrity (Paquin, 2025). Paquin explores how the Sweden Democrats weaponized transparency to amplify anti-elite populist narratives, and so this work provides analytical insight into a paradoxical problem: how open and transparent government mechanisms—which are so prized by democratic governments—can be employed for partisan gain and may ultimately diminish, rather than amplify, public trust.

In a similar vein, Esfahani and Masoudnia (2025) focus on the relationship between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's populist policies and governance quality from 2013 to 2023. They use critical approaches to populism and garner a combination of quality of governance indicators and quality of democracy dimensions. Deploying empirical indicators from sources including the World Governance Indicators, Freedom House, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, as well as The Legatum Prosperity Index, and comparing the president's rule across his tenure in office, the authors conclude that Erdoğan's more recent policies have adversely affected the quality of democratic governance in Turkey.

MacKenzie (2025) explores an under-theorized aspect of democratic leadership. Noting that many leading theorists assert democratic leadership necessarily requires leaders to consult with their followers and forge joint commitments before taking action, MacKenzie asks: What happens when leaders act without doing so? Is the democratic nature of their leadership compromised in such instances? He argues that there are solid justifications for such cases, and while democratic leaders should justify their actions and account for them, they can, in fact, act with democratic legitimacy before establishing joint commitments with their supporters. He illustrates this position in two insightful cases: Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's decision to

introduce the Goods and Services Tax in 1991 and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's handling of the European "migrant crisis" in 2015.

Dieleman (2025) focuses attention on conceptualizing the trust relationship between leaders and followers. She notes that empirical studies of trust in the political realm are increasing within the social science literature; however, recent work in philosophy on the topic of trust addresses very little of the existing empirical work. In her study, she proposes a conceptual infrastructure that can help to clarify and substantiate the theoretical foundations of existing empirical work on the topic of trust in political leaders. This infrastructure recommends a typology of theories of trust that includes entrusting theories, which focus on what is entrusted, trusting theories, which focus on the values and dispositions of the truster, and trustworthy theories, which focus on the trustworthiness of the trustee. This conceptual infrastructure aims to be theoretically useful in supplying a language to understand and articulate the nature of trust and trustworthiness. It may also be empirically useful by offering a recommended method for determining a set of concepts that can be deployed in empirical work to apprehend the presence or absence, and evolving dynamics surrounding, trust between leaders and followers.

4. Political Leadership

With respect to the third theme of political leadership, two of the studies focus predominantly on these foundational questions: exactly how is leadership effected? What informs politicians' performance and representation in this task, and how do they mobilize people to follow them?

Gaspard (2025) notes that while the academic literature concerning citizens' democratic satisfaction is well-established, the understanding of politicians' satisfaction with democracy is surprisingly underdeveloped. He analyzes cross-national data from The Comparative Candidates Survey, covering 49 elections in 21 countries from 2005 to 2021, to investigate the relationship between the political leadership's perceptions of electoral integrity and their satisfaction with the quality of democracy. He concludes that while electoral integrity affects democratic satisfaction among politicians, this factor matters more for politicians who lost an election. He finds that electoral management bodies' independence does not affect politicians' satisfaction with democracy. And finally, while electoral management bodies' capacity influences politicians' levels of democratic satisfaction, the strength of the effect differs among politicians depending on their left or right ideological affiliation (Gaspard, 2025).

Finally, Ristevska and Prezelj (2025) focus their analysis on a specific mechanism of political leadership, addressing the question of how American presidents shape public understanding of terrorism, legitimate their policy choices, and construct narratives that aim to reconcile security goals with democratic ideals. The authors employ a careful analysis of leader rhetoric concerning counterterrorism policy since the 9/11 terrorist attacks by comparing four key speeches delivered by Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden. While Bush and Trump framed terrorism as an existential threat to justify aggressive measures, Obama and Biden adopted a more moderate rhetoric, balancing security objectives with civil liberties. They conclude that "by understanding how framing devices operate in specific political and historical contexts, policymakers and scholars can better appreciate the challenges of crafting ethical and effective counterterrorism strategies that uphold democratic principles and maintain public trust" (Ristevska & Prezelj, 2025, p. 18)

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the nine studies within this issue adeptly engage with the collection's main themes of ethics, democracy, and political leadership at the theoretical and empirical level. They present an impressive range of specific examples of political leadership as well as citizen-based social action. The complexity found in exercising competent, democratic, ethical leadership in today's political context is a common theme across these works. As well, in considering this fine assembly of some of the latest leadership research from scholars located at many different institutions across the globe, I notice all of the works collected here reference the importance of trust in relation to leadership. In 2025, social scientists continue to seek more knowledge about the concept of trust and its relationship to the exercise of leadership. So, the continuing importance of trust in governance and government signals the necessity for more academic scholarship on this topic, even as a new comprehensive empirical investigation finds that while trust in implementing institutions is stable or perhaps increasing around the world, trust in representative institutions has been declining in recent decades (Valgarðsson et al., 2025, p. 2).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Virtues in Political Practice: Insights From an Interview Study With Swedish Parliamentarians

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Abstract

Which virtues, and why these, are most important for politicians? While philosophical discussions on virtues in politics are extensive, empirical investigations into the virtues politicians themselves value remain limited. This article addresses this gap through in-depth interviews with 74 Swedish parliamentarians. Analyzing these interviews using a structured multi-level coding approach, I make three main claims. First, the cardinal virtue in the Swedish parliament is the ability to separate ideas from those who hold them; this principle is seen as vital for fostering political trust within parliament and with the public. Second, virtue pluralism is essential within parliamentary and party groups as the virtues politicians prioritize depend on the broader virtue composition of their group. Third, virtues can be categorized into five key themes—entrepreneurial, social, integrity, wisdom, and craftsman—reflecting the multifaceted nature of parliamentary representative roles and responsibilities. Collectively, these findings underscore the interdependent nature of virtues in political practice, where the value of specific virtues is shaped by group dynamics and the presence or absence of the cardinal virtue. This study provides novel empirical insights into how national political leaders perceive and value virtues in politics, contributing to the literature on political ethics, representation, and leadership.

Keywords

parliaments; political ethics; political virtues; representative democracy; virtue ethics

1. Introduction

The demands of political representation call on elected officials to fulfill their responsibilities with a careful blend of decisiveness, thoughtfulness, and principled decision-making. They are expected to listen attentively to the voices of those they represent while simultaneously exercising independent political judgment.

The virtues they cultivate to meet these challenges are not only critical to their political roles but also deeply connected to the citizens they serve through their democratic mandates. As elected representatives, politicians act on these mandates, making decisions, as Beerbohm (2012) aptly puts it, "in our names." Despite the significant role virtues can play in shaping democratic and political practices, systematic empirical studies of elected officials' understandings of virtues in politics—the character, traits, and qualities they prioritize in their representative roles—remain limited. In this article I seek to address this gap by exploring the following research question: Which virtues, and why these, are most important for politicians?

I address this question by focusing on Sweden's premier legislative body, the Swedish parliament. To explore Swedish parliamentarians' understandings of virtues in their representative roles, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 74 members of the Swedish parliament. I analyzed the data using a two-step thematic coding approach, which allowed me to capture the breadth of virtues discussed, connect these findings to existing literature on virtues in representative politics, and develop new analytical categories for advancing normative, theoretical, and empirical exploration of virtues in political practice.

The findings underline the interdependent nature of virtues in political practice. By examining why certain virtues are considered essential and linking this to the concept of virtue pluralism, the study illustrates how the institutional structure and context of a political system—such as the prominence of party groups in the Swedish parliament—shape the virtues politicians value in themselves and their colleagues. The virtues politicians prioritize may, however, shift not only with changes in political contexts or institutional structures but also with the virtue composition of their primary political group. These findings suggest the need to expand theoretical examinations of virtues in representative politics beyond the voter–representative relationship, which has traditionally been the primary focus, to also encompass the interactions and dynamics between representatives themselves. While politicians' own views neither define the conceptual essence of virtues in politics nor determine which virtues politicians ought to cultivate normatively, grounding theoretical discussions in concepts derived from real-world practice—such as the relational nature of virtues in politics—can, I argue, enhance the practical relevance of these theoretical arguments.

The article proceeds in the following way. First, I present the theoretical departure, research design, and methodology. Next, I discuss what I identify as the cardinal virtue in the Swedish parliament. This is followed by an exploration of the role of virtue pluralism. I then present the variety of virtues mentioned by parliamentarians during the interviews and analyze the five key virtue themes identified. I end with concluding remarks and discuss the broader implications of these findings.

2. Previous Research and Theoretical Departure

The character, traits, and qualities that politicians ought to cultivate have long been central to the theoretical literature on political representation. At its broadest level, this inquiry connects to virtue ethics, a tradition with deep historical roots and diverse perspectives. Its origin can be traced to ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle's (2011) *Nicomachean Ethics*, which emphasizes the virtues of moderation, such as courage, positioned between the vices of cowardice and rashness. Aristotle identifies four cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. The term "cardinal" derives from the Latin *cardo*, meaning "hinge" or "key," signifying that these virtues are foundational—other virtues depend upon, or hinge upon, their exercise.

Although glimmers of virtue ethics appear sporadically throughout intellectual history—such as in the works of Aquinas, Hume, and Smith (Badersten, 2002)—the virtue ethics perspective ceded prominence in moral philosophy to arguably more action-guiding universal frameworks, such as consequentialism and deontology. Its revival during the 1960s, often attributed to Anscombe's (1958) influential paper "Modern Moral Philosophy," marked the return of a wide range of theories and perspectives in virtue ethics, with contributions from philosophers like Williams (1985), Foot (2002), and Murdoch (1971). What combines virtue ethics perspectives, broadly speaking, is the shift in focus from principles and consequences as the primary guide for ethical action towards the development and application of character traits, dispositions, and motivations that characterize a virtuous person (Slote, 1997).

Alasdair MacIntyre, a central figure in virtue ethics, highlighted in his book *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 2007) how *telos*—the purpose or end—is essential for understanding virtue, providing guidance on what to value, how to behave, and what actions to take. Rather than basing *telos* on universal or abstract principles, he situates it within human purpose and specific practices. These practices are coherent, socially established forms of cooperative human activity aimed at realizing intrinsic goods through the pursuit of excellence intrinsic to that activity. Virtues within these practices, according to MacIntyre, are the qualities of mind and character necessary to achieve these intrinsic goods. Viewed through the lens of *telos* and practice, virtues in politics can thus be understood as the traits, characteristics, and qualities essential to fulfilling the intrinsic goods and excellence of politics.

Understanding which virtues are necessary in politics, therefore, requires examining, among other things, how they emerge from the practical demands of political life. Among these demands, the nature and closeness of the relationship between elected officials and their constituents have been central to theoretical discussions (Mill, 1861; Pitkin, 1972; Thompson, 1981). One of the most fundamental distinctions in this literature is between the delegate, whose actions closely reflect the preferences of their constituency, and the trustee, who relies more heavily on personal judgment and intellect—a distinction famously articulated by Edmund Burke in his speech to the electors of Bristol. Each role suggests different virtues: Delegates arguably ought to cultivate virtues of attentiveness, responsiveness, and insightfulness, while trustees ought to emphasize judiciousness, pragmatism, and industriousness. However, the extent to which the trustee–delegate dichotomy of representation aligns with how politicians themselves perceive their roles is contested. For example, US congressmen have historically dismissed such dichotomies as overly simplistic and detached from their lived experiences, comparing questions about the distinction to those a high schooler might ask rather than a researcher (Thompson, 1987, p. 99). More contemporary scholars like Rehfeld (2009) have proposed additional frameworks, arguing for eight distinct categories of representation based on factors such as aims, sources of judgment, and levels of responsiveness.

Beyond the relationship between representatives and their constituencies, the literature has also explored the broader traits and qualities that politicians should cultivate in their representative practice. In her seminal study, *The Good Representative*, Dovi (2007) argued that a good democratic representative ought to possess three key virtues: fair-mindedness, the ability to build critical trust, and good gatekeeping. Similarly, Philp (2007) emphasized the importance of integrity, contextual judgment, and the capacity to balance competing values within the practical realities of political life. Tillyris (2015) highlighted the complex interplay between morality and political necessity, suggesting that navigating the so-called dirty hands dilemma requires a nuanced understanding of both ethical compromise and political responsibility.

Moreover, Tholen (2018) argued for viewing political responsibility as a virtue in itself, emphasizing the fragility of democratic institutions and the need for qualities that sustain justice and the common good.

The previous literature outlined above represents a broad range of approaches to understanding the virtues necessary for political representation, yet the literature is far from exhaustive. As Severs and Dovi (2018) contended in "Why We Need to Return to the Ethics of Political Representation," a promising path forward in research is the further integration of empirical political science and political theory, an area that I believe remains underexplored. Building on this insight, the next section outlines the methodological approach employed in this study, which is designed to bridge theoretical concepts with empirical insights by examining how Swedish parliamentarians understand and articulate virtues in their representative political roles.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Interview Data and the Case of the Swedish Parliament

This study is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with 74 randomly selected Swedish parliamentarians, stratified by party affiliation and gender. Non-participation was primarily due to lack of response; those who responded but did not agree to participate generally cited time constraints as the reason for not participating. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics and compares these to the overall composition of the Swedish parliament.

The interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2021 primarily via Zoom or Skype due to the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure confidentiality, all participating parliamentarians were given pseudonyms randomly selected from a list of the most common Swedish names. This decision to offer pseudonymity was closely tied to the choice to record the interviews as both can influence participants' willingness to speak candidly (Aberbach et al., 1975; Beamer, 2002; Berry, 2002; Lilleker, 2003). It is worth noting that while recording interviews can sometimes hinder participants from speaking freely, this concern is arguably less pronounced in this case because the participants—as Swedish parliamentarians—are used to speaking publicly and on the record. Recording was also essential for the analytical approach of this study as it allowed for detailed attention to the nuances, arguments, and tonal shifts in the interviews, which were conducted in Swedish.

Table 1. Data characteristics.

Label	Parliament (%)	Sample (%)	Difference (%)
Center Party	8.9	9.5	+0.6
Christian Democratic Party	6.3	4.1	−2.2
Green Party	4.6	5.4	+0.8
Left Party	7.7	12.2	+4.5
Liberal Party	5.4	6.8	+1.4
Moderate Party	20.0	17.6	−2.4
Social Democratic Party	28.6	31.1	+2.5
Sweden Democratic Party	17.8	13.5	−4.3
Women	49.0	51.5	−2.5

Notes: These data come from the official records of the Swedish parliament. The records are kept and updated by the secretariat of the chamber. Parliamentarians who were not party group members at the time of selection were excluded.

The interviews were then transcribed, and I translated the quotes into English. The list of interviews quoted in this article is in Table 2.

Table 2. Cited interviews.

Pseudonym	Year and Month	Party Affiliation	Gender
Christer	2020, November	Social Democratic Party	Man
Gunnar	2020, November	Liberal Party	Man
Linnéa	2020, November	Moderate Party	Woman
Birgitta	2020, November	Moderate Party	Woman
Louise	2020, December	Sweden Democrats	Woman
Magnus	2021, January	Center Party	Man
Karin	2021, January	Moderate Party	Woman
Bengt	2021, January	Green Party	Man
Helena	2021, January	Social Democratic Party	Woman
Simon	2021, January	Liberal Party	Man
Nils	2021, January	Center Party	Man
Anna	2021, January	Liberal Party	Woman
Roger	2021, February	Center Party	Man
Mohamad	2021, February	Moderate Party	Man
Fredrik	2021, February	Moderate Party	Man
Karl	2021, February	Social Democratic Party	Man
Henrik	2021, February	Sweden Democrats	Man
Johanna	2021, February	Social Democratic Party	Woman
Margareta	2021, February	Moderate Party	Woman
Kent	2021, February	Sweden Democrats	Man
Helen	2021, February	Left Party	Woman
Gustav	2021, February	Liberal Party	Man
Maria	2021, March	Center Party	Woman
Maja	2021, March	Left Party	Woman
Elin	2021, March	Social Democratic Party	Woman
Olof	2021, March	Social Democratic Party	Man
Monica	2021, March	Social Democratic Party	Woman
Jan	2021, March	Center Party	Man
Elisabeth	2021, March	Christian Democratic Party	Woman
Åke	2021, March	Sweden Democrats	Man
Lena	2021, March	Green Party	Woman
Mats	2021, April	Moderate Party	Man
John	2021, April	Liberal Party	Man
Daniel	2021, April	Social Democratic Party	Man
Leif	2021, September	Christian Democratic Party	Man
Irene	2021, September	Left Party	Woman
Oskar	2021, October	Moderate Party	Man

Moreover, with a unicameral system, the case of the Swedish parliament is characterized by strong party organizations, strict discipline, and dual responsibilities of parliamentarians to both their parties and constituencies (Hagevi, 2022; Öhberg & Naurin, 2016). In my view, the generalization of the results from this article mainly depends on the degree of "fittingness" between Sweden's legislative context and other political systems (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). This includes political institutions with similar proportional systems, disciplined party structures, and collective decision-making processes. My stance on which institutions these might be aligns with how the political ethnographer Fenno views generalization: I recognize that I do not know enough about other similar cases to confidently determine the extent to which the results apply to them, but I simultaneously argue that they might (Fenno, 2000, p. 2).

3.2. Interview Questions and Analytical Approach

The key aspect of any measurement is its validity: the extent to which the empirical measurement accurately reflects the theoretical concept. Maintaining high validity is a challenge when investigating virtue understandings in politics. In Sweden, the term *dygd* (virtue), while etymologically correct, may not effectively capture the meaning of the theoretical concept. *Dygd* is rarely used in everyday language, carries strong religious connotations, and is often employed derogatorily—indeed, being called *dygdig* (virtuous) is more likely meant as sarcasm than praise.

Instead, I used the Swedish term *egenskaper*, which can be translated as "characteristics" or "qualities." The challenge here lies in the fact that parliamentarians may indeed consider specific skills—such as processing large amounts of information—essential to their role, but it could also be that they interpreted *egenskaper* solely in terms of professional competencies. To address this, I asked follow-up questions to clarify whether their answers would change if *egenskaper* were framed more as personal characteristics rather than professional skills. Although this approach likely contributed to parliamentarians understanding the question in a similar way across interviews, I cannot rule out that some understood the question more in terms of professional qualities than personal characteristics, and vice versa. The questions about virtues in politics were the first in a more extensive interview that also covered vices and political dilemmas, which are not the subject of this article. The two questions I asked parliamentarians regarding virtues in politics were the following:

- What characteristics/qualities do you believe a parliamentarian should have?
- In what ways are these characteristics/qualities important in the daily work of parliamentarians?

I analyze parliamentarians' answers to these two questions through a two-step thematic coding structure. Although thematic analysis lacks both an exact definition and a precise description of how it should be used, it is generally seen as a method to identify, analyze, and report patterns within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). I adopt the flexible coding structure outlined by Deterding and Waters (2021), which is a stepwise coding structure where each step serves a particular empirical or theoretical function. In the initial step, I closely adhered to the empirical material, coding parliamentarians' answers into the following two pre-determined nodes: "What virtues a parliamentarian should have" and "Other important theoretical elements." The first node includes all virtues either directly or indirectly mentioned by parliamentarians. The total number of mentioned virtues, or the codes, presented in quantitative terms are those parliamentarians mentioned before any substantial follow-up questions were asked.

In the next stage, I examined these virtues in relation to previous research, such as assessing whether any virtue could be considered cardinal. I also used thematic analysis to construct themes based on similarities in legislators' reasoning about the importance of specific virtues. This methodological process is best described as abductive rather than strictly inductive or deductive. In this article, the abductive approach involves moving iteratively between the empirical material and the theoretical literature outlined above, generating "theoretical hunches" that are then systematically explored and refined through thematic analysis (Earl Rinehart, 2021; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Following the approach commonly adopted by scholars in empirical political theory, this study aims to generate rather than test theory (Floyd, 2022; Herzog & Zacka, 2019; Longo & Zacka, 2019; Martinsson, 2024a; Zacka, 2017). Generating theory at a principal level arguably necessitates focusing on overarching collective views—that is, what is shared across parliamentarians' reasoning—rather than systematically comparing subgroups within the Swedish parliament. While information on party affiliation and gender is included in the results to highlight the diversity within the group, conducting a detailed quantitative or qualitative analysis of subgroup differences would have required a different methodological approach as well as another theoretical aim. Future research with these methods and aims could build on or challenge these findings by examining how factors such as gender and party affiliation, which prior studies suggest influence views on political representation more generally (Barrling Hermansson, 2004; Erikson & Josefsson, 2020; Öhberg et al., 2022), also affect views on cardinal virtues, virtue pluralism, and the five virtue themes identified in this article.

4. Results

4.1. The Cardinal Virtue: Separating Ideas From Those Who Hold Them

The Swedish parliament can be a perplexing place for an outsider. Stepping into the chamber, one will see parliamentarians clashing over political matters. The debates are generally civil and policy-oriented—heavier on substance than theatrics. The debates can, however, still be harsh, particularly about ideological and polarizing topics. Yet when parliamentarians step out of the chamber to the coffee machine outside, it is hard to find any lingering hard feelings: "It's like a tennis match," Gustav from the Liberal Party explained, "when you are on the court, you are competitors. You play hard. You can even get angry. But after the match, you clap each other on the back and talk about something else."

In the Swedish parliament, this practice is known as *skilja på sak och person*, which roughly translates to "separating ideas from those who hold them." Given that this notion was raised repeatedly in the early stages of the interview process, I began to bring it up myself in the follow-up questions. Among the parliamentarians asked to comment on its importance, there was an almost universal endorsement of it as a fundamental virtue in the Swedish parliament. Analyzing parliamentarians' motivations for why it was important, I argue that it takes the form of a cardinal virtue.

Being able to separate ideas from those who hold them was what the Social Democrat Olof described as a *grundförutsättning*, a foundational prerequisite: "I'm happy to go a tough round with a political opponent in the chamber," he explained, "but I can also have a coffee with them right afterwards." Henrik from the Sweden Democrats expressed a similar view, stating that separating ideas from those who hold them is what "makes

it all possible." Johanna from the Social Democratic Party similarly remarked that this separation is "a bit of a badge of honor in national politics."

As these responses indicate, separating ideas from those holding them forms the foundational structure enabling the cultivation and practice of other virtues. The points many parliamentarians raised were that separating ideas from those who hold them "is what makes it all possible" and that it is the "basic prerequisite" for parliamentary work. This sentiment underscores a common belief: Failing to distinguish a political opponent's arguments from their personal identity undermines one's own effectiveness in the Swedish parliament. The ability to do this therefore attains the status of a cardinal virtue as the exercise of other virtues hinges upon it.

Why is it important to separate ideas from those who hold them in the Swedish parliament? The answer, I argue, lies in the inherent nature of parliamentary work. Parliamentarians need to project political conflict outward to foster critical debates on key political differences while simultaneously preserving the possibility of working together within the walls of the parliament. Debates in the chamber constitute one main arena for parliamentarians to project conflict. A confrontational approach is necessary here since it is "very much about clarifying [the differences] for voters, but also for society in general; [clarifying] that there are different actors [in politics] and to make it clear where the political differences are and what questions we are prioritizing," Lena from the Green Party observed. However, the confrontational tone should be dropped once parliamentarians step out of the public eye: "We distinguish between what happens in the chamber so that you can have rather tough political debates…but then you must be able to cooperate so that the work can continue in the committees and in other ways," Maja from the Left Party explained. Bengt of the Green Party summarized the distinction between portraying conflict outwards while maintaining the possibility of working together behind closed doors:

> If I am being honest, I think that cleavages in the public debate are the essence of what politics is. There is no point in having a representative democracy if everyone thinks the same thing. So, [cleavages] are a very, very, very important part. Parallel with that, it is also important to be able to sit down and agree about the political substance.

Given the importance of relationship-building in the Swedish parliament, parliamentarians unable or unwilling to separate ideas from those who hold them risk being isolated and thus becoming ineffective. To separate ideas from those who hold them is "completely decisive," Johanna from the Social Democratic Party explained, noting that it is "pretty clear that the people who don't master that become isolated very, very quickly." One reason for this is the unpredictability of future cooperation: "Relationships mean a lot," Roger from the Center Party remarked, "suddenly you do not know whom to cooperate with and who to be in opposition to, because that can change from election to election."

4.2. Virtue Pluralism

Parliamentarians widely agreed that virtue pluralism is essential for the functionality, drive, and influence of party groups in the Swedish parliament. Party groups need to fill many roles and responsibilities. Parliamentarians may take or be assigned many of these roles, which can change drastically depending on whether their party is part of the government, cooperating with the government, or in opposition: "All in all,

we need members of parliament with slightly different qualities," Fredrik from the Moderate Party noted, underlining how he "think[s] the profile of what qualities you are looking for can probably shift a little depending on what role the member will play." Simon from the Liberal Party likewise observed how "you can be a parliamentarian in many different ways." Henrik from the Sweden Democrats argued along similar lines, saying:

> I think there must be many different qualities [in parliament]. A variety of qualities can generate dynamic work….For me, there is no easy answer to that question [What characteristics/qualities he believed a parliamentarian should have], but I think both the analytical part, the kind of politician you might not often see, a somewhat analytical, non-charismatic person, is essential to have in politics. But there must also be a charismatic element of creativity and cordiality to get a good mix.

The many roles and responsibilities in the Swedish parliament require an almost endless number of virtues. It is unlikely that any single parliamentarian can have them all. This could be one reason why Bengt of the Green Party argued that parliamentary groups need "a mix of different qualities, rather than all people needing all qualities," asserting that this "would become unsustainable in the end." Relatedly, many parliamentarians raised that it is not only important to have virtue plurality in the party group but also that parliamentarians recognize the roles and responsibilities in which these virtues should be exercised. Gunnar from the Liberal Party explained, "It is crucial to understand group dynamics, group development, and all these things," underscoring that parliamentarians cannot think that they have "a mandate just for themselves."

The analysis of parliamentarians' responses clearly indicates that no single set of virtues can encapsulate who one ought to be in politics. The need for virtue pluralism stems from the lack of a single possible approach to the representative mission as individual parliamentarians may take on, or be assigned, different roles and responsibilities. It was a widely shared notion among parliamentarians that party groups need those who are quick and savvy in the media to generate attention, those who are firmly based in their local constituency to galvanize support, those who are great analytical thinkers, and those who know the ins and outs of parliamentary craftsmanship. Helen from the Left Party captured this sentiment as follows: "You need the theorists, you need the one who shoots from the hip, you need the one who says stop, and you need the ones who keep shooting off ideas."

4.3. Five Virtue Themes

Parliamentarians mentioned or alluded to 48 different virtues. To have and act on 48 virtues is undoubtedly a daunting task for any parliamentarian. Luckily, the relevance of most virtues depends on parliamentarians' roles and responsibilities within their party groups. Certain virtues were important for similar reasons. These common features are the basis for what I call *virtue themes*. Conducting a thematic analysis, I identified five such virtue themes: craftsman, entrepreneurial, integrity, social, and wisdom. Figure 1 presents the virtues parliamentarians mentioned or alluded to, their frequency, and their thematic categorization. The cardinal virtue and aspects of virtue pluralism are excluded from the frequency measure as I describe them separately. Figure 2 illustrates the relative size of each theme.

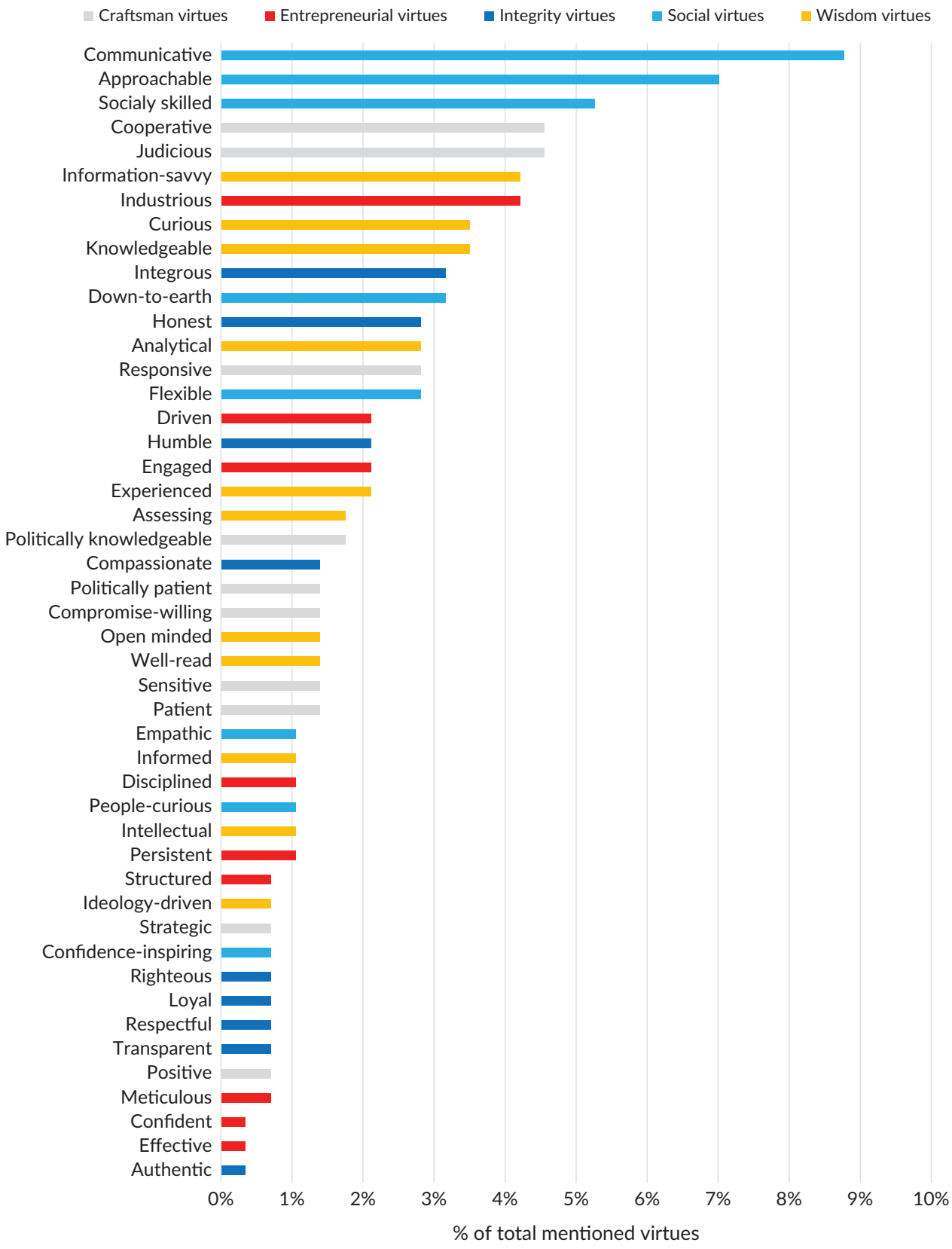

Figure 1. Parliamentary virtues and themes. Notes: Percentage of all virtues divided by themes; total number of mentioned virtues = 277.

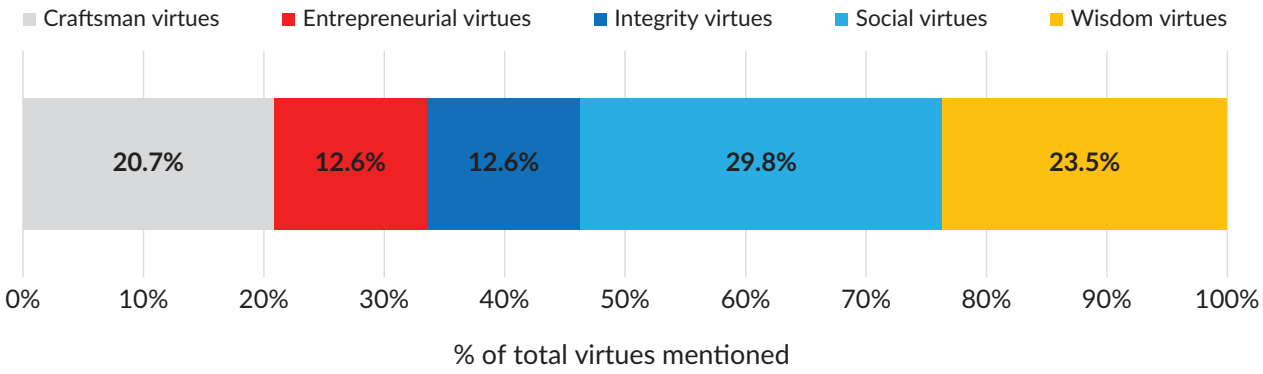

Figure 2. Relative size of virtue themes. Note: Total number of mentioned virtues = 277.

4.3.1. Integrity Virtues

"First and foremost, they should have high integrity," Linnéa from the Moderate Party responded when I asked what virtues she believed were most important for Swedish parliamentarians. Her response largely reflects the views of parliamentarians who emphasized integrity virtues as fundamental virtues all parliamentarians should have or strive to acquire. These virtues represent around 13% of the coded virtues.

Virtues in the integrity theme were underscored as foundational for upholding parliamentary conduct, particularly in withstanding undue pressure in the decision-making process: "There are many people who want to influence the Riksdag and members of the Riksdag," Mohamad from the Moderate Party explained, and it therefore is "important at all levels to be able to listen to everyone. But it is important that you treat all information, even that from your friends, with integrity." Irene from the Left Party pointed out the challenge of engaging with various groups while upholding integrity: "You should preferably be very social and meet people in the constituency, but at the same time, you cannot just agree with everyone on everything. You must also be able to state your own opinion." She concluded that upholding this distinction is "an impossible job." Karin of the Moderate Party considered both perspectives:

> We spend a lot of time doing visits, talking to people, having contact by phone or oftentimes with Skype at the moment. In general, we have a lot of external contacts. Depending on which committee you are on, there are different interest groups [that are important]. It is critical to discuss with these organizations, such as lobbyists and others, and you must be open and listen to them. At the same time, it is essential that you have personal integrity, that you understand that the people you talk to may have slightly different agendas than you do, and that they have a specific direction they want to push you towards, somewhere they think that politics should go. But you have to make these trade-offs, so personal integrity is critical.

Integrity virtues also include the conduct parliamentarians expect in relationships with each other, such as honesty, respectfulness, and compassion. These are particularly important in relationships that occur inside the Swedish parliament. Similar to interactions with external actors like lobbyists, acting based upon these virtues was fundamental to parliamentary conduct and not explicitly tied to a specific role or responsibility.

4.3.2. Entrepreneurial Virtues

Regarding the nature of parliamentary work in Sweden, Oskar of the Moderate Party stated, "I usually say that it is very similar to running a business. You plan your work and your time yourself. In the end, you must be productive." There are no guidebooks for how to be a parliamentarian, "no manual, 'do this and it will turn out right,'" as Roger from the Center Party explained; "instead, you as a parliamentarian need to be driven." The Sweden Democrat Louise similarly claimed:

> It is not like a job where you are told what to do every day. So, if you do not take initiative, come up with ideas, or develop policies and keep your eyes open to what's happening in the news or different groups…then it can get quite dull.

The virtues in the entrepreneurial theme—such as being industrious, structured, and meticulous—were identified by several parliamentarians as key to making the most of their tenure in parliament. These virtues account for around 13% of all coded virtues.

The entrepreneurial virtues emphasize a willingness to work hard, be driven, and be structured enough to accomplish things without supervision. Nils of the Center Party likened the parliamentary role to being a farmer: "There are different chores in a week, but it requires that you do things all the time, ticking off things that have to be done so that you can be flexible." The focus on structure and the ability to handle a mounting workload is easier if parliamentarians are willing to "work seven days a week" and are "passionate about learning new things" as Birgitta from the Moderate Party explained.

The necessity for entrepreneurial virtues arises from the expectation that parliamentarians should be ready to serve in committees beyond their first choice or area of expertise—not everyone can sit in the Committee on Finance—and rapidly switch between them when needed. This necessitates both a willingness and entrepreneurial drive to quickly adapt to new circumstances: "You must have some drive, a desire to learn something new because you can get into just about any committee," Karl from the Social Democratic Party observed; "it is not like you get there [the Swedish parliament] and say I want to work on these questions, and then it is done. You can end up with anything, and then you have to tackle the situation as it is." Oskar of the Moderate Party echoed this sentiment, highlighting how "you must be able to move from the Committee on Environment and Agriculture to the Committee on Health and Welfare and still be able to quickly familiarize yourself with the information, be good at planning and organizing your life." He concluded that this adaptability "is much easier if you plan and organize."

4.3.3. Craftsman Virtues

Who do you need to be, or what virtues do you need to have, to successfully navigate the parliamentary process? The virtues in the craftsman theme provide some guidance. Representing approximately 21% of the coded virtues, this theme underlines the practical, nuts-and-bolts side of parliamentary work. Two types of virtues within this theme stand out: (a) those necessary for discerning the correct decisions and (b) those vital for guiding these decisions through the political system.

The first kind are virtues such as being attentive, judicious, and politically knowledgeable. They concern "the ability to listen and evaluate information from different angles and then make decisions based on your

political beliefs or ideology," as Maria from the Center Party explained, or the "ability to listen and be able to make decisions based on all accumulated knowledge," according to Maja from the Left Party. These comments are indicative of a significant notion among many parliamentarians, namely that these virtues were necessary for their ability to absorb different perspectives, evaluate options, and choose the best way forward—what Kent from the Sweden Democrats and Christer from the Social Democratic Party described as having *fingertoppskänsla*, which roughly translates to "sensitivity." According to John from the Liberal Party, this includes the ability to "think a bit further." Irene from the Left Party raised similar points, arguing that parliamentarians should "be quite broad in their knowledge" and "think about many things at the same time, to draw generalizable conclusions from one committee report to the next."

The remaining virtues mainly concern the second type of craftsman virtues, which are important for parliamentarians in guiding decisions through the parliamentary process. Key among these was being responsive, patient, and willing to make compromises within the parliamentary arena—an arena Roger of the Center Party described as "an institution whose life to a great extent is about grand compromises." While parliamentarians' roles in cooperating or making compromises depends on their status within the party and their party's current goals, certain aspects cross this divide—primarily the need to find compromises within party groups themselves as well. The need for a compromising mindset was often raised with regard to committee work, where a cooperative and positive mindset was said to increase parliamentarians' influence. Daniel of the Social Democratic Party framed these aspects of parliamentary work in terms of alliance building: "It can be alliances within one's party, it can be alliances with other parties, it can be an alliance with individual municipalities, it can be alliances with organizations, and so forth."

4.3.4. Wisdom virtues

The virtues in the wisdom theme are those enabling parliamentarians to approach parliamentary work in an open-minded and analytical way, and they comprise approximately 24% of all virtues. Proponents of these virtues underlined the importance of curiosity, understood as showing an openness to new ideas and developing their understandings rather than being stuck in old truths. Anna from the Liberal Party called this a "flexible intellect." The virtues in this theme paint a portrait of the thoughtful and reflective parliamentarian, one who is "perhaps a little more leaned back than one might generally think," as Elin from the Social Democratic Party described. Parliamentarians stressed that parliamentary work should be about analyzing the pros and cons of a policy proposal rather than taking jabs at each other on social media: "Democracy takes time," Magnus from the Center Party noted; "you can't just go all out and celebrate short-term wins on Twitter."

Importantly, being wise was not mainly about having a certain level of intellectual capacity or a specific academic degree. Rather, the virtues central to this theme rested on a distinct kind of intellectual ability, namely "the capacity to analyze what is happening, see connections, and draw conclusions," as Olof from the Social Democratic Party stated. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the foremost virtue in this theme was the ability to comprehensively take in, analyze, and draw conclusions based on complex materials—to be information-savvy. Leif from the Christian Democratic Party, for instance, argued that:

> It would be wrong to put up specific criteria or to have some IQ quota. But you need a certain minimum measure of talent to cope with the job and do it well. We cannot just take in *pleti* and *creti* believing

> that their words carry equal weight just because different groups are represented like this. There need to be people who both want and can solve different problems.

How this type of intellectual capacity should be acquired is a dividing line within this virtue theme, with a split between proponents of practical lived experience and advocates of ideological and political expertise. Proponents of the former perspective mainly argued that practical knowledge and diligence are crucial for understanding policy implications. In this view, strict adherence to ideology can blind political judgment: "I think members of the Swedish parliament have too much knowledge of ideology and too little knowledge of what people want," John from the Liberal Party remarked. These parliamentarians lack foundational knowledge that is in the bones of those with practical experience. As Mats from the Sweden Democrats expressed, "Sometimes I feel that many people in the Riksdag do not have this. They do not have the experience."

On the other hand, parliamentarians prioritizing ideological and political expertise contended that those legislating in areas they used to work in often fail to see the forest for the trees. They argued that the ideological compass, rather than practical experience, ought to guide the analytical process. These parliamentarians maintained that citizens had voted for a party that stands on a certain ideology and therefore deserved to be represented by this ideology rather than the lived experience of an individual parliamentarian. Seeing the value of both practical experience and ideological knowledge, Jan of the Center Party posited:

> Maybe I believe ideology has a more important role because we have a political system based on the fact that we are elected by the people and must represent parties. We have a lot of authorities and others who will be responsible for the expertise, but politicians still have to make the decisions.

Parliamentarians of this viewpoint, like Leif from the Christian Democrats, asserted that practical knowledge "you gain with time," or that "you can learn the expertise," as Irene from the Left Party concluded. Monica from the Social Democratic Party underlined similar points when explaining how she thinks that: "it is more important to connect with the ideology than knowing what happened for that specific question back in 1947."

4.3.5. Social Virtues

Being a parliamentarian is an inherently social endeavor. To varying degrees, parliamentarians are required to create, maintain, and strengthen relationships with party members, constituencies, and other parliamentarians. The virtues in the social theme are the ones parliamentarians rely on to do this well. Representing approximately 30% of the coded virtues, the virtues in this theme were the most frequently mentioned ones.

Among these virtues was being socially skilled. Generally, having social skills was linked to what Nils from the Center Party and Karl of the Social Democratic Party characterized as the ability to *ta folk*, meaning to talk to regular people in everyday face-to-face meetings. Several parliamentarians explained that this requires a certain degree of social flexibility: "You have to be very flexible, and it is good if you can handle people in different ways," Monica from the Social Democratic Party explained, clarifying how "you need to be able to fit into different contexts; to have been in different environments before makes things a lot easier." Margareta

from the Moderate Party reiterated a similar point: "Sometimes you have to speak with farmers in a farmer's way and with the wise in Latin."

While social skills were about interacting with people in general, being communicative was primarily about addressing broader audiences through posting on social media, speaking in the chamber, or writing articles. It is not, as Åke from the Sweden Democrats proposed, a bad thing if parliamentarians are "somewhat delighted to be noticed." Although it was generally a good thing to be communicative, many parliamentarians also stressed that communicative work always needed to be tied to the parliamentarian's roles and responsibilities in the party group and to align with their party's objectives.

Moreover, the virtues in the social theme extend beyond delivering messages, equally encompassing the ability to listen and maintain approachability for voters: "It is important that we not only listen to the voters in every election," Helena from the Social Democratic Party shared when underlining responsiveness, "but you should also listen between elections, and many parliamentarians do this well." Elisabeth from the Christian Democrats reinforced this point, asserting how "above all, you have to be interested in people. This applies at all levels of politics. I must be interested in people's opinions because I represent the voters." Elin from the Social Democratic Party summarized the need for parliamentarians to listen rather than always speaking: "If I am being completely honest, I think it is better to have big ears than a big mouth."

Being approachable is associated with the Swedish concept of being *jordnära*, which loosely translates to being down to earth. This entails having "dialogue[s] in the community," as Bengt from the Green Party described, and maintaining "great contact with the foundation," as Johanna from the Social Democratic Party stated. Parliamentarians emphasizing this virtue sometimes mentioned it in relation to being re-elected, thus underscoring this virtue's electoral significance: "All this is based on trust," Gustav from the Liberal Party noted; "this whole industry is based on the importance of understanding your constituency." Similarly, Fredrik from the Moderate Party mentioned that he "also think[s] that if you want to be successful in such a constituency [in the countryside], you have to be reasonably down to earth and like being in the small local contexts," concluding that "perhaps Twitter is not the most important arena" for these contexts.

5. Conclusion

Gustav of the Liberal Party likened his work in the Swedish parliament to a tennis match: Competitors clash fiercely on the court but step off with mutual respect. This metaphor encapsulates the cardinal virtue in the Swedish parliament: the ability to separate ideas from those who hold them. For Swedish parliamentarians, this virtue seems to be not merely a matter of personal conduct but a foundational principle that enables the balance between vigorous political debate and the collaborative relationships that many identified as central to parliamentary work. In addition to this cardinal virtue, the findings underline the importance of pluralism within parliamentary groups. The wide range of virtues discussed by parliamentarians, categorized into five key themes—entrepreneurial, social, integrity, wisdom, and craftsman—reflects the multifaceted nature of their representative roles and responsibilities. Collectively, these findings underscore a perspective that I argue warrants further theoretical and empirical exploration: the interdependent nature of virtues in political practice.

What does it mean that virtues in political practice are interdependent? It can mean, as emphasized throughout the history of virtue ethics, that certain virtues are cardinal—so essential that their absence diminishes the value of other virtues, which often depend on them. It can also mean that politicians work in close cooperation with others, especially in legislative settings where diverse roles must be fulfilled. However, as has been less emphasized in past scholarship, the interdependent nature of virtues found in this study suggests that the effectiveness of any given virtue depends not only on the individual fulfilling their role but also on the broader composition of virtues within the group. Contrary to traditional models like the delegate–trustee distinction, the interdependent view originating from political practice underscores that the virtues essential for effective representation are shaped both by individual roles as well as the collaborative dynamics within the political group. Similarly, the interdependent perspective on virtues in politics suggests that for politicians, the "good representative" as discussed in previous literature on representation and political ethics, should not be understood solely in terms of the representative's relationship with voters or the demands of their specific role, but also in terms of how their virtues interact with and complement those of their political colleagues.

Before drawing extensive theoretical or empirical conclusions from these findings, certain limitations of this study that future research could address should be acknowledged. First, the operationalization of virtues as questions about *egenskaper*—a term translatable as both qualities and characteristics—likely shaped the results. This framing might explain why only 13% of the coded virtues fall within the integrity theme, despite its prominence in theoretical and normative literature. This discrepancy could either reflect a different understanding of integrity in political practice or indicate that the question's framing led politicians to overlook aspects traditionally associated with virtues in politics. Clarifying which of these explanations is more accurate could be a valuable contribution in future research. Additionally, this study's methodological aim has been to generate rather than test theory. Future research employing alternative methods is needed to evaluate the empirical robustness of these findings, particularly if they are applicable across diverse political contexts and cultures. Such studies could also examine variations based on key factors like gender, age, and political experience.

Beyond examining the empirical prevalence of the results, a fundamental question remains for future research: To what extent are these virtues parliamentarians spoke of conceptually and normatively significant in determining which virtues ought to be valued in politics? While empirical findings cannot—or at least should not—dictate the definition of theoretical concepts or their normative importance, they can provide a valuable foundation for normative and theoretical analysis by enhancing the likelihood that the theoretical conclusions are practically relevant. Fostering a dialogue between empirical realities and normative ideals in this way can deepen our understanding of virtues in politics, which in turn increases the likelihood that the results remain significant for both scholarly inquiry and the practical demands of democratic governance.

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Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

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Populist Rhetoric and Hate Speech: Analyzing Xenophobic Narratives in Vox's 2023 Election Campaign

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Abstract

Under the guise of being "concerned citizens," populist leaders often feel untouchable when demonizing ethnic minorities or expressing contempt for immigrants. This purported concern places them beyond moral scrutiny. Within this sphere of political (ir)responsibility, parties aligned with the radical populist right seek to polarize society using nativist strategies. This phenomenon significantly affects ethics, democratic principles, and political leadership in Europe. The most recent European elections revealed growing support for radical right-wing populist parties like Vox in Spain, which exploit societal fears and economic insecurity through divisive rhetoric that threatens social cohesion and democratic values. This study analyzes the political discourse of Vox's regional candidates during the 2023 electoral campaign, focusing on racist and xenophobic hate narratives published on their official X accounts. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates descriptive quantitative analysis with critical discourse analysis. Findings reveal regional variations in hate speech, with coastal candidates focusing heavily on Moroccans, while criticisms of unaccompanied minors are more prevalent in Madrid. Vox also violated electoral law by publishing hate messages on the reflection day, May 27. The use of self-defensive discursive strategies—such as victimist, alarmist, and dehumanizing rhetoric—constructs a deliberate binary narrative of "us versus them," further intensifying ideological polarization. These tactics raise serious ethical concerns within the framework of European integration, which is built upon cooperation, solidarity, and mutual respect. Addressing these challenges requires fostering inclusive, just, and democratic societies capable of resisting populist divisiveness.

Keywords

critical discourse analysis; electoral campaign; hate speech; political candidates; political ethics; political leadership; populism; racism; Vox; xenophobia

1. Introduction

Contemporary democracies face an increasing challenge posed by the rise of populist movements (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), which often undermine core ethical rules and principles of democratic leadership (Mudde & Kaltwasse, 2013). Ethical leadership is critical for building public trust and serves as a cornerstone of good governance (Weinberg, 2020). However, populist leaders often erode this trust through hate rhetoric that targets ethnic minorities, immigrants, women, and other marginalized groups (Dieleman, 2019). These harmful political narratives exacerbate social polarization (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2022; Fenoll et al., 2024; Pérez-Escolar & Noguera-Vivo, 2021) and corrode the ethical norms that are essential for sustaining democratic institutions and promoting inclusivity (MacKenzie & Bhatt, 2020).

In his "paradox of tolerance," Popper (1966) questions whether freedom of speech should extend to extremist, violent, and radical individuals, highlighting the inconsistency of tolerating those whose ideologies and hatred endanger democratic coexistence. Given the opportunity, such intolerant individuals would suppress opposing views, thereby eroding mutual respect and social harmony (Popper, 1966, p. 266). Bollinger (1986) further stresses the need to establish appropriate limits to prevent society from accepting extremist discourse under the guise of free speech. Ironically, those who most seek freedom of expression are often those who pursue its extinction (Bollinger, 1986).

Despite the decades since their publications, the arguments of Popper's (1966) and Bollinger's (1986) remain highly relevant—particularly given the current wave of hate speech infiltrating both online and offline public discourse (Haugsgjerd et al., 2023; Uyheng et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2020). Detecting such speech is increasingly urgent, especially as political leaders often serve as its main purveyors. Exposing political misconduct—namely, the unethical and manipulative behavior of political actors who employ hate speech to deepen divisions and undermine democratic norms—is thus essential. In this regard, the political elite, often self-proclaimed representatives of "the common people" (Mudde, 2007), not only enables the denigration of those perceived as different but actively frames them as enemies (Emcke, 2019).

According to Emcke (2019), these figures adopt the persona of "concerned citizens" (p. 45), claiming to act in society's best interest while expressing open contempt for marginalized groups. Shielded by the apparent legitimacy of their concerns, they are often exempt from moral accountability.

The impact of hate speech on democratic processes has been widely examined, particularly in reference to the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the 2016 US presidential elections (Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Similarly, European democracies are under increasing strain due to the growing influence of populist and extremist parties, which escalate political polarization and radicalize public discourse (Schulze et al., 2020). While populist parties made notable gains in the 2014 (Martín-Cubas et al., 2018; Mudde, 2014) and 2019 European elections (Manucci, 2021; Mudde, 2019; Popivanov, 2022), the 2024 European Parliament elections—held between June 6 and 9—marked a turning point in the EU's political trajectory (Mudde, 2024). These elections were characterized by the normalization of extreme views within mainstream discourse (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024) and the increasing power of far-right parties to shape electoral narratives (Picheta, 2024).

In Spain, in particular, Vox emerged in 2013 amidst an economic crisis, institutional fatigue, and the fragmentation of the traditional bipartisan system (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019). The 2008 financial crisis and its consequences—rising unemployment, welfare state cuts, and growing public disaffection—paved the way for the rise of social movements like the 15M and the emergence of new political parties channeling public discontent. While Podemos gained traction on the left, Vox positioned itself as an emergent right-wing party, appealing to sectors advocating for identity-based politics and a strong stance against the Catalan independence movement (Esteban, 2019).

Vox's growing electoral success has reshaped the Spanish political landscape, deepening polarization and altering ideological alliances. The 2023 municipal and regional elections reinforce this trend. Traditionally dominant parties like the Partido Popular are no longer the sole force on the right but now rely on Vox for governability in multiple regions. This shift has expanded Vox's influence on the political agenda and contributed to the fragmentation of the right. As a result, some scholars interpret the regional and local elections of May 28, 2023, as the culmination of a broader political cycle shift (Montabes Pereira et al., 2023).

In this context, analyzing Vox's discourse during the 2023 elections is essential to assess whether the party maintained a unified hate-based mobilization strategy or adapted its rhetoric to reflect Spain's regional diversity. Given the country's complex cultural and territorial makeup—multiple languages, identities, and local concerns—it is vital to examine whether hate speech was similarly fragmented or consistent across regions, as is often the case at the national level. Although the national account (@vox_es) published more frequently, we have decided to include both the official national and regional leaders' accounts for a fuller understanding of how hate rhetoric operates at the local level.

This study, therefore, explores the racist and xenophobic narratives disseminated by Vox's regional candidates on X (formerly Twitter) during the 2023 election campaign. It aims to expose political misconduct and reveal how populist leaders use digital platforms and rhetorical strategies to polarize Spanish society—particularly during crucial electoral periods. Since political misconduct often surfaces in the form of hate rhetoric, this research assesses whether Vox's hate speech during the municipal elections reflects the same pervasiveness and coherence observed in national-level campaigns. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of the ethical responsibilities of political leaders in a territorially and ideologically fragmented democracy.

2. Political Speech and the Ethical Challenges of Racist and Xenophobic Narratives

The previous section mentioned three fundamental concepts that form the foundation of this study: hate speech, populism, and polarization. In the following subsections, we will first define hate speech—see Section 2.1—and explain its impact on democratic systems and societal cohesion. Subsequently, Section 2.2 will explore the concepts of populism and polarization, highlighting their implications and the risks they pose to democratic stability.

2.1. Hate Speech: A Rhetorical Pandemic in Political Discourse

Hate speech is a form of "information disorder" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20), specifically classified as malinformation—information that is based on reality but deliberately used to cause harm. According to the

European Commission (2016) and the United Nations (2019), hate speech includes any expression that incites violence, discrimination, or hostility towards individuals or groups based on identity-related attributes, such as race, gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, or disability (Carlson, 2021; Emcke, 2019; Hawdon et al., 2017; Rossini, 2020). Hate speech not only fosters social division but also legitimizes intolerance and undermines democratic principles by restricting inclusive public discourse (European Commission, 2016; United Nations, 2019).

Rieger et al. (2021) outline five key reasons why hate speech is particularly problematic on digital platforms:

- First, continuity is a major concern. Gagliardone et al. (2015) note that even when moderators remove hate-inciting content, it may already have spread to other sites or be reposted shortly afterward (Carlson & Cousineau, 2020; Jardine, 2019).
- Second, hate speech is highly spreadable. Jenkins et al. (2013) argue that participatory culture encourages widespread dissemination of user-generated content. Social media's algorithmic design further amplifies hateful content by prioritizing engagement, often favoring inflammatory or extremist rhetoric over neutral discourse (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Combined with the echo chamber effect (Sunstein, 2007, 2017), this environment allows hate speech to spread rapidly and become normalized within certain communities. As ElSherief et al. (2018) note, the emotionally charged nature of hate speech increases its visibility, reinforcing cycles of online hostility.
- Third, anonymity fuels aggression. Online users are more likely to express extreme views when shielded from accountability (Mondal et al., 2017). This disinhibition effect encourages the expression of radical opinions without fear of immediate social consequences (Brown, 2018, p. 298). Mondal et al. (2017) found that anonymous platforms like 4chan or Reddit see higher levels of racial and sexual hate speech. Hsueh et al. (2015) further explain that such anonymity can spark spirals of extremism (Busher & Macklin, 2015), where initial hateful comments lead to increasingly aggressive responses from others.
- Fourth, the lack of interpersonal cues—such as facial expressions or tone of voice—reduces the perceived harm of online hate speech. Perpetrators cannot see the impact on their victims, which increases their sense of detachment and further reinforces disinhibition.
- Finally, hate speech is often "memetized" and disguised as satire or humor. This tactic, common among alt-right communities (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), helps build group identity while marginalizing outsiders (Tuters & Hagen, 2020).

Identifying digital hate speech is difficult due to its linguistic complexity and often covert nature (Rossini, 2020). Explicit hate narratives are relatively easy to detect—such as messages that dehumanize people by comparing them to animals or vermin (Cividanes-Álvarez & Martínez Rolán, 2023; Williams, 2021). However, implicit hate messages are more subtle. These include texts that question women's leadership abilities (Sheckels et al., 2012), promote microaggressions or stereotypes (Rieger et al., 2021), or imply that children raised by same-sex couples may suffer abuse (Strand & Svensson, 2019). These examples demonstrate how language can be weaponized to covertly spread hate. As such, detecting these messages requires a nuanced understanding of rhetorical strategies (Chakraborty et al., 2022).

In line with this, Uyheng et al. (2022) define hate speech as a form of "identity propaganda," echoing Reddi et al.'s (2021) view of hate speech as a strategic narrative that uses abusive language to manipulate audiences through identity and power dynamics.

Consequently, addressing hate speech requires a multidimensional strategy—legal frameworks, platform regulation, and education that fosters digital literacy and critical thinking. As hate narratives become increasingly sophisticated—masked as jokes, irony, or coded language (Rieger et al., 2021)—further research is needed to improve detection tools. Recent studies are already exploring artificial intelligence and deep learning to analyze lexical patterns with greater precision (Srivastava et al., 2021).

As Van Bavel et al. (2020) and Weber et al. (2020) argue, hate speech is a new social pandemic—especially in the form of racist rhetoric—which spreads rapidly online and often translates into real-world violence (Awan & Zempi, 2016; Lozada et al., 2021; Wachs et al., 2022). Combating hate speech is essential to safeguarding democratic institutions and protecting marginalized groups. Although this study focuses on hate regarding identity and may not capture the full complexity of it (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017), it provides a valuable framework for examining its social dimensions (Reddi et al., 2021). Moreover, it highlights the ethical shortcomings of regional political leaders, who, through online discourse, contribute to populist narratives that promote racist and xenophobic rhetoric (topics explored in the next subsection).

2.2. Vox's Political Narratives: Populist Leadership, Polarization, and the Ethical Implications of Xenophobic Rhetoric

The Spanish regional elections of May 28, 2023, marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape, redefining power dynamics at both the regional and local levels. Vox, a far-right party, gained greater influence across multiple territories, resulting in the appointment of controversial figures such as Gabriel Le Senne, the new President of the Balearic Parliament, who has publicly denied climate change, the 2030 Agenda, and multiculturalism in education and immigration policy. Similarly, Juan García-Gallardo, Vice President of Castilla y León, has drawn criticism for his speeches criminalizing immigrants. These examples reflect a broader pattern among Vox's regional leadership, where inflammatory and exclusionary rhetoric plays a central role in their political strategy.

Vox's political communication aligns with the core principles of populism, which construct a binary opposition between "the pure people" and the threatening "outsiders" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). As Mudde (2004) explains, populism is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (p. 543). Vox reinforces this logic by framing immigrants, progressive policies, and political opponents as existential threats to national identity and sovereignty. In doing so, it mobilizes public sentiment through fear, resentment, and a rejection of pluralism (Moffitt, 2016; Wodak, 2015).

According to Cáceres-Zapatero et al. (2023), Spain suffers from a weak democratic culture in which ideological diversity is often met with hostility rather than constructive debate. Combined with the erosion of shared civic values and the rise of digital echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017), this creates fertile ground for extremism and hate speech—particularly during election campaigns, when political actors should be upholding democratic norms and addressing real social challenges (Mainwaring, 2003; Sánchez de Dios, 2006, p. 142). Populist rhetoric exacerbates polarization by normalizing discriminatory narratives and presenting certain social groups as a threat to national unity, consistent with Mudde's (2004) notion of "the pure people."

While political polarization is not inherently harmful to democracy—since the diversity of political views is fundamental to liberal democratic systems—extreme polarization can undermine democratic stability. When ideological divisions become too pronounced, they can lead to social fragmentation, heightened conflict, and an increasingly antagonistic public sphere (Iyengar et al., 2012; McCoy et al., 2018). In such cases, political discourse often devolves into a stark "us versus them" dichotomy (Mudde, 2004), further isolating communities and fueling the spread of hate speech.

In this context, radical right-wing populist leaders (Dai & Kustov, 2022) contribute to this polarization (Lilleker & Pérez-Escolar, 2023b) by employing nativist discourse (Mudde, 2020), emphasizing a divide between "us"—the native righteous population—and "them"—the dangerous outsiders (Mudde, 2004). Vox exemplifies this strategy, especially through its social media presence (Sosinski & Sánchez García, 2022). The party's nationalist messaging, rooted in far-right ideology (Ferreira, 2019), intensifies polarization and fosters hostility toward immigration (Gutiérrez-Peris, 2018, p. 104). Although Vox presents itself as a "savior movement" (Charaudeau, 2009) defending Spain's integrity, this overlooks the historical reality that many Spaniards themselves have emigrated due to political, economic, and social hardship (Sosinski & Sánchez García, 2022, p. 153).

Vox's xenophobic rhetoric resonates with segments of the Spanish population because fear-driven narratives often appeal more to emotion than to rational analysis (Cazorla et al., 2022; Lozada et al., 2021; Montolío Durán, 2019, p. 75). By framing immigrants as dangerous "others" (Mudde, 2004), Vox positions itself as the defender of national traditions. This strategy is not new (Fernández Lagunilla, 1999; García Beaudoux et al., 2005); it has long been used to mobilize "polarized crowds" (Smith et al., 2014). Vox has capitalized on the instability following the 2008 financial crisis—a period described by Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2003) as a "populist moment"—to shape public opinion through xenophobic discourse.

As Lim (2017) illustrates, hate speech is often employed as a populist tactic to influence voters by reinforcing negative stereotypes. Given Spain's increasingly polarized political climate (Cristófol-Rodríguez et al., 2024), this study explores how Vox's regional leaders used xenophobic and racist hate speech during the 2023 elections. The goal is to assess whether their discourse followed a uniform national strategy or was adapted to the specific social and political contexts of Spain's diverse autonomous regions. Pettersson (2020) emphasizes the importance of continued analysis of racist and xenophobic rhetoric to understand how political discourse constructs hostile narratives that marginalize ethnic and cultural minorities. In this vein, identifying self-defensive discursive strategies (van Dijk, 1993) employed by far-right candidates is crucial.

Pettersson (2020) outlines several common rhetorical techniques used by far-right populists. These include denial of racism—often prefaced with disclaimers such as "I'm not racist, but…" (van Dijk, 1992); empiricist strategies that claim scientific objectivity to justify prejudice (Potter, 1996); deracialization rhetoric (Augoustinos & Every, 2007), which frames xenophobic concerns in economic or neutral terms; and essentialist narratives that recast racism as cultural incompatibility, especially in anti-Islamic discourse.

These self-defensive strategies, when combined with established hate speech taxonomies (Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, 2017; ElSherief et al., 2021; Lava-Santos, 2023), reveal how political figures present themselves as reasonable and impartial while portraying migrants as inferior or undesirable (Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008; van Dijk, 1993). Understanding these rhetorical tools is vital to countering

hate speech in political communication (Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024), which is the core aim outlined in this study's methodological framework.

3. Methodology

3.1. Objectives

The main objective of this research is to analyze the political discourse of Vox's regional candidates during the 2023 electoral campaign to detect and examine possible racist and xenophobic hate narratives published on their official X accounts. Based on this purpose, the following specific objectives have been formulated:

> O1: Identify the main ethnic and racial groups targeted or victimized by the xenophobic narratives by Vox's regional candidates on their X posts during the 2023 electoral campaign.
>
> O2: Classify the intentions behind the racist rhetoric used by Vox's regional candidates in their X posts during the 2023 electoral campaign.
>
> O3: Assess the level of activity and engagement generated by the populist xenophobic speech of Vox's regional candidates on their official X account during the 2023 electoral campaign.

3.2. Method

This study employs a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses. First, a data collection phase was conducted to retrieve all messages posted by Vox's regional candidates on X during the 2023 electoral campaign. Second, a critical discourse analysis—qualitative research—was performed to examine the linguistic and rhetorical patterns of the identified hate speech messages. Lastly, a descriptive quantitative analysis was carried out to assess the activity level and engagement metrics associated with the racist and xenophobic hate speech posts.

Firstly, the data collection phase aimed to gather messages posted by Vox's regional candidates on X between May 1 and May 31, 2023, covering the pre-campaign, election day, and post-campaign periods. According to the Organic Law 5/1985 of June 19, 1985, on the General Electoral System—*Ley Orgánica 5/1985, de 19 de junio, del Régimen Electoral General*—the official pre-campaign period lasts 15 calendar days. However, we have extended the analysis to the beginning of May—rather than starting on May 12—to reflect the widely accepted notion that political campaigns have become permanent (Laza, 2024).

The post-campaign period extends three days beyond election day. This decision is based on two key factors: First, winning candidates recognize that campaigning resumes the day after the election (Laza, 2024); second, elections represent moments of political transition and uncertainty, like crisis situations. In crisis communication management, it is standard practice to analyze communication within three days following a major event to capture immediate strategic narratives and responses (Pérez & García, 2010).

This method aligns with the suggestions of previous authors (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Diez-Gracia et al., 2023; Guerrero-Solé et al., 2022) for further research into political communication trends and strategies on X,

given its predictive nature and the value of the interactions generated between users and content. To this end, we employed Fanpage Karma—a commercial online tool for social media monitoring—to scrutinize publications on X, as this tool has been validated in previous social media studies (Ferrer-Serrano et al., 2020; Gutiérrez Montoya et al., 2018; Latorre-Martínez et al., 2018; Martínez-Sala et al., 2021).

In total, 15 official Vox accounts on X were analyzed (N = 15; see Table 1), including 14 profiles belonging to regional candidates from Aragón, Asturias, Canarias, Cantabria, Castilla La Mancha, Comunidad Valenciana, Extremadura, Islas Baleares, La Rioja, Madrid, Navarra, Murcia, and the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla. Since Vox's communication strategy is highly centralized at the national party level (Morejón-Llamas, 2023; Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023), we included only the official national account (@vox_es) alongside the regional candidates' profiles. This decision ensures that our dataset captures both the overarching party discourse and the individual rhetoric of regional candidates.

It is also important to clarify that Vox does not operate separate official accounts for its regional branches—unlike other Spanish political parties that maintain distinct profiles for each autonomous community. Consequently, to prevent sampling bias, we excluded any accounts representing regional party structures and focused exclusively on the profiles of individual candidates.

Table 1. Vox candidates for the 28M regional elections.

Vox candidate	Region	Profile on X	Followers	Date of joining X
Vox España	—	@vox_es	560,700	November 2013
Rocío Monasterio	Madrid	@monasterioR	343,200	December 2013
José María Figaredo	Asturias	@FigaredoJoseM	40,500	April 2019
Jorge Campos Asensi	Baleares	@jcamposasensi	17,600	March 2014
José Ángel Antelo	Murcia	@JA_Antelo	17,400	February 2011
Carlos Flores Juberías	Valencia	@FloresJuberias	13,600	August 2022
Ángel Pelayo	Extremadura	@_Angel_Pelayo	6,600	February 2012
Juan Sergio Redondo Pacheco	Ceuta	@redondo_pacheco	1,838	August 2018
David Moreno Ramos	Castilla-La Mancha	@DavidMoreno___	1,862	December 2022
Alejandro Nolasco	Aragón	@_a_nolasco	1,389	January 2023
Nicasio Galván Sasia	Canarias	@Niky_Galvan	1,182	May 2015
Leticia Díaz	Cantabria	@LeticiaDiazR	778	January 2023
José Miguel Tasende Souto	Melilla	@TasendeMiguel	526	March 2020
Maite Nosti	Navarra	@MaiteNosti	432	March 2023

Source: Author's own collection of information.

After collecting data from the 15 official Vox accounts, Fanpage Karma generated an Excel file containing 4,341 posts (N = 4,341). However, not all these messages included hate speech. Thus, to identify hate rhetoric, we utilized Python's Pandas library to read and interpret all the data in the columns and rows of the .xlsx file. Following this initial step, a script was created and the Python's Natural Language Toolkit library was used to analyze the data. From the data obtained in Pandas, this second library employed the SentimentIntensityAnalyzer tool (see the Supplementary File) to assign a polarity score—polarity_score—to each post (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014).

After calculating the polarity_score for each post, the messages were classified as positive, negative, or neutral based on the criteria shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Polarity index.

Classification	Polarity index
Positive	Index ≥ 0.05
Negative	Index ≤ −0.05
Neutral	In all other cases

Note: Values of polarity index and classification as introduced in the Python's Natural Language Toolkit.

The process initially filtered the 4,341 posts, resulting in $n = 719$ publications identified as negative, which suggested a potential correlation with hate speech narratives. To ensure the accuracy of this classification, a final manual review was conducted, carefully verifying that each post met the established criteria for hate rhetoric. This step was essential to confirm that the automated classification was reliable and that no relevant messages were miscategorized. After this manual validation, the final sample remained at 719 publications containing hate speech, as no posts were eliminated and no duplicates were detected.

The second phase of this research consisted of a critical discourse analysis of the messages identified as hate speech. This qualitative analysis was conducted following the frameworks established by Fairclough (1992), van Dijk (1998), Charaudeau (2009), and Wilson (2015), allowing for an in-depth examination of the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed in the discourse of Vox's regional candidates on X. Specifically, the 719 posts classified as hate speech were systematically reviewed to identify and categorize racist narratives. Through this process, a subset of $n = 188$ posts was identified as explicitly containing xenophobic content.

To address objective O1, a lexicon was developed based on the categorization proposed by Sosinski and Sánchez García (2022). This lexicon included specific vocabulary and terminology used to refer to different racial and ethnic communities, enabling a systematic identification of racialized discourse. In response to objective O2, the 188 xenophobic messages were analyzed using van Dijk's (1993) framework of self-defensive discursive strategies. Based on this classification, the messages were grouped into three distinct categories according to their rhetorical purpose: victimist narratives—portraying the in-group (native population) as victims of immigration; alarmist narratives—framing immigrants as a threat to national identity, security, or economic stability; and dehumanizing narratives—using language that diminishes the humanity of racial minorities, portraying them as inferior or dangerous outsiders.

The data extraction was conducted in Spanish and the translation was performed using Python software. To ensure a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the original Spanish lexicon, an English translation is also provided. Lastly, to address objective O3, a descriptive quantitative analysis was conducted to evaluate the activity levels and engagement metrics associated with the racist and xenophobic hate speech posts, providing insights into their visibility and audience interaction.

This methodological approach ensured a systematic and theory-driven analysis of the xenophobic rhetoric disseminated by regional candidates during the 2023 Spanish regional elections, providing valuable insights into how far-right populist actors employ hate speech as a tool for political mobilization and polarization.

4. Findings

This section introduces the core findings from the 188 posts containing xenophobic and racist messages. Of the total 4,341 posts collected from the 15 official Vox profiles on X during the 2023 electoral campaign, 16.56% (719 publications) were identified as hate speech. Among these pejorative messages, 26.15% ($n = 188$ posts) contained racial hatred, indicating that xenophobic narratives are present in the political agenda of these regional leaders.

The results are organized around the three specific objectives we have previously formulated. They aim to identify the main victims of xenophobic narratives (O1), classify the intentions behind the racist rhetoric (O2), and assess the level of activity and engagement generated by the populist speech of Vox's regional candidates (O3). To respond to O1 and O2, we employed a discourse analysis method (qualitative research). For O3, we conducted a descriptive analysis of social media on X (quantitative research).

4.1. Ethnic or Racial Groups Targeted by Xenophobic Narratives

As detailed in Section 3, to address objective O1, we developed a lexicon based on the classification proposed by Sosinski and Sánchez García (2022), incorporating terms and expressions used to refer to various identities and racial communities (Table 3).

Table 3. Lexicon related to ethnic and racial groups.

ETHNIC OR RACIAL GROUPS	LEXICAL UNITS	
	Spanish words	English translation
Natives	indígena; indigena; indígenas; indígenas.	native(s); indigenous; indigenous.
Afro-descendants	negro(s); negrata(s); africano(s); África; Africa; áfrica; africa; nigeriano(s).	black(s); nigger(s); African(s); african(s); Africa; africa; Nigerian(s); nigerian(s).
Unaccompanied minors	Mena; mena; MENA.	unaccompanied minor(s); unaccompanied foreign minor(s)
Roma (gypsies)	gitano(s).	gypsy; Gypsy; gypsies; Gypsies.
Arab, Muslim, and Islamic community	árabe; arabe; islam; islamista; islamistas; judío; judío; antisemita; antisemitismo; moro; musulmán; musulman; musulmanes; marroquí; marroqui; marroquíes; marroquies; Marruecos; marruecos; magrebí; magrebi; magrebíes; magrebies; yihadista; Afganistán; Afganistan; afganistan; afanistán; Irán; irán; talibán; taliban; afgano.	Arab; arab; Islam; islam; Islamist(s); islamist(s); Jew; jew; antisemitic; antisemitism; Moor; moor; Muslim(s); muslim(s); Moroccan(s); moroccan(s); Morocco; morocco; Maghrebi; maghrebi; Maghreb; maghreb; Maghrebis; maghrebis; Jihadist(s); jihadist(s); Afghanistan; afghanistan; Iran; iran; Taliban; taliban; Afghan; afhan.
Asian	Asia; asia; China; china; chino(s); amarillo(s).	Asia; asia; China; china; Chinese; chinese; yellow; yellow(s).
General community	Inmigrante(s); refugiado(s); extranjero(s).	immigrant(s); refugee(s); foreigner(s).

A total of 33 publications explicitly referred to a specific ethnic or racial group. This result indicates that 17.55% of the xenophobic messages aimed to accentuate polarization by constructing the "us vs. them" narrative and positioning others as the enemy. Notably, there was a significant emphasis on the Arab and Muslim community (n = 14 posts; 42.4%) and MENAS (unaccompanied foreign minors; n = 13 posts; 39.4%). References to afro-descendants were minimal (n = 3 posts; 9.1%) and a total of 3 publications (9.1%) alluded to immigration in general.

Regarding the criticism of the Arab and Muslim community, the national party account @vox_es was the most vocal, specifically targeting Moroccans and practitioners of Islam (n = 6 posts). This profile was followed by Juan Sergio Redondo Pacheco, the candidate in Ceuta (n = 5 posts); Carlos Flores Juberías, the candidate in the Generalitat Valenciana (n = 2 posts); and Jorge Campos Asensi, the candidate in the Islas Baleares (n = 1 post).

For attacks on MENAS, @vox_es was also the most active profile, which posted more than half of the messages against unaccompanied minors (n = 7 posts). This account was followed by Rocío Monasterio, the candidate in the Community of Madrid (n = 3 posts); José María Figaredo in Asturias (n = 1 post); Ángel Pelayo Gordillo in Extremadura (n = 1 post); and Maite Nosti in Navarra (n = 1 post).

4.2. Typology of Intentions Behind the Racist Rhetoric

Following the methodological approach described earlier, objective O2 was examined through van Dijk's (1993) framework of self-defensive discursive strategies. This classification allowed us to identify three predominant types of xenophobic rhetoric within the 188 racist messages: victimist, alarmist, and dehumanizing.

4.2.1. Xenophobic Speech With a Victim-Oriented Purpose

This type of racist rhetoric involves techniques of narrative deracialization (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Pettersson, 2020), where the speaker appeals to the protection of national borders and the preservation of a national identity (van Dijk, 1993) to justify restrictions on immigration and asylum requests from refugees or other ethnic minorities. In doing so, the speaker reinforces the idea of cultural incompatibilities between their own culture and other racial or ethnic groups. This form of hate speech allows political leaders to deflect accusations of racism or xenophobia by positioning themselves as defenders of the nation while promoting their values, religion, and culture.

These xenophobic narratives can be categorized as what ElSherief et al. (2021) describe as implicit hate motivated by white grievance, where the speaker feels frustrated, believing that ethnic and racial minorities receive undue privileges, thereby portraying the majority group—Spanish citizens—as the true victims. To analyze this type of hate speech, a compilation of words and vocabulary used by Vox's regional candidates on X to target various identities and racial communities has been assembled (Table 4):

Table 4. Lexicon related to messages with a victim-oriented purpose.

LEXICAL UNITS	
Spanish words	English translation
blanco; hombre(s); patria; nación; nación; nacionalismo español(es); estado; Estado; supremacía; supremacia; supremacismo; superioridad; superior(es); racista(s); racismo; xenófobo; xenofobia; nosotros; mejor(es); valemos; merecemos; ganamos; colonizar; colonizamos; conquistar; conquistamos; cristiano(s); cristianismo; católico(s); catolico; catolicismo.	white; man; men; homeland; nation; nationalism; Spanish; spanish; state; State; supremacy; supremacism; superiority; superior; racist(s); racism; xenophobic; xenophobia; we better; we best; we worth; we deserve; we win; colonize; we colonize; conquer; we conquer; Christian(s); Christian(s); Christianity; christianity; Catholic; catholic; Catholicism; catholicism.

Source: Author's own collection of information inspired by van Dijk's (1993) framework of self-defensive discursive strategies.

The results indicate that more than half of Vox's messages (n = 105; 56%) encompass a victimist intent. Consequently, the rhetoric employed by Vox's regional candidates aligns with nativism (Mudde, 2020), a supremacist political ideology that demonstrates xenophobia towards anything perceived as non-native or foreign to Spanish territory.

Notably, most nativist and white supremacist messages originate from the national-level political group, with 54.29% of the posts (n = 57) published by @vox_es. This strategy is less predominant in messages published by individual candidates, but is still particularly evident among certain political profiles, including Carlos Flores Juberías for the Generalitat Valenciana (n = 9 posts; 8.57%); Rocío Monasterio for the Community of Madrid (n = 8 posts; 7.62%); José María Figaredo for Asturias (n = 8 posts; 7.62%); Juan Sergio Redondo Pacheco for Ceuta (n = 6 posts; 6%); Jorge Campos Asensi for the Balearic Islands (n = 5 posts; 5%); José Ángel Antelo for Murcia (n = 4 posts; 4%); Maite Nosti for Navarra (n = 3 posts; 3%); Ángel Pelayo Gordillo for Extremadura (n = 2 posts; 2%); and Leticia Díaz Rodríguez for Cantabria and David Moreno Ramos for Castilla-La Mancha (each with n = 1 post; 0.95%).

4.2.2. Hate Speech With an Alarmist Aim

This type of rhetoric has an empiricist connotation (Potter, 1996), as Vox's regional candidates attempt to justify their negative stances toward ethnic and racial minorities by appealing to external facts. In other words, their arguments suggest that the inclusion or asylum of these communities places an excessive burden on society and exploits the social welfare system, portraying racial minorities as a potential threat (Mudde, 2007).

The lexicon used in this study was developed by compiling terms and expressions inspired by the classification proposed by the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration (2017) and Lava-Santos (2023). Additionally, we incorporated the stereotypes and negative attributes identified by ElSherief et al. (2021) and Lilleker and Pérez-Escolar (2023a), which are frequently used to associate these communities with insecurity, terrorism, or crime, among other stigmatizing narratives (Table 5).

The results reveal that a total of 45 posts (24%) aim to create social alarm about the presence of ethnic minorities, immigrants, or refugees in Spanish society and, at the same time, serve as a form of incitement to violence (ElSherief et al., 2021). Again, most of these publications come from the national-level political group

Table 5. Lexicon related to hate speech with an alarmist purpose.

LEXICAL UNITS	
Spanish words	English translation
inseguro(s); insegura(s); inseguridad(es); peligro(s); terrorista(s); terrorismo; cuidado; violencia; violento; golpe(s) de Estado; golpe(s) de estado; dictador(es); dictadura(s); paga(s); paguita(s).	insecure; unsafe; insecurity; insecurities; danger(s); dangerous; terrorist(s); terrorism; care; violence; violent; coup(es); dictator(s); dictatorship; pay(s); payment(s); wage(s); paid.

Source: Author's own collection of information inspired by van Dijk's (1993) framework of self-defensive discursive strategies.

(@vox_es). Specifically, 26 posts (59%) were detected portraying immigrants as terrorists or instigators of violence. Rocío Monasterio published 7 posts (16%) concerning the insecurity allegedly caused by immigrants in Madrid and Spain; Jorge Campos Asensi posted 4 times (9%); Leticia Díaz Rodríguez, Juan Sergio Redondo Pacheco, and José María Figaredo each posted 2 times (4%); and finally, Carlos Flores Juberías and José Miguel Tasende Souto each published 1 post (2%).

4.2.3. Dehumanizing Hate Speech

This type of rhetoric represents one of the most explicit forms of hate in discourse. ElSherief et al. (2021) describe these narratives as the "language of inferiorization," meaning the speaker views an individual or a minority group as inferior. The political candidate attempts to strip their antagonists of human attributes, often associating them with diseases or animals (Williams, 2021). To analyze this strategy, a compilation of words and vocabulary used by Vox's regional candidates on X to dehumanize individuals or racial communities has been assembled (see Table 6).

Table 6. Lexicon related to dehumanizing hate speech.

LEXICAL UNITS	
Spanish words	English translation
sabandija(s); alimaña(s); cucaracha(s); animal(es); enfermedad(es); tifus; estiércol; mierda(s); virus; malaria; rata(s); perro(s); perro; puto(s); cabrón; cabrones; plaga(s).	vermin; pest(s); cockroach(es); animal(s); disease(s); typhus; manure(s); excrement(s); virus(es); malaria; rat(s); dog(s); fuck; fucking; bastard(s); plague(s).

Source: Author's own collection of information inspired by van Dijk's (1993) framework of self-defensive discursive strategies.

The results indicate that this type of explicit and denigrating rhetoric is the least frequently used by Vox's candidates. In total, 38 dehumanizing messages (20%) were identified. Most of these publications (69%) are reposts from Santiago Abascal, where he compares immigrants and other ethnic groups to rats. Although there are no significant differences in the frequency of posts among the candidates, it is notable that this strategy has been adopted by certain profiles, such as @vox_es (n = 8 posts; 21%), Rocío Monasterio (n = 6 posts; 16%), José María Figaredo (n = 5 posts; 13.5%), Leticia Díaz Rodríguez (n = 5 posts; 13%), Juan Sergio Redondo Pacheco (n = 4 posts; 10.5%), José Miguel Tasende Souto (n = 3 posts; 8%), Carlos Flores Juberías (n = 3 posts; 8%), José Ángel Antelo (n = 2 posts; 5%), and Ángel Pelayo Gordillo (n = 1 post; 5%).

4.3. Level of Activity and Engagement of Messages From Vox's Regional Candidates

As previously outlined in Section 3, objective O3 was investigated through a descriptive quantitative analysis to assess the activity levels and engagement metrics of the racist and xenophobic hate speech posts. Findings show that Vox Spain's official account, @vox_es, is the most active on X, constituting 50.53% of the total sample (n = 95 publications; see Figure 1). Rocío Monasterio, candidate for the Community of Madrid, follows with 10.11% (n = 19), then Carlos Flores Juberías with 7.98% (n = 15), José María Figaredo with 7.45% (n = 14), Juan Sergio Redondo Pacheco with 6.38% (n = 12), and Jorge Campos Asensi with 5.32% (n = 10). The remaining candidates posted fewer racist and xenophobic messages: Leticia Díaz at 2.66% (n = 5), José Ángel Antelo at 2.66% (n = 5), Ángel Pelayo and Maite Nosti each at 2.13% (n = 4), and David Moreno Ramos and Alejandro Nolasco both at 0.53% (n = 1). Nicasio Galván Sasia from the Canary Islands did not publish any hate rhetoric.

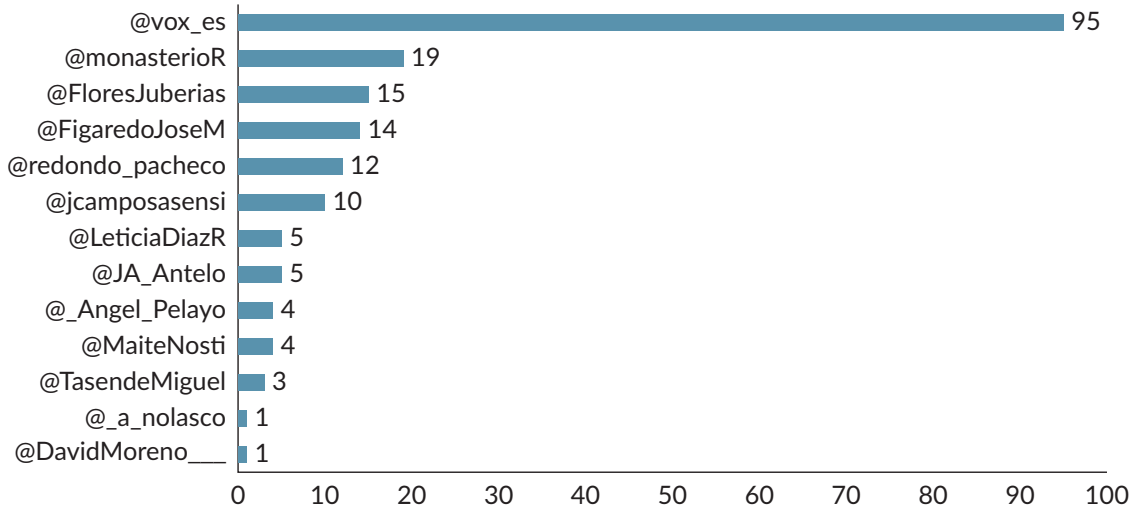

Figure 1. Level of activity of Vox's candidates in the regional elections on X. Source: Information collected by the authors.

Figure 2 illustrates the temporal pattern of racist and xenophobic hate messages, highlighting peaks in activity. On May 5, 15 posts (7.98%) were posted by Ángel Pelayo, Juan Sergio Redondo Pacheco, Rocío Monasterio, José María Figaredo, José Ángel Antelo, Leticia Díaz, and @vox_es. These posts discussed topics like bilateral relations with Colombia and disputes with Morocco, using terms such as "rats," "MENA," "terrorist," and "insecurity." On May 16, 12 posts (6.38%) were published focusing on conflicts with Morocco and expressing hostility towards Moroccans, featuring terms like "violence," "pay," "insecurity," "MENA," and "immigrant." May 23 recorded the highest activity, with 17 posts (9.04%) demonizing immigrant assistance and associating MENAs with the insecurity of Spanish society, including terms like "violence," "Moroccan," "immigrant," "pay us better," "MENA," and "nation," and covering the sports controversy regarding insults towards the football player, Vinicius Jr..

The impact of racist and xenophobic hate narratives, as shown in Table 7, is measured by interactions—likes, comments, and shares—per profile's followers (Fernández-Gómez & Martín-Quevedo, 2018). For reposts, interactions are attributed to the original source's followers. On average, posts receive 2,247.07 likes, 172.63 comments, and 913.36 shares. Notably, @vox_es, Rocío Monasterio, and José María Figaredo garner

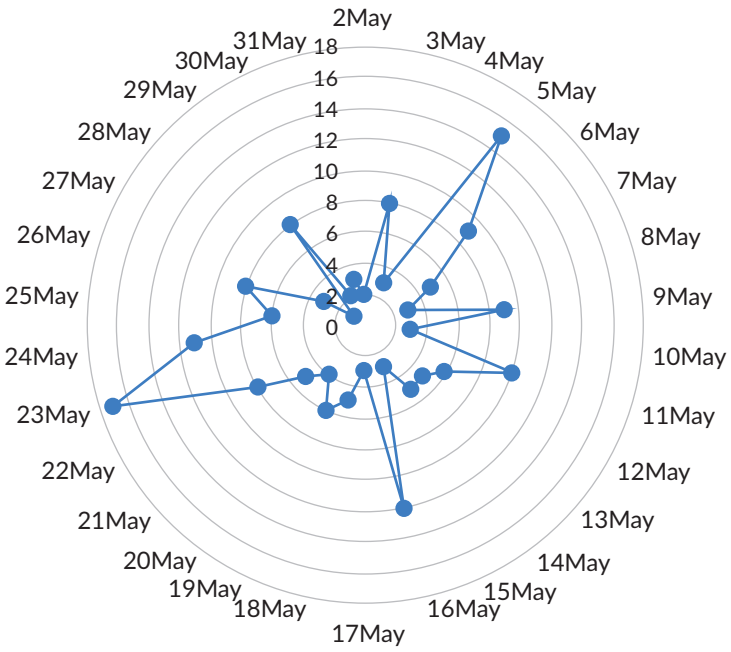

Figure 2. Temporal evolution of posts published by Vox's candidates in the regional elections on X. Source: Author's own collection of information.

Table 7. Reach of the candidates' publications on X during May 2023.

Political candidate	Likes	Comments	Share	Engagement
Alejandro Nolasco	95	2	81	12.81%
José Miguel Tasende Souto	18,387	2,000	6,560	10.36%
Maite Nosti	313	4	128	10.06%
Leticia Díaz	25,120	2,709	10,000	5.47%
Ángel Pelayo	19,016	2,027	6,898	5.15%
José María Figaredo	55,545	3,071	20,984	4.54%
Jorge Campos Asensi	2,713	198	1,682	3.61%
Carlos Flores Juberías	2,669	89	1,332	3.15%
José Ángel Antelo	18,936	2,032	6,855	2.15%
Rocío Monasterio	57,286	5,631	22,982	1.87%
Juan Sergio Redondo Pacheco	22,862	2,312	8,718	1.66%
Vox España	199,495	12,380	85,486	1.12%
David Moreno Ramos	13	0	7	1.07%

the most likes and comments. High engagement for José Ángel Antelo and Ángel Pelayo results from reposts rather than their own posts. The overall engagement rate is 2.39%. Alejandro Nolasco (12.81%), José Miguel Tasende Souto (10.36%), and Maite Nosti (10.06%) lead in engagement despite having fewer followers. Remarkably, @vox_es has a lower engagement rate at 1.12%, likely due to the regional elections spotlighting individual candidates over the national party.

Since this study analyzes the drivers of user engagement—comments, likes, and shares—at both the profile and post levels using a multi-level approach, we identified six topics that generated over 15% engagement.

Maite Nosti's post from May 16, in which she suggests that the best baker in Pamplona is attending an event with Vox leader Santiago Abascal (see the original post here: https://x.com/MaiteNosti/status/1658568063900438535), received the highest engagement, reaching 39.12%. José Miguel Tasende Souto's post on May 19, featuring the cover of the Melilla newspaper addressing vote-buying, followed with 26.8% engagement. José María Figaredo's repost on May 15, displaying an image suggesting Bildu's campaign with hands stained with ETA's blood, gathered 24.17% engagement. Leticia Díaz's video on May 16, highlighting the plight of Cantabrian farmers due to wolf attacks and holding PSOE and PP accountable, gained 21.46% engagement. José María Figaredo's repost on May 24, showing a video of a State Secretary addressing a journalist pejoratively, garnered 18.68% engagement. Finally, Jorge Campos Asensi's video on May 11, exposing attacks by Maghrebi pedestrians on cars in Palma de Mallorca, recorded 15.1% engagement.

To explain the reason why some candidates present high levels of engagement, we correlated this data with information from the National Institute of Statistics on migrant reception in 2023. According to the report, the regions with the highest intake were Catalonia (240,753), the Community of Madrid (202,894), and the Valencian Community (170,816). Given that Catalonia did not hold elections in 2023, Catalan candidates were excluded from the sample, and cross-referencing was not possible in this case. Nevertheless, it was feasible to cross-reference for the Valencian case—Carlos Flores Juberías—and the Madrid case—Rocío Monasterio. In both instances, engagement levels were low, at 3.15% and 1.87%, respectively, demonstrating no correlation between the two variables.

It is important to note that this comparison is limited to 2023 and does not consider previous migration dynamics. For this reason, although Melilla has a long-standing migration tradition and the candidate from Melilla—José Miguel Tasende Souto—achieved one of the highest engagement rates (10.36%), it is worth highlighting that during the electoral year under study, only 1,612 migrants were received. This was largely due to Spain and Morocco's strict migration policies and their cooperation in controlling migration flows.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Henry Mencken's critique of demagoguery and populism, particularly his characterization of populist leaders as "fools" driven by false doctrines and megalomaniacal ambitions, resonates strongly in the context of Spain's current political climate, especially concerning the rhetoric employed by Vox. This study sheds light on the prevalence of hate speech in Vox's communication strategies, particularly through the posts made by its regional candidates on the social platform X.

The analysis reveals that 16.56% of Vox's regional candidates' posts contain explicit or implicit hate narratives. Specifically, 26.15% of these posts target migrants and ethnic minorities, while the remaining 73.85% focus on other issues or groups. This gap indicates a strong strategic focus on migrant populations but also highlights the broader scope of Vox's hate-driven rhetoric, including gender demonization, attacks on political opponents, climate change denial, and opposition to Agenda 2030. The regional variations in hate speech were also notable. Coastal candidates tended to focus on Moroccans—e.g., Carlos Flores Juberías in the Generalitat Valenciana, Juan Sergio Redondo Pacheco in Ceuta, and Jorge Campos Asensi in the Balearic Islands—while attacks on MENAs were particularly concentrated in Madrid under the leadership of Rocío Monasterio.

Furthermore, in line with objective O3, analysis of the pre-election campaign—May 1 to May 12, 2023—reveals that Vox's publications containing hate speech increased strategically during key events. One notable example is the spike in posts following the Vinicius Case (see Hedgecoe, 2023), where the party leveraged the controversy to intensify anti-immigration rhetoric, specifically targeting the Arab world. The analysis of Vox's digital activity revealed a disregard for democratic norms, particularly when the party violated electoral laws during the reflection day of May 27, 2023, by posting hate messages. This pattern suggests a calculated use of polarizing narratives to exploit public debates and reinforce xenophobic discourse during critical moments of the campaign.

This study's findings align with Mouffe (2003) and Laclau (2005), who describe the "populist moment" as a time of societal fractures that populist actors capitalize on. The analysis shows that Vox's hate speech intensified during critical moments, suggesting that the party uses such rhetoric as a deliberate tool to manipulate public opinion and deepen societal divisions. The strategic use of hate speech during controversies, like the Vinicius Case, demonstrates how populist movements thrive by exploiting public debates to amplify polarizing narratives, thereby reinforcing their xenophobic agenda. The calculated exploitation of societal fractures emphasizes the need for further research into the evolution of hate speech over time, by tracking the polarity score in discourse. This analysis of how hate speech fluctuates across different political cycles and electoral contexts can offer valuable insights into how populist rhetoric evolves and its long-term effects on public opinion and political polarization.

The use of self-defensive discursive strategies (van Dijk, 1993), such as victimist, alarmist, and dehumanizing rhetoric, demonstrates a deliberate effort to construct a binary opposition between 'us' and 'them' (Mudde, 2004). According to van Dijk (1993) and Mudde (2004), these strategies aim to deepen ideological polarization (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2022; Fenoll et al., 2024; Pérez-Escolar & Noguera-Vivo, 2021) by portraying migrants and ethnic minorities as existential threats to national identity and social stability. In response to objectives O1 and O2, regarding the main ethnic groups targeted by the xenophobic narratives and the intentions behind this racist speech, the victimist rhetoric, which was present in 56% of the analyzed posts, was especially dominant in posts by the national Vox account (@vox_es), revealing a clear attempt to foster a sense of victimhood and mobilize support based on collective fear.

The use of nativist discourse, seen particularly in posts by regional candidates like Rocío Monasterio and Carlos Flores Juberías, frames Spanish citizens as superior and immigrants as economic and cultural threats. This rhetoric not only reinforces exclusionary ideologies but also erodes democratic cohesion, aligning with the concerns raised by scholars like Popper (1966) and Bollinger (1986), who warn about the dangers of allowing populist ideologies to undermine social cohesion and democratic values. The explicit focus on regional targets, such as Moroccans in coastal areas or MENAs in Madrid, reflects how such hate speech is not only rooted in national politics but also crafted to exploit local fears, thus exacerbating social divides and contributing to long-term political polarization (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2022; Fenoll et al., 2024).

The regional focus of these hate messages further illustrates the adaptability of hate speech to local dynamics, reflecting the broader strategic goals of Vox, which aims to exploit local fears and grievances. This regional targeting points to a tailored approach that intensifies the political divide on a local level, thereby exacerbating long-term political polarization.

The ethical implications of these findings are significant. The growing prevalence of hate speech, both explicit and implicit, poses a direct threat to the integrity of democratic institutions and social harmony. Vox's strategic use of hate speech erodes public trust in democratic institutions, thereby exacerbating political polarization and further disrupting constructive political dialogue and leading to the marginalization of certain social groups.

As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue, populist rhetoric destabilizes democratic foundations by fostering division and intolerance. Vox's rhetoric exemplifies this concern, as this type of rhetoric contributes to the disintegration of political stability and democratic integrity, highlighting the urgent need for political leaders, legal authorities, and digital platforms to address the proliferation of hate speech.

Given the serious ethical and democratic challenges posed by hate speech, future research should focus on the evolving nature of these narratives, particularly by tracking fluctuations in the polarity of discourse over time. Technological advancements in deep learning and artificial intelligence (Srivastava et al., 2021) could significantly enhance the detection of hate speech, enabling more effective responses and mitigation strategies. Interdisciplinary collaboration across linguistics, communication, psychology, and law will be crucial in developing comprehensive approaches to counteract hate speech and its impact on social cohesion and political stability. Furthermore, political leaders and digital platforms must take concrete steps to combat the spread of hate speech. This includes fostering inclusive governance practices, promoting counter-narratives that challenge xenophobic ideologies, and implementing legal frameworks that penalize harmful political rhetoric. Scholars such as Fernández Lagunilla (1999) and García Beaudoux et al. (2005) suggest that such measures are necessary to restore democratic integrity and social well-being.

In conclusion, this study underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to addressing hate speech in political discourse. The findings emphasize the strategic role of populist rhetoric in fostering division and eroding democratic norms. The ethical concerns raised by the widespread use of hate speech are profound and addressing them requires the concerted efforts of political leaders, legal authorities, and academic communities. Only by creating ethical frameworks and innovative tools to counteract hate speech can we promote a more inclusive and democratic society.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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On the Brink of Populism: Credible Leaders and Unreliable Politicians

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Abstract

This article studies the relationship between the lack of ethical inhibitions among populist leaders and the decline in public trust in democratic systems. It analyzes the role of cynical leaders, who are inextricably linked to populism, on the one hand, and emphasizes the role of social movements and civic initiatives in revitalizing democracy, on the other. An illustration of this process is seen in Poland, where after eight years, in 2023, the far-right bloc led by the populist party Law and Justice was removed from power. The text focuses on activists or social leaders, contrasting them with cynical populist leaders, who have emerged in various democratic systems around the world. Activists play a key role in organizing demonstrations and collective actions, which manifest themselves in various forms: civic initiatives, non-governmental organizations, and social movements. Typically, social leaders refrain from engaging in so called dirty political games between parties and factions. Additionally, this article examines protest movements in Poland: STOP ACTA, the Committee for the Defense of Democracy, and 3xVeto. The process of social emancipation culminated in the Women's Strike of 2020. This mobilization proved to be a decisive factor in achieving high voter turnout in the 2023 parliamentary elections and the victory of the democratic bloc.

Keywords

activists; leaders; social movements; unreliable politicians

1. Introduction

In October 2023, Polish society changed the course of history diverging from the global trend of weakening liberal democracy and the rise of spin dictators. In the 21st century, these new, more sophisticated political leaders have generally abandoned physical intimidation and direct violence. "Contemporary autocrats

understand that in today's circumstances, violence is not always necessary or even helpful. Instead of terrorizing citizens, a skilled leader can control them by changing their beliefs about the world" (Guriev & Triesman, 2023, p. 28). The democratic opposition in Poland successfully removed the right-wing nationalist government led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS). How did social actors—whether collaborating with opposition parties or acting independently—mobilize an unprecedented voter turnout of nearly 75% (76% in urban areas and 71% in rural regions) and secure victory for a political coalition encompassing Christian Democrats, centrists, and leftists? Was this merely the consequence of societal exhaustion with the erosion of the rule of law, pervasive xenophobic propaganda financed by public funds, and a growing estrangement from the European Union, despite the majority's will?

If so, such an explanation would be overly simplistic for at least two reasons. First, before being ousted, PiS had won democratic elections twice, in 2015 and 2019, without resorting to electoral fraud or a coup. This underscores the entrenched polarization of Polish society, which remains a defining political reality. Since 2015, Polish parliamentary elections have been arenas of political contention shaped not only by economic cost–benefit analyses but also by ideological and worldview-related considerations. In 2023, a majority of voters opted for democracy over authoritarianism and the erosion of legal norms, signalling a return to democratic governance.

Second, for social discontent to translate into effective political change, several conditions must be met. This article highlights one key factor: the role of social movements and civic initiatives. While political parties are acknowledged, they are secondary to our focus on civil society actors who, since 2012, have driven a long-term process culminating in the removal of populist leaders. This outcome was facilitated by the mobilization of large social groups, particularly women and young voters. Within these demographics, new social leaders emerged, so "activists" played a crucial role in the effectiveness of a multi-component civic movement advocating for freedom and democracy.

Drawing on the sociology of social movements, this article does not seek to delve into the theoretical essence of populism in political science or provide an exhaustive review of existing studies on the topic. Instead, it examines the process by which social actors revitalized democracy. The central argument is that despite their decisive contribution, these actors did not transition into institutional politics; they did not become part of the political class even after the democratic opposition assumed power in 2023.

2. Populism: The Erosion of Institutional Trust

Populism is used in this article both as a theoretical framework and as a tangible "everyday problem" that poses a real threat to democracy. Contemporary theories of populism include a strategic approach that views it as an instrument to gain or maintain power in the long term. A parallel approach focuses on populist discourses (de la Torre, 2018). Populism has been associated with anti-establishment appeals, top-down mobilization, and a particular concept of popular sovereignty (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Its manifestations are very diverse, appearing in different regions, political orientations, and historical periods (Arditi, 2003).

The case of Polish anti-populism, which is the subject of this article, is particularly interesting because it deviates from the worrying trends observed in many Western societies. Without engaging in the theoretical debate on populism, it is important to recognize that its global rise correlates with the escalation of

social unrest triggered by crises such as war, climate change, uncontrolled migration, inflation, and technological unemployment.

The restoration of democratic order in Poland in the mid-2020s occurred in an era in which numerous politicians around the world were effectively mobilizing mass support using a populistic narrative. The discourse framework imposed by PIS exploited political competition, reinforcing the conflict between the "people" and the "elite." Right-wing populism is particularly characterized by anti-elitism and nationalist rhetoric.

A crucial aspect of populism is its intrinsic connection to declining trust in institutions. Consequently, populist leaders actively seek to undermine confidence in key institutions, not only at the national level but also within international frameworks such as the European Union and multilateral trade agreements. The success of populism has attracted new political figures who learn from established populists—from Viktor Orbán on how to remain in power, from Donald Trump on how to reclaim power, and from Marine Le Pen and Alice Weidel on how to approach power. No society is entirely immune to populism's resurgence. The primary safeguard against this threat lies in strong institutions and public trust in them, which in Poland have historically been fragile.

Institutional trust, built upon interpersonal trust as a foundational paradigm, encompasses various categories, including trust in different social groups, specific governments, and the broader political class. In democratic systems, newly elected governments typically receive a "credit of trust" from voters, who anticipate the fulfilment of electoral promises (Easton, 1965). However, successive administrations shape—or erode—generalized trust in political actors, depending on their performance and integrity (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). The highest level of institutional trust pertains to trust in structural arrangements such as courts, universities, financial markets, and military command networks. Sztompka explains this sort of institutional trust in this way:

> An even more abstract case is the trust directed at institutions and organizations (understood as specific structural arrangements within which actions and interactions take place). The school, the university, the army, the church, the courts, the police, the banks, the stock exchange, military command network, computer networks, financial markets, and so forth. The principles and mechanisms of their operation are opaque and cryptic for the average user. We usually take them for granted, do not even notice their pervasive presence. (Sztompka, 1999, pp. 43–44)

As Inglehart and Norris (2016) argue, the erosion of confidence in these fundamental institutions poses a greater threat to liberal democracy than declining trust in individual politicians.

From a historical perspective, Polish society has experienced fluctuating levels of institutional trust, often marked by deep skepticism (Sztompka, 1999). The loss of statehood at the end of the 18th century and brief independence between the world wars fostered a reliance on charismatic leaders rather than institutions (Davies, 2005). This legacy of statelessness and foreign domination contributed to a political culture in which personal authority frequently overshadowed the authority of formal structures (Ekiert & Kubik, 1999). Protest movements have played a decisive role in accelerating political change in Poland's modern history, particularly after World War II. Despite subjugation to the Soviet bloc, Polish society resisted sovietization, exemplified by

recurring worker and intellectual protests. These culminated in the Solidarity movement (1980–1981), which not only transformed Polish society but also contributed to the fall of communism (Touraine et al., 1984).

Solidarity propelled its leader, Lech Wałęsa, to the Polish presidency (1990–1995), illustrating the phenomenon wherein populist charisma substitutes for institutional guarantees in nascent democracies. Even today, leaders who publicly oppose populism—as Szymon Hołownia or Donald Tusk—often employ populist rhetoric to varying degrees, highlighting the pervasiveness of this political phenomenon. Populism exists on a spectrum, from radical forms that undermine democracy through xenophobia and attacks on civil society (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) to moderate variants that strategically challenge specific institutional structures for short-term political gain.

Stanley and Cześnik (2019), who offered a thorough analysis of populism in Poland, showed that PiS has become a party of radical populism: it transformed from a relatively moderate party that, after gaining a majority thanks to the support of centrist voters, attacked the elites, whom it held responsible for the groups harmed by previous governments.

3. Cynical Leaders

The period between 2012 and 2023 witnessed increasing civic engagement in Poland, characterized by grassroots mobilizations against the erosion of democracy. This activism intensified after 2015, when PiS systematically dismantled legal norms, weakened institutional trust, and embraced nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric. However, institutional trust is further eroded when political leaders manipulate governance structures for personal or ideological ends. PiS's assault on judicial independence and media freedom created a public perception of institutional bias, exacerbating democratic backsliding.

Political cynicism—a key driver of populism—manifests itself in voter disengagement or, conversely, unwavering support for populist leaders who claim to represent "the true will of the people." PiS successfully leveraged public disillusionment by positioning itself as a defender of national sovereignty against corrupt elites and liberal institutions. However, declining trust in institutions has not deterred political participation; rather, voters remain engaged but with greater skepticism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). This paradox underscores the persistence of democratic engagement amid institutional distrust.

As Sadura and Sierakowski (2019, p. 10) put it:

> A new phenomenon that has come to dominate Polish politics is the conscious and open acceptance by voters of pathological behavior on the part of political parties. Political cynicism is being displayed by voters on all sides. It functions as a higher form of polit ical initiation, a kind of co–participation in politics, which all voters see as a hotbed of evil....When they are asked about politics, voters begin to act like politicians, calculating the plays necessary to win and openly accepting underhanded moves. They consider what they should say, whom they should seek accommodation with, what to promise to whom. Just like politicians, they do not pretend to believe the things they say about the other side.

The rise of "spin dictators," who legally ascend to power and sustain popularity without overt repression, exemplifies modern political cynicism (Guriev & Triesman, 2023). These leaders do not promise a utopian

future, as in communism, but rather a nostalgic return to a glorified past. Their primary techniques involve systematic legal erosion and the normalization of blatant falsehoods as politically or culturally acceptable. The appeal of Trump's Make America Great Again slogan illustrates how populist rhetoric fosters a sense of shared destiny between political elites and the masses:

> The language that refers to the retrotopian vision of the world is the source of a specific bond between populist leaders and the electorate. It is the language that generates the effect of political persistence. It consolidates support for the authoritarian versions of leadership. In this sense, retrotopia is more than a narrative, it is a substitute for ideology. It gives its supporters a sense of rightness in the realities of cultural war—an acute conflict over the identity of the nation and its "substance": tradition, faith, family, and so on. (Szczegóła, 2023, p. 253)

Spin dictators know how to use the powerful negative emotions embedded in political cynicism, including violating basic values such as truth and honesty. However, with all their techniques, they have a common goal: replacing trust in institutions with trust in leaders, i.e., themselves. In contrast to institutional trust, trust in leaders is often more volatile and can be significantly influenced by the personal qualities and public personas of those in power. Trust in individual political leaders is a deeply interpersonal and subjective dynamic, shaped by citizens' personal experiences and judgments. Voters often evaluate political leaders based on their behavior, the promises they make, and their perceived integrity. This process mirrors the everyday game of trust that individuals navigate in their personal relationships—people develop a sense of whom they can rely on, and this instinct extends to their political representatives. Trust in leaders often rests on ethical considerations, such as whether a leader is transparent, honest, and capable of following through on their commitments. Trust in leaders can be built on the belief that effectiveness is the most important quality, regardless of whether it has been confirmed in practice or by whatever means it has been achieved. This kind of uncritical faith in the agency of leaders is characteristic of followers of populist politicians, which seems accurately to characterize Donald Trump's electorate.

4. Activists

In this section, we will focus on social leaders, whom we call activists or social activists. They are crucial for building and developing the collective actions of civil society, which take various forms: civic initiatives, non-governmental organizations, and social movements.

We need to distinguish social leaders from two groups, namely classical authorities and contemporary influencers: Classical authorities are, as a rule, people of science and culture, who played an important role in shaping public opinion in Poland during the communist era. The role and history of this group, known as the "intelligentsia," have been well-researched and documented. Prominent members of this group constitute the scientific community found in academia and public institutions. They disseminate their knowledge, usually through the mainstream media, but as a rule, without directly referring to political parties and politicians. They try to shape public opinion in the proper sense of the word, i.e., as a space for free discourse and communication (Łuczewski, 2023, pp. 19-21).

Contemporary influencers have an importance difficult to overestimate, especially when we talk about scandalous influencers. On a global scale, these include, for example, pop culture stars, with a reach

exceeding billions and speaking out on political issues, such as Taylor Swift, who supported Kamala Harris just before the US presidential election in 2024. If influencers speak out on political matters, they do so "in passing," without directly declaring their accession to politics. Their significance, however, is hard to overestimate, if we take into account, for example, the case of Elon Musk. There is no space to illustrate the phenomenon of contemporary Polish influencers entering the political game for a short time, but it is worth citing one example as an attempt to monetize popularity through pseudo-activism. In December 2023, the wife of a Polish conservative politician from the highest level of power debuted on Clout MMA as the "new queen of freak fight." In order to capitalize on her online popularity, she announced the establishment of a feminist political party called "Mam dość" (I've had enough), although the court did not register this party due to the lack of a sufficient number of signatures. This case would not be worth attention if it were not for the celebrity's attempt to mobilize sentiment, which we will return to in Section 9 where we analyse the Women's Strike at the end of 2020, after the tightening of anti-abortion law in Poland.

Not all influencers are scandalmongers who aim to profit from their popularity. It is worth paying attention to those whose role as whistleblowers has reached the heights of power. Cyber activists and social leaders are not anonymous and therefore operate openly in the public space. Although they have much in common with the social leaders we are dealing with here, it is worth pointing out the significant differences between these groups. What characterizes social leaders is that they do not limit themselves to the Internet and build their position and credibility by physically participating in demonstrations in public squares and streets. It is difficult to overestimate the role and significance of experience that social leaders gain by standing face-to-face with their supporters and opponents.

5. Social Movements: Learning Politics From Below

Theories of the "society of social movements" challenge the traditional role of political parties as central pillars of democracy in late modernity. Castells (2012) and Della Porta (2020) emphasize the increasing relevance of social movements as mechanisms that can reinvigorate democratic institutions such as political parties, particularly those belonging to parliamentary democracies. These movements and non-governmental organizations often serve as the vehicle by which new political leaders—commonly known as anti-system politicians—emerge. However, despite their origins outside institutional politics, these leaders are often absorbed into the very political games, arrangements, and transactional systems they originally opposed (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Social movements and civic initiatives form part of an expanding sphere of non-institutional politics, which plays a vital role in a system of checks and balances within a democracy. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) define contentious politics as the interactions in which social actors make claims that conflict with others' interests, leading to collective actions, such as protests, strikes, social movements, and revolutions. It involves mobilizations in which people engage in conflict with elites or authorities. As long as activists do not become party leaders, members of parliament, or ministers, they remain part of non-institutional politics, the importance of which is difficult to overestimate. They rarely cross the boundary of formal politics, departing from their role as social leaders to become politicians. Staying within the realm of non-institutional politics also means rejecting the tools that belong to the repertoire of radical groups, who do not shy away from extremism.

The growing importance of "non-institutional politics" results from discouragement, indignation, or even anger caused by party fights, corruption, and broken promises. The result is radicalization and open conflicts, for example between supporters and opponents of abortion. There is a threat of "anti-institutional politics" that does not shrink from symbolic or physical violence (Kuczyński, 2023a, pp. 162–163).

The case of Poland illustrates the process of learning politics by social actors, divided into successive stages. In the first stage, in 2012, the youth were the main actors in the protests under the slogan STOP ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement; Jurczyszyn et al., 2014). The second stage (2016) was characterized by the participation of the middle class from large cities, especially during the period of the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD) activity in defense of democratic institutions (Kubik, 2016) and in the following year (2017) of the "3xVeto" movement. In the third stage (2020), women became leading social actors, especially during the Women's Strike and later feminist movements (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). Although these stages overlap, each of them reflects the mobilization of a different segment of society, whose leaders embodied the dominant social concerns of the time.

It is worth mentioning that during this period PiS was supported not only by its voter base but also by a few ultra-conservative non-governmental organizations, such as Ordo Iuris, often backed by the Catholic Church. The National Movement (Ruch Narodowy, in Polish) played an important role as an organization that articulated the populist radical right youth. Some authors use the term "populist social movements" to refer to organizations supporting PIS, such as the large media concern controlled by the Lux Veritatis Foundation, consisting of a radio station (Radio Maryja), a television station (Telewizja Trwam), and a periodical (Nasz Dziennik), which benefit from financial support from the PiS state. Also associated with PIS were Gazeta Polska Clubs:

> A network of local meeting clubs set up by readers of the Gazeta Polska weekly in Poland and among the Polish diaspora. These clubs, which number an estimated 10,000 members, serve as focal points for the presentation and discussion of ideas associated with the conservative right. (Stanley & Cześnik, 2019, p. 77)

The vast majority of NGOs, however, distanced themselves from the ruling populist regime, with many either actively participating in protests or supporting civic actions aimed at opposing the government and its populist president. In the next sections, the focus is on case studies of social leaders whose visibility and activities were not always directly related to traditional politics. These leaders operated across three domains—NGOs, social movements, and ad-hoc civic initiatives—thereby constituting the living fabric of civil society (Koopmans, 2004). Under certain conditions, these distinct groups often merged into cohesive actions, as we will explore through specific examples.

The first case study concerns the STOP ACTA protest movement (2012), studied using a sequence of methods. First, interviews were conducted with the leaders of the movement, who then took part in a sociological intervention, consisting of, among other things, a series of meetings between activists, supporters, and opponents of the movement. Research on the remaining cases—the KOD, the protests known as "3xVeto," and the Women's Strike—in each case began with participant observation, followed by interviews, online discourse analysis, and secondary data analysis. It is important to note at the outset that each of these mass protests, with the exception of "3xVeto," had a nationwide nature. They differed in the level of institutionalization of the movement, which was the highest in the case of KOD.

6. STOP ACTA

On January 26, 2012, the Polish government signed an international agreement aimed at combating piracy, known as ACTA. It covered intellectual property rights for both tangible and digital products. However, the issue of piracy was not the primary concern of the protestors who mobilized across Poland in February 2012. According to demonstrators, ACTA posed a significant threat to privacy rights, particularly by undermining the principle of internet user anonymity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Movement leaders viewed ACTA as a mechanism serving the interests of secret service agencies and large corporations under the guise of intellectual property enforcement. Ultimately, the protests proved successful, leading to the suspension of ACTA ratification not only in Poland but also beyond its borders.

The leaders of the movement, who referred to themselves as "ACTAvists," were predominantly young individuals from major urban centers, although the movement also gained traction in smaller towns such as Siedlce and Bolesławiec. The protest attracted widespread social support, with participants demonstrating a high level of digital literacy and online communication skills. Many had prior experience in activism, spanning the ideological spectrum from anarchist movements, such as the Free Hemp Movement, to far-right groups, including radical football supporter groups (Kuczyński, 2023b).

A key methodological approach employed in this study was sociological intervention, which involved moderating group discussions with movement leaders, supporters, and opponents. Sociological intervention, as developed by Alain Touraine and his team, is a participatory and dialogical method designed to engage directly with social actors in the process of constructing sociological knowledge. Rather than observing passively, researchers moderate structured discussions with key participants to uncover the internal logic, values, and conflicts that shape collective action. In this study, the method serves at least two purposes: An exploratory one, to reveal the subjective meanings, motivations, and identities that movement actors attach to their participation or resistance. And, a reflexive one, to encourage participants to reflect on their own experiences, enabling a co-production of knowledge between researchers and social actors (Dubet, 1994). As Alain Touraine stated:

> Sociological intervention profoundly transforms the relationship between analyst and actor; it does not confuse one with the other, and protects the former from the dangers of ideology as clearly as it prevents the latter from seeing his consciousness devalued in favor of a meaning that would be completely external to him. Hence the importance and novelty of the exchange of views that it has allowed to be established between those who lead social struggles and those who analyze them. (Touraine, 1982, p. 16)

The discussions with ACTAvists provided insights into the movement's self-definition and the framing of its core conflict. They consistently emphasized their detachment from formal politics and political figures, promoting the slogan NO LOGO (with no reference to the concept of Naomi Klein). As one participant explained: "We are a highly diverse group, and we strongly emphasize NO LOGO, which signifies neutrality. It does not matter where you come from; once you enter our world, you become NO LOGO" (Jurczyszyn et al., 2014, p. 95).

This self-definition allowed ACTAivists to engage in collective action while setting aside their political differences. The shared symbolic rejection of political affiliations was exemplified by the widespread use of Guy Fawkes masks during demonstrations. This imagery further reinforced associations with the principle of anonymity and the Anonymous group, who act collectively under a shared or symbolic identity, while maintaining individual anonymity. Such collectives often engage in activism, digital resistance, or protest, and reject formal leadership or centralized control. The internet played a crucial role in the movement's organization, facilitating rapid communication and mobilization. For example, within mere hours, activists successfully gathered 15,000 protestors in Kraków's main square—an effort led by individuals who had never previously held leadership roles. These public demonstrations were accompanied by extensive online discourse, including memes and innovative activist strategies, such as a temporary truce between virtual factions in the Metin2 online game. More radical actions included, on 21 January 2012, the hacking and temporary shutdown of the Polish parliamentary website: "Tango down. Sejm.gov.pl." (Jurczyszyn et al., 2014, p. 17).

One of the participants in the sociological intervention described himself as a citizen journalist who collaborated with others to create a protest map of Europe:

> This map, in my view, helped ignite protests across Europe, fueling the broader freedom movement. On February 11, demonstrations will be held across the continent. I co-created this map with collaborators from Bulgaria, France, Germany, England, and one other person whose name I cannot recall. (Jurczyszyn et al., 2014, p. 67)

The NO LOGO principle also informed the movement's strategy, which focused all efforts on a single objective. As one activist noted: "For now, we are like a laser that can burn through this ACTA document. Just this one document. If we disperse our focus, if we turn into a prism, it may not work" (Jurczyszyn et al., 2014 p. 56). This targeted approach, conceptualized by ACTAivists, facilitated collaboration and collective action with a clear singular goal—enabling the movement to reach a critical mass. Ultimately, the "laser" strategy proved effective, compelling the Polish government to withdraw from the ACTA agreement on 17 February 2012. As reported on 4 July 2012 by BBC News, the European Parliament has voted to reject ACTA.

These developments challenge earlier sociological observations regarding the political disengagement of Polish youth. According to the Public Opinion Research Centre, nine out of 10 Polish teenagers were convinced in 2013 that politicians only care about their careers, while almost eight out of 10 respondents claimed that they had no influence on what the government did, and three-quarters were unable to specify their political views.

Observers of the STOP ACTA movement noted the unexpected presence of right-wing youth factions, whose political activism had previously gone largely unnoticed (Junes, 2016). The movement underscored to its participants that they themselves constituted the most valuable resource in the digital age. Governments and corporations, having long mastered the art of leveraging this resource, were now perceived as direct threats to individual autonomy. This realization prompted internet users to view anonymity as the most effective defense against pervasive surveillance (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

7. The KOD

The second case study concerns a much more enduring movement known as the KOD, which was established at the end of 2015 in response to the first decisions of the PiS government. KOD reached its peak in 2016. Sociological analysis undertaken by Anna Radiukiewicz, based on extensive 78 in-depth interviews, revealed that KOD was primarily a grassroots movement composed of the metropolitan middle class. The author of the study analyzed the online discourse and slogans at regularly organized street demonstrations. The results showed, among other things, that the KOD was a social movement focused on strategic alliances with opposition political parties (Radiukiewicz, 2021, pp. 312–314).

The immediate cause of KOD's formation was the dispute over the Constitutional Tribunal and the rule of law, issues that would remain central to Polish political life for the next decade. Between November 2015 and December 2016, six acts concerning the Constitutional Tribunal were passed, prepared by PiS to introduce its nominees to the Tribunal. As a result, legal dualism has occurred in Poland, the consequences of which last until 2025. Prominent opposition politicians participated in KOD demonstrations from the outset, marching alongside movement leaders and delivering speeches from specially equipped vehicles. The protests, including the demonstrations outside the Polish Parliament in December 2015, were acts of solidarity with opposition MPs. Notably, former President Komorowski also took part.

Slogans such as Citizens for Democracy, Defend Constitutional Order, and We Are and Will Remain in Europe reflected KOD's explicit political stance. These protests extended beyond Poland, with large Polish expatriate communities organizing parallel demonstrations in Brussels, London, Paris, and Berlin. The height of KOD's activity came in mid-2016, when a demonstration in Warsaw, organized in collaboration with three major opposition parties, attracted nearly 240,000 participants. The movement's international presence was further underscored by a KOD delegation's visit to Brussels. (Radiukiewicz, 2019).

Internal divisions and ideological tensions ultimately weakened the movement, leading to its decline from public prominence. Two key factors contributed to KOD's weakening: First, the middle-class base of the movement exhibited a sense of superiority over those who did not share their liberal democratic values, revealing a class dimension within the movement. The author of the interesting study on KOD identity stated:

> As a consequence of identifying citizenship with the intelligentsia, contemporary ideal citizens are its heirs who have adopted its lifestyle and ethics. From this perspective, the KOD supporters show what constitutes the sacredness of a democratic society and what a true citizen should look like. Despite their street activities outside the 'salons' in which rational debate takes place, they submit to the regime of the public sphere, situate themselves as defenders of its rules and validate the same. (Radiukiewicz, 2019, p. 367)

Second, KOD's close association with the political class led to a dilution of its identity, ultimately eroding its grassroots appeal. KOD's collaboration with established opposition parties—while initially a source of organizational strength and visibility—blurred the line between civic activism and party politics. This hybrid character undermined its credibility as an independent social movement and alienated segments of its grassroots base who sought non-partisan civic engagement (Domaradzka, 2020).

8. The Judiciary Defense Movement

The third case study is referred to here as the Judiciary Defense Movement or 3xVETO. In 2017, Poland witnessed a wave of protests against anti-democratic judicial reforms enacted by the Polish Parliament, awaiting only the signature of the president, an ally of PiS. The 3xVETO protests were held in various cities, including Warsaw, where demonstrators gathered in front of the Presidential Palace. The protesters demanded that President Andrzej Duda veto three controversial bills: the Supreme Court bill, the National Council of the Judiciary bill, and the Common Courts bill. A very detailed report covering these protests was prepared by Amnesty International (2017), which replaced sociologists in describing this phenomenon. The following analysis was prepared primarily based on participant observation by the author of this article.

The demonstrations were organized by a coalition of KOD, opposition parties, and civic groups. Political party leaders and KOD activists led the protests, which took place in many cities across Poland. Notably, some leaders from the 1980–1981 Solidarity movement, including Lech Wałęsa, participated in the demonstrations. Judges and cultural figures also addressed the crowds, lending a solemn and symbolic weight to the protests in front of the Supreme Court.

This period is particularly noteworthy as it saw the emergence of independent civic initiatives, signalling a deliberate distancing from political parties. One such group was the non-governmental organization Action Democracy (Akcja Demokracja), founded in 2015, which organized a symbolic protest known as the Chain of Light. This demonstration, which took place outside Parliament, featured thousands of protesters holding candles, symbolizing their resistance to judicial subjugation.

Toward the end of the protests, further efforts were made to detach some civic initiatives from political parties. At a demonstration in mid-2017, under the slogan 3 x VETO—Outside the Presidential Palace Without Party Leaders, speakers included writers and anti-discrimination defenders. Standing in the crowd in front of the Presidential Palace, one could hear proposals such as “constitutional patriotism” or appeals for the protection of the Białowieża Forest from exploitative logging practices. Although this surge of civic activism did not lead to a major breakthrough, it foreshadowed a new logic of social engagement, one that would later manifest itself through the Women’s Strike.

9. Women: The Most Important Social Actor

Alain Touraine, in his influential book *Le Monde des femmes*, in 2006, compared the significance of contemporary movements led by women to the importance of workers’ movements that shaped industrial societies:

> The women’s movement and the set of actions carried out by what is called sexual minorities occupy a central place in public life and the post-social era, in the same way that workers’ struggles were at the center of industrial society and democratic and national sovereignty was the mobilizing theme in the previous period. (Touraine, 2013, p. 285)

Evidence suggests that the turning point in the process of doing politics without entering formal politics in Poland was the Women’s Strike in 2020. This event was preceded by the so-called Black Protest in October

2016, when demonstrations took place in most major cities in Poland. The scale of the protests in 2016 forced the rejection of the proposed anti-abortion bill. Four years later, according to police data, there were 410 demonstrations across the country, involving 430,000 people, including 100,000 in Warsaw alone (Zaworska-Nikoniuk, 2023, p. 58). This largest wave of protests was triggered in 2020 by the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal that some provisions of the 1993 Act, in particular those allowing for termination of pregnancy in cases of serious fetal abnormalities, were unconstitutional (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021).

Who were the participants of the Women's Strike, a movement described by scholars as an example of connective action? As one researcher argues: "I suggest that the protests against the abortion ban are an example of initiatives following the logic of connective rather than collective action, and that this new logic was one of the key factors facilitating mass engagement" (Korolczuk, 2016, p. 101). A survey conducted shortly after the 2020 Women's Strike revealed that participants shared a high degree of agreement on women's rights, unsurprising given the nature of the protests. However, some facts concerning their political preferences are noteworthy. First, the movement was clearly directed against the leadership of PiS, the ruling party, which represented a paternalistic and patriarchal model of political culture. As a result, positive political preferences among participants were secondary. Notably, one-third of the protestors did not identify with any political party (Tomczyk, 2022).

Another significant feature of the Women's Strike was its radicalism, combined with a commitment to non-violence. The radicalism was evident in the protestors' style of communication, which was often seen in the slogans on banners and memes on the streets and shared online. The language of those protests expressed anger, rejected patriarchy, xenophobia, and attacks on minorities and immigrants (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021).

Although the Women's Strike did not result in changes to the strict abortion laws, it had significant consequences, particularly in terms of raising social awareness, creating new social bonds, mobilizing many women, and fostering the development of new organizations and networks (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). The movement was led by activists and organizers who were not professional politicians but were deeply committed to defending women's rights and democratic values. The movement mobilized hundreds of thousands of people across Poland, bringing together a diverse coalition of feminists, human rights advocates, and ordinary citizens united in their opposition to government policies.

Despite facing repression from the populist state, the leaders of the Women's Strike maintained a non-violent, ethical approach to their activism. Their leadership was rooted in principles of inclusion, equality, and democratic participation. This ethical leadership helped rebuild trust in the democratic process, particularly among younger voters who had become disillusioned with traditional politics, ultimately contributing to the defeat of PiS in the 2023 elections (Marczewski, 2024).

However, the victory of the democratic opposition in 2023 does not appear to have marked a significant turning point in restoring trust in the state, either at the personal or institutional level. Most activists remain in their civic roles, with few entering formal politics, as evidenced by two notable examples: The first is the political career of Michał Kołodziejczak, founder of the Agrounia movement, which was established in 2018 to organize protests, road blockades, and high-profile actions—such as dumping agricultural products in cities—to draw public and governmental attention to farmers' issues. Agrounia transformed into a political party in

2022 but, after unsuccessful pre-election alliances, reached an agreement with the leading opposition party Citizen Platform (Platforma Obywatelska). As part of this deal, Agrounia members were allocated seven spots, mostly at the bottom of Civic Coalition's electoral lists. Only Kołodziejczak was placed at the top of the list, later becoming the Deputy Minister of Agriculture following the election.

Another example is Marta Lempart, who gained political fame as a co-founder of Women's Strike. She has also actively supported LGBTQ+ rights and advocated for the separation of church and state. Her case is important because Marta Lempart is an isolated example of a social leader who was elected to the new parliament in 2023 and, although she sides with the democratic coalition, she is its most active critic and reviewer.

The Women's Strike, despite its radicalism and confrontational stance, awakened hope for building democratic governance from the grassroots level. As one woman, interviewed for a study on intergenerational solidarity, expressed:

> The girls who are on the streets today will soon be in municipal councils, village councils, and mayors' offices, and they will simply take power themselves. They will take the Poland they want. We don't need any man to come and say: "Girl, you can sit here and make me coffee." (Żurek, 2022, p. 74).

On the other hand, any form of connectivity—whether in a more enduring or ad-hoc form—may inspire hope, especially when it transcends party lines, political preferences, and even prejudices. The principle of NO LOGO, as proposed by the ACTAvists, serves as an effective tool for mobilization when common concerns are at stake. From the STOP ACTA protests to the Women's Strike, one can observe the gradual involvement of young people in public life, who resisted the encroachment on their privacy and autonomy of the state. A researcher of Polish feminism noted the similarities between these seemingly disparate protests:

> Both initiatives seemed to appear out of nowhere: they surfaced on the Internet, but participants quickly moved from online discussions to street protests. Both emerged in response to specific pieces of legislation supported by those in power, and both managed to halt further proceedings over the controversial regulations. Moreover, studies show that in both cases, the youngest generation of Poles was the most engaged. (Korolczuk, 2016, pp. 98–99)

However, the NO LOGO principle may prove insufficient when divisions arise over fundamental differences in values, such as those visible in the abortion debate. In this context, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of mobilizations based on shared moral values that transcend ideological and political divisions. There are many manifestations of solidarity between people, but the ones that most attract our attention are those in which the entire society faces challenges that affect everyone. The Covid-19 pandemic in Poland, as in many other countries, has provoked a variety of social responses to support those affected. Social workers, volunteers and religious communities have provided multifaceted assistance, including medical, charitable, and pastoral support in 2022 to war refugees from Ukraine (Kalinowska et al., 2023).

Why is it important to write about this phenomenon, when the solidarity movements we are discussing here are linked to politics only to the extent that they have filled the gap where government solutions were lacking? It is impossible to ignore these extraordinary actions, which reveal the potential of family, neighborhood, and ad hoc groups. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and individual initiatives have shown an unprecedented

degree of solidarity, offering essential services and assistance both behind the scenes and on the front lines of the war in Ukraine. A survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center in Poland in April 2022 showed that 63% of Polish respondents or members of their households provided assistance to Ukrainian refugees. Forms of assistance included financial support, donations of goods, and offering accommodation. The survey also indicated that 84% of Poles supported accepting refugees from Ukraine, which reflects strong public support for aid activities.

It is important to emphasize that the solidarity movements in Poland, whether related to the pandemic or to helping war refugees from Ukraine, were primarily animated by women. The war in Ukraine caused families to flock to Poland, usually without men, who stayed in Ukraine to fight. Help for multi-generational Ukrainian families, composed mainly of women, was also carried out in Poland mainly by women of different ages. Its intensity was also related to the sense of threat felt by the inhabitants of Poland, a country located just behind the front line. Nevertheless, its scale was by no means local or regional and reached a global scale. The explosion of aid activity in Poland had a mainly moral dimension, but it is worth noting that many aid workers felt empowered and understood that "what I do matters." It is difficult to overestimate the experience of building networks based on real, direct interactions and activities in physical spaces such as warehouses or collective shelters. In the summary of the book we wrote based on the results of a sociological study of helping war refugees from Ukraine in 2022, we stated:

> The most important factor that cannot be ignored in the analysis was the rapid self-organization, the completely grassroots nature of the aid campaign. Internally, the Movement did not need either leaders or programs. It did not even need internal enemies that would support mobilization, which is also a specific phenomenon. (Kalinowska et al., 2023, p. 243)

10. How Far From Politics?

If disappointment with politics leads to populism, regaining trust in democratic institutions becomes even more difficult. Politicians without inhibitions, who do not shy away from lies and promise a return to the happy years of the past, convince many voters, who will feel an irresistible anxiety. It is hardly surprising that such an image of politics effectively discourages social leaders from fighting for power. They leave room for cynical players who bet on a political career. Of course, we will find encouraging exceptions among professional politicians. Most non-governmental organizations in Poland, as probably in other countries, maintain a healthy distance from "dirty politics" and fulfill their statutory obligations. It turns out, however, that "dirty politics" will not forget about non-governmental organizations. Populist leaders have noticed that non-governmental organizations can be used to build a social base seemingly independent of politicians. Providing them with financial resources and loyal staff has become one of the techniques of spin dictators. The authors, who analyzed many cases around the world, showed, among other things, how these modern populists use communication technologies, especially social media: "The Internet offers previously unknown opportunities to denigrate activists and arouse distrust. In their circles, they can be anonymously accused of working for profit to the detriment of the state" (Guriev & Triesman, 2023, p. 101). Even more worrying are the actions directly targeting breakaway NGOs that are part of a broader group known as CSOs.

Many CSOs, especially those focused on anti-discrimination, equality, and human rights, are increasingly targeted by right-wing populist groups and politicians. Their inclusive outlook is often criticized, and their

funding is questioned or framed as serving elite interests. Across Europe, CSOs also face growing regulatory pressures, funding restrictions, and, in some cases, threats and intimidation (Ruzza & Sanchez Salgado, 2021, pp. 471–472).

A number of countries, following Russian President Putin's decrees, have passed laws restricting foreign contributions to NGOs, often justified by rhetoric emphasizing national sovereignty and the desire to ward off foreign influence. These laws often require NGOs to register as "foreign agents" if they receive a certain percentage of their funding from abroad, exposing them to increased scrutiny and bureaucratic hurdles. For example, in 2017, populist-led Hungary passed a law requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding above a certain threshold to register as "foreign-supported" organizations. This law was later found illegal by the European Court of Justice in 2020, leading to its repeal in 2021. Similarly, Slovakia proposed a law in 2024 requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding to identify themselves as "foreign-supported organizations," prompting warnings from the European Commission of potential legal action.

CSOs in Hungary, Slovakia, and more authoritarian countries (e.g., Turkey and Iran) illustrate how civil society is a contested field shaped by broader power struggles rather than simply a neutral space for democratic participation. Their sociological significance lies in their dual role: as actors resisting authoritarian consolidation and as barometers of the health of democracy in countries governed by populist politicians.

Poland's experience from the last decade shows that significant protection against authoritarianism and populism is provided by the constant activity and vigilance of leaders of democratic social movements and civic initiatives, provided they are able to mobilize their supporters to act in the next parliamentary and other elections. And above all, to act in the periods between elections, in which civic activity should not disappear.

In recent years, the rise of populism has challenged democratic norms and pluralistic values across many societies. In this context, CSOs—including NGOs, social movements, and grassroots initiatives—play a crucial role in defending human rights, promoting social cohesion, and holding governments accountable. They provide platforms for marginalized voices and advocate for inclusive policies, often countering populist narratives that rely on division and exclusion. CSOs also contribute to democratic resilience by fostering civic engagement and public debate. Despite increasing pressures such as regulatory restrictions and political attacks, these organizations continue to be key actors in sustaining open, participatory societies. Their work is particularly vital in protecting democratic space and encouraging solidarity in polarized environments.

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ARTICLE

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Transparency Against Democracy: The Sweden Democrats, Radical-Right Populism, and Political Trust

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Abstract

Existing explanations for the rise of populist radical-right parties often focus on two primary factors: economic insecurity, driven by globalization, financial crises, and technological disruptions; and cultural backlash, which stems from intergenerational and immigration-related value conflicts. While these perspectives offer valuable insights, there is little doubt that the growth of populist radical-right parties is also closely linked to political distrust and declining confidence in democratic institutions. Supporters of populist radical-right parties tend to exhibit lower political trust as compared to voters in mainstream parties. However, these explanations often overlook the complex relationship between anti-establishment populist radical-right parties and the very democratic accountability mechanisms designed to uphold transparency and institutional integrity. This study explores the paradoxical role of public transparency and press freedom in facilitating the rise of populist radical-right and anti-establishment movements, with a particular focus on Sweden—a country with exceptionally strong public transparency mechanisms. Traditionally regarded as pillars of democratic governance, these mechanisms have been strategically repurposed by the Sweden Democrats, an anti-establishment, radical-right party, to expose political scandals and erode trust in traditional elites. Leveraging alternative media platforms and even troll factories, the party has effectively weaponized transparency to amplify anti-elite populist narratives. This research critically examines whether transparency and media freedom serve to strengthen democracy or instead enable the politicization of scandals, reinforcing populist distrust of institutions. By analyzing the intersection of transparency mechanisms, free press dynamics, and anti-establishment populist strategies, this study provides a new perspective on how accountability tools can be manipulated for partisan gain. In doing so, it sheds light on the broader implications of transparency policies in an era of rising populism and increasing democratic polarization.

Keywords

democracy; free press; radical-right populism; Sweden democrats; transparency; trust

1. Introduction

The rise of populist radical-right parties raises concerns, as these parties often promote anti-establishment and anti-immigration stances that can, at times, challenge the core principles of liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). In Sweden, this trend is exemplified by the rise of the Sweden Democrats, who have cemented their political influence by signing the "Tidö Agreement" with the Moderates, Christian Democrats, and Liberals, forming an unprecedented coalition. Their influence is reflected in recent polls that rank the Sweden Democrats as the country's second-largest political party, with their leader, Jimmie Åkesson, emerging as one of Sweden's most popular political figures (Löfgren, 2024; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019).

Literature on the rise of populist parties typically focuses on two phenomena. The first revolves around globalization and growing economic insecurity, notably as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, the China shock, automatization, rising protectionism, and economic nationalism (Newton, 2024, p. 50). These factors enable party leaders to take advantage of the population's economic anxiety to mobilize them to vote for an anti-system party (Dannerhäll, 2023). Some researchers interpret the rise of populist radical-right parties as a reflection of declining trust in the political system, particularly in the aftermath of economic disruptions (Algan et al., 2018).

The second type of explanation is the cultural backlash theorized by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019). According to this thesis, there is in Sweden as elsewhere in the world an intergenerational cultural clash between older people who identify with their countries and younger people who characterize themselves as "citizens of nowhere" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In the context of Sweden, there is also a clash of values when it comes to immigration, particularly Muslim immigration in the wake of the refugee crisis of 2015. The significant growth in the number of immigrants and the cultural clashes that may result are said to favor the nativist rhetoric that is the trademark of populist parties (Tomson, 2020).

While these explanations provide valuable insights, this research aims to explore a less-examined dimension of populism: the role of transparency and freedom of the press mechanisms in enabling political gains for anti-establishment radical-right populist parties like the Sweden Democrats (Abedi, 2004). According to the OECD (2024) the Government of Canada (2025), and other specialists (Erkkilä, 2020; Ilter, 2022; Sgueo, 2018), transparency and free press mechanisms are tools that can help restore citizens' political trust and thus curb populist parties. For example, the Canadian government's position is that public trust can be strengthened by increasing transparency with measures such as legislation on improving access to information (Government of Canada, 2025).

This research argues that mechanisms of public transparency and press freedom, which were originally designed to foster political trust and strengthen democratic legitimacy by promoting meaningful democratic accountability, can also be exploited by populist radical-right parties, such as the Sweden Democrats, to undermine that trust. Radical-right populist movements frequently position themselves as defenders of transparency, leveraging publicly available information to expose alleged corruption or misconduct among political elites (Fenster, 2021; Moffitt, 2016, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, 2017).

The Sweden Democrats have clearly benefited from leveraging information made available through public transparency mechanisms to strengthen their political position. By selectively amplifying scandals and

framing elite behavior as proof of widespread corruption, these actors transform transparency into a tool for delegitimizing democratic institutions and eroding citizens' confidence in representative governance. In doing so, they strengthen political support within an increasingly polarized public, taking advantage of the very openness that democratic systems depend on to maintain trust. The causal process unfolds as follows. First, regarding transparency mechanisms and press freedoms, these mechanisms expose government actions, as well as the behaviors of political and administrative elites, highlighting institutional shortcomings and increasing the visibility of potential issues. Populist radical-right party leaders rely on the perception of scandals and corruption as a central element of their strategy to gain power. Without these controversies, they would have much less material to exploit.

Second, concerns the scandal framing and amplification through digital media. Populist radical-right party entrepreneurs strategically highlight and frame these revelations, emphasizing misconduct, inefficiency, or moral failings as evidence of systemic corruption within the political elite. The Sweden Democrats' ability to effectively use digital media—media that are not subject to journalistic standards—to bypass traditionally hostile mainstream media amplifies their message. Crucially, the sources disclosing this information are often perceived as legitimate, further reinforcing the Sweden Democrats' narrative and lending credibility to their claims of the elite's moral failure. This strategic use of credible sources strengthens their position and deepens the resonance of their populist rhetoric within an increasingly polarized public sphere.

Third, concerns the erosion of political trust. The ongoing emphasis on these narratives gradually erodes citizens' trust not only in specific institutions, leaders, or policies, but in the legitimacy of representative institutions as a whole.

And at last, we turn to the consolidation of populist support. As trust in political institutions diminishes, populist radical-right parties position themselves as the authentic voice of the "people," capitalizing on citizens' disillusionment to secure electoral support in an increasingly polarized public sphere. Hooghe (2018) and Newton (2024) highlight a strong connection between low political trust and the tendency to vote anti-incumbent, as well as to support populist parties.

This research situates its analysis within the Swedish context, where transparency and freedom of the press mechanisms are exceptionally robust, much more than what is seen in France, the US, and Canada for example. Sweden's principle of public access to official documents ("offentlighetsprincipen") ensures an unparalleled level of governmental openness. However, while these mechanisms can foster trust in government, they also expose political actors to significant scrutiny.

The methodology of this article is qualitative in nature. It is based on an extensive review of primary, secondary, and grey literature sources, including newspaper articles, government documents, and expert analyses on these issues. The methodology employed in this study is grounded in a longitudinal content analysis of political scandals in Sweden over the past 30 years, with a particular focus on the last decade, during which new disinformation strategies have emerged. The research investigates how public transparency mechanisms and press freedom—originally intended to uphold democratic accountability—have been strategically utilized by the Sweden Democrats, to erode trust in traditional political institutions. The study examines how the nature, media coverage, and public perception of these scandals have evolved over time. Additionally, it explores the historical evolution of transparency laws and press freedom regulations in Sweden, assessing their role

in exposing unethical behavior and political misconduct. Furthermore, the research analyzes the rise of new disinformation strategies over the past decade, including the deployment digital media and the deployment of "troll farms" to manipulate online discourse, the use of segmented messaging to target specific audiences, and the expansion of parallel media ecosystems, particularly alternative right-wing media platforms. These elements are analyzed to understand how they contribute to amplifying political scandals and diminishing political trust.

By examining the intersection of transparency, free press mechanisms, and far-right populist politics, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how accountability tools can be wielded for partisan advantage. In doing so, it sheds light on the broader implications of transparency policies in the context of rising populism, polarization, and the evolving challenges to liberal democracy.

2. Conceptual Framework: Trust and Populist Radical-Right Parties

In recent decades, numerous studies and reports in the social sciences have highlighted the crucial role of trust in maintaining a well-functioning society. Trust has been linked to social cohesion (Larsen, 2013), the development of "successful societies" (Hall & Lamont, 2009), the resolution of collective action problems (Ostrom, 1990), and the stability of democratic institutions (Warren, 1999). At the economic level, trust is essential for commercial transactions (Arrow, 1972), economic growth (Algan & Cahuc, 2010), macroeconomic stability (Sangnier, 2013), and the sustainability of the welfare state and income equality (Bergh & Bjørnskov, 2014). Beyond these institutional benefits, political trust is fundamental to the maintenance of the public good and the rule of law. Without it, everyday decisions, such as boarding a plane or sending children to kindergarten, would be significantly more difficult (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2017).

Rothstein (2005) argues that cooperation is only possible when individuals trust that others will do the same. Trust, as an abstract concept, is built upon shared narratives and collective memory, shaping a common understanding of good governance and civic responsibility. It serves as a key mechanism in discouraging behaviors such as free-riding, which can undermine collective efforts. As Rothstein (2000, p. 477) states, "Without norms of trust, the 'tragedy of the commons' is unavoidable." In essence, trust functions much like the air we breathe, its importance often goes unnoticed until it begins to disappear.

Trust in government can be defined in various ways, depending on the context and purpose. In the literature on trust, there is a clear and consistent distinction between social trust and political trust, with social trust generally being higher. In surveys, social trust refers to the belief that most people in society are trustworthy, whereas political trust reflects the confidence citizens have in government institutions and political leaders (Newton, 2024, pp. 8, 40–41). A broader understanding of political trust encompasses citizens' confidence in the political system as a whole, which is rooted in an assessment of whether political institutions demonstrate good decision-making and transparency (OECD, 2024, p. 115).

Erkkilä (2020) and Sgueo (2018) argue that strong social trust can act as a counterbalance to risks such as corruption, social unrest, high crime rates, and even populism. However, when political trust erodes due to issues like corruption, political instability, or high levels of polarization, social trust also tends to decline. For many years now, researchers have noted that trust in governments has been in general decline since the 1960s–1970s (Freedom House, 2021; Nye, 1997; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). A 2024 OECD report highlights a

concerning trend: an increasing proportion of the population reports low political trust in national governments. Among the 30 countries surveyed, 44% of respondents expressed low or no trust in their national government, compared to only 39% who reported high or moderately high trust (OECD, 2024, p. 11).

According to Ilter (2022), political trust is a fundamental pillar of governance and transparent governance is key to fostering trust. According to the OECD (2024), one of the key elements in building trust in public institutions is government transparency. For the OECD, there is a causal link between transparency, freedom of the press, and the perception of public integrity, as well as low corruption. For the OECD (2024), increasing transparency fosters citizens' political trust in their institutions. Transparency is regarded as a fundamental principle in modern governance (Hood & Heald, 2012). It is frequently linked to democratic accountability and good governance (Newton, 2024). According to Fenster, "Transparency has become a preeminent administrative norm with unimpeachable status as a pillar of democracy" (Fenster, 2021, p. 286). In order to implement the principles of public transparency and accountability, there has been a rapid adoption of access-to-information laws around the world (Erkkilä, 2020).

However, this causal relationship has been called into question by several experts. Moore (2018), for example, offers a sociological critique of the transparency agenda and the assumed connection between institutional openness and public trust. Building on Simmel's insights, she contends that open government initiatives often prioritize visibility at the expense of clarity and overlook the role of communication in fostering political trust. According to Tsoukas (1997, p. 827), more information may lead to less understanding; more information may undermine trust; and more information may make society less rationally governable.

Fenster (2021) argues that transparency has become a dominant administrative norm, firmly established as a pillar of democracy. However, he also suggests that the rise of right-wing populism threatens this position. Recently elected governments, in the US, Europe, and elsewhere, represent a shift away from liberal democratic institutions that promote the visibility and public accountability associated with transparency. Yet, contemporary populist movements have not fully rejected transparency as an ideal. Their critique of power inequalities and advocacy for popular sovereignty implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, calls for a more visible and accessible state. According to Fenster (2017), this paradox reveals the complex politics of transparency and highlights the challenges of ensuring legal compliance in an era of resurgent populism. He contended that public transparency is unlikely to strengthen trust in institutions, as the information disclosed cannot be effectively controlled.

Transparency can thus have unintended consequences for democracy. Transparency, originally intended to foster political trust and strengthen democratic legitimacy, can be weaponized by populist radical-right parties, such as the Sweden Democrats, to undermine that very trust. A key argument of this article is that public transparency and freedom of the press expand the strategic toolkit of radical-right populist parties. By making government information more accessible, these mechanisms provide anti-establishment populist movements with material to fuel their criticism of the ruling elite, whom they portray as "corrupt" and "incompetent" (Moffitt, 2016, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Newton (2024, p. 52), a leading expert on trust, recognizes that, although various theories exist regarding the rise of populism, its strong correlation with political distrust and declining confidence in institutions is widely acknowledged. Likewise, Hooghe (2018) highlights a clear link between populist parties' hostile rhetoric

toward political elites and decreasing levels of social trust. Growing public dissatisfaction with the government often fuels support for populist movements, which, in turn, aim to further erode trust in political institutions to advance their own agenda.

A decline in political trust can have far-reaching consequences for democratic stability. Even in societies with generally high levels of political trust, significant disparities among different groups can create serious challenges. When certain segments of the population exhibit notably lower trust levels, the effects extend beyond those groups, influencing the broader social and political landscape. Larsen (2013) attributes declining trust in the UK and the US to perceptions among many middle-class individuals that certain ethnic minority groups are disproportionately seen as untrustworthy, undeserving, or even threatening. A lack of trust disrupts social cohesion and economic interactions, making exchanges involving low-trust groups slower, more expensive, and less effective. Over time, this dynamic can create a negative feedback loop, further eroding trust and deepening societal divisions (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2017; Larsen, 2013).

A similar pattern emerges in public finance and governance. The sustainability of public goods—such as infrastructure, education, and welfare programs—depends on the public's confidence in the fairness of taxation and in their fellow citizens' willingness to contribute. When people doubt the integrity of tax authorities, suspect widespread tax evasion, or perceive excessive dependence on public services, maintaining these systems becomes increasingly difficult. Without sufficient trust in the tax system, the ability to fund and uphold essential public services is severely compromised, leading to systemic failures akin to a modern-day Greek tragedy (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2017).

Political mediation of scandals is often carried out through digital media and social networks, which are particularly effective in the case of the Sweden Democrats. These platforms allow for the strategic amplification of scandals, enabling the party to bypass traditional media channels and shape public discourse in ways that align with their political agenda (Schroeder, 2019). Da Empoli (2019) examines the growing influence of radical-right political strategists and experts in public opinion manipulation in the digital age. The author highlights how behind-the-scenes advisors leverage big data, algorithms, and social media to shape political discourse, deepen societal divisions, and fuel the rise of radical-right populist movements. Populist leaders do not succeed solely based on their charisma or political platform, but rather due to strategists who harness new technologies to manipulate public opinion. Da Empoli argues that the recent successes of populist figures such as Trump, Bolsonaro, Salvini, and Orbán, can be attributed to digital experts—whom he calls "engineers of chaos"—who use sophisticated techniques drawn from marketing and behavioral science. These strategists excel in spreading misinformation, micro-targeting electoral segments, and exploiting emotions to reshape the political landscape in their favor (da Empoli, 2019). The Sweden Democrats have effectively leveraged social media and platforms to amplify scandals, turning them into key rallying points for their cause. Additionally, they have garnered significant support through alternative media outlets—news websites that advocate for right-wing populism and anti-immigrant policies (Newman et al., 2018; Schroeder, 2019).

3. Trust, Transparency, and the Free Press in Sweden

Sweden is a country with high levels of social trust and low levels of corruption. Data from the World Values Survey waves 5 and 6 (2005–2013) showed that in established democracies, an average of 46% of citizens

report having social trust. Sweden ranks significantly higher at 65%, compared to 42% in Canada, 38% in the US, 30% in the UK, and just 18% in France (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2017, p.3).

According to the OECD, political trust levels in Sweden, as measured in two separate OECD surveys, increased by four points between 2021 and 2023, compared to an average increase of 2.4 points across OECD countries (OECD, 2024, p. 24). The OECD further reports that, as in most OECD nations, Swedes place greater trust in institutions such as the police (69%), the judicial system (64%), and fellow citizens (62%), than in the national government (43%). Less than half of the respondents expressed moderate to high trust in the national parliament (46%) or the news media (45%), while political parties (31%) remain the least-trusted institutions in Sweden (OECD, 2024, p. 4). There is a significant gap between trust in the police and the judicial system compared to trust in the national parliament and political parties. This creates an opportunity for the Sweden Democrats to weaken political trust in these institutions further for political gain.

As discussed, political trust involves multiple factors, but governmental transparency is often seen as central. In Sweden, transparency mechanisms, freedom of the press, and administrative policies are the most effective means of preventing possible situations of corruption or breach of ethics (Paquin et al., 2015). Law professor Madeleine Leijonhufvud, who was also head of the Swedish Anti-Corruption Institute, believes that laws aimed at prohibiting behavior are less effective than public transparency measures and freedom of the press in combating corruption and ethical abuses (as cited in Marilier, 2017, p. 2). Rothstein agrees. In his opinion, transparency mechanisms remain more effective (as cited in Marilier, 2017, p. 2).

Sweden differs from many other OECD countries in its emphasis on preventing corruption rather than criminalizing it after the fact. Indeed, it has adopted a different approach to influencing the behavior of public officials. Sweden, for example, is not very active in regulating the financing of political parties or in regulating the practice of lobbying (Leijonhufvud, 1999, p. 144), and it has no major action plan or large institution coordinating the fight against corruption (European Commission, 2014, p. 2; Salminen, 2013, p. 60). Despite their tightening in 2012 and 2014, Swedish laws dealing with the issue of influence peddling are not particularly severe. The OECD (2010, 2012, 2017) has even criticized the lack of firmness of several Swedish anti-corruption laws.

Freedom of the press is a fundamental principle in Sweden (Andersson, 2002, p. 69), which was the first country in the world to adopt a law on the subject. The law, which dates back to 1766 and is therefore almost 260 years old, not only protects freedom of expression, but also gives Swedes the right to access all public documents (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018). The application of this law goes much further than in most OECD countries, since very few Swedish public agencies or organizations escape this right of access to information. In practice, this law gives all citizens access to public documents, including the travel expenses of civil servants and elected representatives. As a result, citizens may at any time consult detailed information on government projects, the personal expenses of elected officials, or the budgets of the state, municipalities, and agencies (Andersson, 2002, p. 62; Larsson, 2002, p. 181). Elected officials and civil servants are free to disclose information since it is public in nature (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018). Documents can also be requested anonymously.

There are, however, certain restrictions. This is particularly the case when the documents involve international relations or organizations, or when they deal with budget preparation or deliberations on monetary policy.

In some cases, courts may grant access to documents, but behind closed doors. Such a situation can arise when matters affect minors or people suffering from mental disorders (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018).

Sweden was also a pioneer in the field of disclosure requirements for elected representatives and the civil service. Ministers, for example, have been obliged to disclose their financial interests since September 1986, and they must also declare the names of any companies or employers with which they have had links in the past (Leijonhufvud, 1999, p. 143). The Swedish state requires public officials, including elected representatives, to disclose all sources of additional income (Andersson, 2002, p. 60). Moreover, since the salaries of civil servants and public officials are funded by taxpayers, citizens have a legitimate right to access this information (Larsson, 2002, p. 190). As in many countries, elected officials must declare any gifts received in the course of their duties.

Beyond laws promoting whistleblowing and access to information, the institutionalization of ombudsmen and auditing practices in Sweden have significantly contributed to embedding a culture of transparency while exerting sustained pressure on public actors (Rothstein, 2007). In the case of Sweden, auditing and verification institutions deserve to be considered as guardians of ethics (Larsson, 2002, p. 199). These include the National Audit Office, the Swedish Agency for National Financial Management, the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret), and parliamentary audits.

In Sweden, it is thus easy to investigate the misuse of public assets by politicians and civil servants. Swedish newspapers and media enjoy significant public financial support in order to maintain a diverse and competent media sector (Milner, 2014, p. 140). The laws are organized in such a way as to make the denunciation of any act of corruption or system of corruption easy, inexpensive, and low-risk (Erlingsson et al., 2008, p. 601). For example, the law not only prohibits journalists from revealing their source, but also prohibits public officials from undertaking investigations aimed at finding the source of a leak. Thus, public servants who wish to disclose information to the media are protected by law. They also have the right to remain anonymous, and disclosing the identity of a whistleblower is a criminal offense. In 2016, Sweden went so far as to strengthen protection for "whistleblowers," becoming the first Scandinavian country to adopt a whistleblower protection law, which now also applies to the private sector.

What makes Sweden's case particularly noteworthy is that many of the scandals brought to public attention since the mid-1990s have been uncovered through the work of Swedish traditional media. Their investigative efforts are significantly facilitated by public transparency mechanisms, which provide access to the crucial information needed to substantiate their reports (Paquin et al., 2015). One of the most infamous ethical scandals in Swedish history was the 1995 "Toblerone Affair," involving Deputy Prime Minister Mona Sahlin. As a leading candidate to succeed Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson, Sahlin's career was derailed when the daily *Expressen* revealed her use of an official credit card (available through public records) for private expenses totaling SEK 50,000 (Radio Sweden, 2010). In 2006, the daily *Dagens Nyheter* revealed that the Moderate Party's Minister for International Trade, Maria Borelius, had failed to declare her children's babysitter to the public authorities (Reuters, 2006). A few days later, the Minister of Culture, Cecilia Stego Chilo, also resigned. The media had reported that she had not paid the TV license fee (a tax on the number of TV sets in a household) for 16 years. In 2016, Minister of Secondary Education Aida Hadzialic resigned after being stopped at a roadside check in Malmö with a blood alcohol level of 0.2 g/l, the legal threshold for an offense in Sweden. Since the information was public, the media exposed the affair, leading to the

minister's resignation. Aida Hadzialic described this incident as "the biggest mistake of [her] life" ("Ivre elle démissionne," 2016). The same year, Erik Bromander, state secretary to the minister of infrastructure, resigned after media revelations of frequent business-class travel, incurring costs of SEK 829,000 for 27 international trips since 2014. These cases highlight the critical role of transparency and press freedom as fundamental factors in ensuring ethical governance in Sweden. These elements serve as key pillars for holding public officials accountable, thereby fostering a culture of openness and integrity within Swedish political institutions.

Journalists can investigate politicians and civil servants without difficulty since public documents are readily available. Transparency extends to the social insurance numbers and tax returns of all Swedes. In addition, ministries are required by law to make all invoices public, and the tax authorities are obliged to share personal and corporate tax data with citizens. From this information, a journalist can learn which company a person has been involved with, access their income over the last 15 years, and even discover their school exam results.

There is more. Every year the Swedish government publishes the *Taxeringskalandern*, an official publication of tax returns. Using this publicly available data, a private company created the Ratzit directory, which is accessible online and compiles information such as the name, address, age, salary, marital status, and credit rating of all Swedish citizens. It is even possible to view a photograph of a citizen's house through Google Street View or to find the name of their spouse. According to the company's information, millions of users consult the directory each year. While private individuals use it to assess potential tenants or inquire about a neighbor's income, journalists rely on it as a valuable resource for their investigations.

It is evident that public transparency mechanisms and press freedom collectively generate a substantial amount of public information, which the Sweden Democrats can exploit to undermine trust in public institutions and the actions of the governing elite.

4. Ethical and Corruption Scandals in Sweden: A Growing Concern

Despite Sweden's reputation for high transparency and low corruption, the country has not been spared from political scandals. As Herkman (2018, p. 350) notes, political scandals are a relatively recent phenomenon in the Nordic countries. While they began to surface more frequently in the 1970s and 1980s, it was not until the 21st century that they became a regular feature in Nordic media coverage. During the first decade of this century, Sweden recorded 34 political scandals, while Denmark and Finland each had 20, averaging two to three major scandals per year in these countries.

Hivert (2024) reports that corruption indictments in Sweden have surged threefold over the past three years, with 93 cases recorded in 2023, of which 77% led to convictions. Louise Brown (2014) insists that there is a culture of corruption in Sweden that is largely underestimated. Linde and Erlingsson (2013, p. 585) observe that Swedes are significantly more inclined to perceive corruption among politicians and public officials compared to their Nordic neighbors. These perceptions influence public trust in democratic institutions, underscoring the potential risks of declining legitimacy even in a nation traditionally viewed as a low-corruption environment. Past surveys further illustrate these challenges. Erlingsson et al. (2008) argue that corruption and deviations from impartiality norms may have become increasingly problematic over the past three decades. In particular, the authors highlight that several public corruption scandals have been

uncovered in Sweden since the 1990s. They conclude that retrenchment initiatives and organizational reforms, often linked to "new public management," may have increased the risk of corruption. While hard empirical data are still lacking, the article emphasizes that the suspicion of a growing corruption problem in Swedish municipalities should not be dismissed, urging further empirical investigation into this issue.

Between 2014 and 2017, several high-profile corruption scandals impacted public trust in Swedish institutions. Sweden's approach to political party funding has also faced scrutiny. Historically, political parties operated with minimal regulation of financial flows. Until 2014, there were no legal restrictions on how parties raised or spent funds. This changed after external pressure from the Group of States Against Corruption (Ohman, 2016). In 2017, three employees of the National Property Board of Sweden were convicted of bribery-related crimes, leading to a prison sentence for accepting bribes totaling SEK 7.6 million (700k USD). These crimes included the misuse of public funds to renovate private vacation homes. These individuals were exposed by TV4's investigative program *Kalla Fakta* (Marilier, 2017). Other incidents involved the National Audit Service, the Swedish Tax Agency, and state-owned enterprises, where corruption and mismanagement went unaddressed despite internal whistleblowing. Moreover, some managers who were dismissed for corruption retained their salaries and benefits, raising further concerns (Hoff, 2017).

In 2018, a scandal involving allegations of tax evasion and mismanagement of public funds by members of traditional parties significantly impacted perceptions of Sweden's political elite (Fund, 2018; "The Guardian view," 2018). More recently, in 2024, the Social Democratic Party was embroiled in a controversy over the financing of its political activities. Since 1956, the Social Democrats have partially funded their activities through lottery ticket sales, a common practice in Sweden. However, allegations have surfaced that Kombispel, a telemarketing company and subsidiary of A-lotterierna, which is owned by the Social Democrats, has engaged in aggressive telephone sales tactics, reportedly exploiting elderly individuals to boost lottery ticket sales ("The CEO of S-Lottery," 2024). The company is alleged to have used dubious methods to force elderly and mentally ill people to buy tickets ("Sweden: Scandal over lottery," 2024). In addition, alleged links between Kombispel and organized crime were raised. The affair sparked a media outcry and put the spotlight on political party funding practices in Sweden, raising questions about ethics and transparency. Although the Social Democrats have announced measures to rectify the situation, the controversy has tarnished its public image.

5. Weaponization of Scandals by the Sweden Democrats

In 1998, Larsson's analysis of Sweden's approach to government transparency argued that while openness fosters public trust, the Swedish government can afford to be transparent precisely because there is no significant social pressure or widespread distrust in its institutions. This is not the case anymore with the rise of the Sweden Democrats. Media scandals with ethical implications are frequent enough to provide the Sweden Democrats with ample opportunities to challenge and criticize the ruling elites. This dynamic creates a favorable environment for a populist, anti-elite party like the Sweden Democrats, allowing them to tap into public dissatisfaction with politics and politicians, effectively mobilizing disillusioned voters.

According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center, surveys were designed to assess citizens' satisfaction with the state of democracy in their own countries, aiming to understand voters' perceptions of their national democratic systems. The findings indicated that as dissatisfaction with democracy increases,

citizens' perceptions of right-wing populist parties become more favorable (Pew Research Center, 2019, as cited in Newton, 2024, p. 55). In Sweden in 2019, 17% of the population had an unfavorable view of right-wing populist parties, while 57% viewed them favorably. Comparatively, these figures stood at 37% and 69% in Germany, 48% and 71% in France, 27% and 49% in the Netherlands, 63% and 73% in Italy, 52% and 63% in Hungary, and 59% and 50% in the UK. The dissatisfaction gap—the difference between favorable and unfavorable views—was 40 points in Sweden, compared to 32 in Germany, 24 in France, 22 in the Netherlands, 20 in Italy, 11 in Hungary, and 9 in the UK (Pew Research Center, 2019 as cited in Newton, 2024, p. 55).

Research indicates that Sweden Democrat politicians are disproportionately drawn from groups with weaker ties to the labor market and traditional nuclear families—demographics that are underrepresented among politicians in other parties. As Bo' et al. (2023, p. 675) observe, "Surveys show that politicians and voters of the Sweden Democrats share strong anti-establishment and anti-immigration attitudes that drastically set them apart from Sweden's other parties." Their voter base also exhibits lower trust in political institutions, the judiciary, and the media compared to supporters of other parties. Bo' et al. (2023, p. 681) further illustrate this disparity: "Among other parties, only 5–25% of voters and politicians report high or very high distrust in parliament. Among Sweden Democrats, these figures reach approximately 60%." Electoral support for the party is also significantly higher in regions where these marginalized groups constitute a larger proportion of the population. These findings suggest that the political mobilization of socially and economically disadvantaged groups has played a crucial role in the party's rise.

Trust in political parties, politicians, and the traditional media has recently diminished among Sweden Democrat supporters, particularly in the aftermath of the "migration crisis" of 2015. On immigration issues, the public has shown relatively low confidence in the media, 93% of Sweden Democrat supporters express distrust, compared to 60% among the broader population (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019, p. 451). Sweden Democrat supporters often view media criticism of their party as evidence of corruption within an elite class with overly liberal views (Herkman, 2018, p. 351).

The party's populist strategy is built around a dichotomy between the "corrupt elite" and the "virtuous people." By highlighting the perceived hypocrisy of mainstream politicians, the Sweden Democrats have effectively mobilized discontent (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Their messaging frequently focuses on instances where politicians fail to uphold the progressive or egalitarian values they publicly advocate. By portraying themselves as the only political force committed to holding the powerful accountable, the Sweden Democrats have reinforced their image as a party of reform and integrity (Tomson, 2020).

Transparency mechanisms and press freedom have enabled the Sweden Democrats to exploit political scandals to bolster their political standing. Historically recognized for its strong governance, Sweden has seen increasing incidents of corruption, hypocrisy, and misuse of public funds, which have eroded public trust in mainstream parties (Herkman, 2018). The party has relied on troubling elements that have affected the Swedish people's trust and further exacerbated the issues. The repetition of scandals and ethical issues revealed through various transparency mechanisms has strengthened the Sweden Democrats' ability to exploit these scandals. While all opposition parties utilize transparency mechanisms to scrutinize the government, populist radical-right parties distinguish themselves by strategically leveraging these tools to undermine institutional legitimacy and weaken public trust in political institutions. This aligns with their

representatives and electorate, reinforcing their anti-elite stance. By capitalizing on these controversies, the Sweden Democrats have strategically positioned themselves as a moral alternative to the political establishment, appealing to a growing number of disillusioned voters.

Using scandals as a political tool has allowed the party to amplify its narrative of a morally compromised establishment. Cases of financial mismanagement, such as allegations of fund misappropriation or coercive practices targeting vulnerable populations, have served as platforms for the party to question the integrity of traditional political actors. These events are framed not merely as individual failings but as symptomatic of a broader dysfunction within the political system (Fund, 2018). Such narratives further erode public trust in mainstream parties while enhancing the credibility of the Sweden Democrats, who present themselves as defenders of "clean politics" and traditional moral values. This strategy resonates particularly with voters who already feel disconnected from the political establishment (Bo' et al., 2023).

The reluctance of mainstream parties to engage with the Sweden Democrats has contributed to increasing political polarization. This dynamic allows the party to position itself as an anti-establishment force, rallying support around an anti-elite narrative (Hellström et al., 2012, p. 204). The "populist" label is particularly fitting, as the party consistently blames the political establishment for failing to recognize and address the concerns of ordinary citizens. The historical "*cordon sanitaire*"—in the sense of political isolation imposed by other parties—has further reinforced this image, allowing the Sweden Democrats to position themselves as the "true representatives of the people" in opposition to a "consensual and disconnected elite" (Hellström et al., 2012, p. 60). Bo' et al. (2023, p. 680) similarly emphasize that the party "consistently presents itself as a champion of the people, standing against an unresponsive political elite." Not only do Sweden Democrat politicians and voters share anti-establishment and anti-immigration views, but these perspectives contrast sharply with those of supporters and representatives of other parties (Bo' et al., 2023, p. 700).

Since the traditional media has largely portrayed the Sweden Democrats negatively, often focusing on various scandals associated with the party (Oscarsson & Stroembaeck, 2019; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019), the party has promoted the development of digital media and party-affiliated platforms, to ensure that scandals gain widespread attention, transforming them into rallying points for their cause (Birdwell, 2012; "Revealed: Sweden Democrats' secret," 2024; Schroeder, 2019; Woolley & Howard, 2018). In Sweden, public service broadcasting continues to dominate as the primary source of news (Schroeder, 2020). Nevertheless, the Sweden Democrats find considerable support through alternative media platforms—news websites that advocate for a right-wing populist and anti-immigrant stance (Birdwell, 2012; "Sweden Democrats to boycott," 2018; Switzer & Tümler, 2023).

Schroeder (2019) argues that, while much attention has been paid to the negative effects of social media, this focus often overlooks how far-right populists have adeptly used digital platforms to circumvent traditional media. Determining the impact of these alternative media platforms is complex since individuals often access multiple sources of news even among younger audiences who rely more on social media for political updates. These websites align with the Sweden Democrats' views and are classified as partisan or alternative media outlets in the Reuters report. The narratives presented by these alternative media outlets diverge significantly from those of traditional Swedish media. They portray Sweden as a nation struggling with widespread crime linked to immigration, as well as corruption, while emphasizing perceived threats to Swedish and Western culture posed by multiculturalism, the left-wing bias of public service media, Islam, and foreign populations

(Schroeder, 2020, p. 99). Former members of the Sweden Democrats also run even more radical alternative media news sites *Exakt24* and *Samnytt* (Switzer & Tümler, 2023).

In Sweden, according to Newman et al. (2018, p. 44):

> The audience of Fria Tider, Nyheter Idag, and Ledarsidorna are further to the right of the audience of the top 15 news brands. Academic research shows that these sites tend to come from a right-wing position and present themselves as alternatives to the legacy media, who they perceive as censoring critical information on issues such as immigration.

In the past decade, alternative online news outlets have gained significant importance, with the Sweden Democrats successfully establishing or supporting such platforms to promote their political agenda. For instance, the web-based news site Avpixlat attracted between 200,000 and 300,000 unique visitors per week (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019, p. 452). The 2018 Reuters Digital News Report highlights the weekly usage rates of certain sites. These platforms have generated substantial outreach (see Table 1). More Swedes (41%) use alternative or partisan media compared to the US (34%). In Sweden, *Fria Tider* is more widely followed than *Breitbart* in the US (Newman et al., 2018, p. 46). In the case of *Fria Tider* users, 50% of the Swedish population had either heard of or used the news site in the week prior to the survey. Users of sites like *Fria Tider* and *Nyheter Idag* in Sweden tend to have lower trust in news compared to the national average. While the general population in Sweden has a higher level of trust in the media, those accessing right-wing or anti-immigration sites like these show significantly less trust in the news (Newman et al., 2018, p. 46).

Table 1. Awareness or use of alternative/partisan media within the past week (2018, Sweden).

News Site	Weekly Usage (%)	Awareness (%)	Combined (%)
Fria Tider	11	39	50
Nyheter Idag	10	27	37
Ledarsidorna	8	17	25
Samhällsnytt	8	18	26
Nya Tider	6	31	37
Samtiden	6	22	28

Notes: Adapted from Newman et al. (2018).

Recent scandals have provoked both public and media backlash, yet they have also increased the visibility of the Sweden Democrats. For their supporters, this criticism is viewed as additional proof of an elite bias against them (Herkman, 2018, p. 351). Despite the controversies, traditional media continues to cover the party predominantly in a negative light (Oscarsson & Stroembaeck, 2019; Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019). The tension between populist movements like the Sweden Democrats and the media has grown more pronounced in Sweden, as reflected in the increasing number of media-related controversies involving the party. While these incidents provoke public outrage, they also amplify the party's presence and visibility.

In 2024, the Sweden Democrats party was accused of operating a so-called "troll factory" (Gelin, 2024). A journalist from Sweden's TV4 conducted a year-long undercover investigation within the Sweden Democrats' communications department. According to the network, the investigation uncovered at least 23

anonymous accounts being operated from within the department. Over a period of three months, these accounts collectively generated 27 million views on social media platforms (Gelin, 2024). In TV4's investigative program *Kalla Fakta*, Sweden Democrat's politician Julian Kroon acknowledged that the party had employed approximately 10 individuals as "online warriors" in the lead-up to the 2018 general election. Their responsibilities included maintaining a prominent presence on social media platforms and engaging actively in comment sections. The TV program also disclosed that the party communications department utilizes numerous anonymous accounts to disseminate content on social media designed to bolster the far-right party's image (Szumski, 2024). These accounts were allegedly used to coordinate attacks on political rivals and journalists. Hidden camera footage reportedly captured employees targeting various opponents, including conservatives viewed as insufficiently aligned with the Sweden Democrats' agenda (Gelin, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This research reveals that while transparency and media freedom are often seen as essential to promoting meaningful democratic accountability, they can be strategically repurposed by populist movements to erode public trust in political elites and institutions. Contrary to the OECD's (2024, p. 11) assumption that increasing transparency fosters citizens' trust in their institutions, the case of the Sweden Democrats demonstrates that transparency mechanisms, when manipulated, can have the opposite effect, exacerbating political polarization and undermining democratic stability.

By capitalizing on these controversies, the Sweden Democrats have strategically positioned themselves as a moral alternative to the political establishment, appealing to a growing number of disillusioned voters. By selectively leveraging scandals and ethical breaches, the Sweden Democrats have successfully capitalized on public disillusionment with the political establishment, reinforcing their anti-elite narrative and consolidating electoral support. Moreover, the Sweden Democrats have skillfully harnessed Sweden's various recent scandals to amplify their anti-establishment messages.

While all opposition parties utilize transparency mechanisms to scrutinize the government, populist radical-right parties distinguish themselves by strategically leveraging these tools to undermine institutional legitimacy and weaken public trust in political institutions. As a recent book on populism explains, populist movements "tend to call for more transparency and the implementation of more democracy…to break what they perceive as the stranglehold of the elite" when they are out of power (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 93).

The findings suggest that transparency mechanisms, originally designed to promote accountability, can fuel political polarization when manipulated by populist movements. These parties effectively weaponize transparency, mobilizing digital media platforms to amplify systemic distrust and reshape public discourse. Critics argue that the Sweden Democrats selectively emphasize scandals involving opponents while downplaying their own missteps, exemplifying a populist strategy of portraying themselves as both victims of traditional media bias and champions of transparency.

These results invite further reflection on the role of transparency in an era of rising populism, emphasizing the need to rethink transparency policies. Transparency advocates promote laws and norms as means for the public to protect itself, while populist movements present themselves as the force that can protect the public

from the elites who currently control the state. Populism, therefore, both aligns with and involves tension with transparency ideals, with transparency advocates often using populist language without necessarily viewing the state as an instrument of an organized elite. The danger posed by populist radical-right parties when they win elections and gain power lies in their skepticism toward pluralist norms and democratic institutions. Populist movements often express deep skepticism toward pluralism as a political theory and view pluralistic governance as an institutional and procedural hindrance. This skepticism ultimately distorts these norms and institutions, subverting democracy itself. A purely populist understanding of transparency, detached from the technocratic rules and institutional mechanisms required to enforce the disclosure of information, will harm both democracy and accountability.

The rise to power of populist radical-right parties serves as a global warning of the potential consequences should the Sweden Democrats ever become the government. The example of Hungary, where Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party has consolidated power by creating an "illiberal state" with restricted access to information, illustrates how populist regimes can undermine transparency. Similarly, in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro's election in 2018 marked a return to authoritarian right-wing rule after years of left-wing governance, during which he curtailed government transparency and targeted independent journalists. Even the US, traditionally seen as a leader in transparency through its Freedom of Information Act, has experienced a shift under President Donald Trump. Despite often claiming to be the "most transparent president in history," Trump's administration repeatedly undermined transparency norms, especially regarding his personal finances and business dealings. His refusal to disclose critical financial information, combined with the dismissal of established norms for transparency, has set a dangerous precedent. These examples show how populist radical-right parties, once in power, can erode democratic principles. The Sweden Democrats' rise could bring similar threats, where transparency and accountability are weaponized to target political opponents and solidify power. Instead of fostering open governance, the manipulation of transparency could lead to a breakdown of democratic norms, a cautionary tale for what might unfold if right-wing populism continues to grow in Sweden.

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ARTICLE

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Turkey Under Erdoğan: Investigating the Relationship Between Populism and Governance Quality Since 2013

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Abstract

Over the past decade, Turkish society and politics seem to have witnessed a populist turn. Events such as the suppression of the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the 2016 failed coup, the 2017 constitutional amendments that expanded presidential powers, the extensive influence over the judiciary, the deepened political polarization, the weakened mechanisms of political representation and mediation, the strengthening of plebiscitary relations, and the overall shift toward personalist rule have led numerous analysts of populism, as well as prominent media outlets like *The Guardian*, *Bloomberg*, *The New York Times*, and *Foreign Policy*, to label Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party as "populists." Accordingly, Turkey's society and political system, particularly over the past decade, seems to have experienced a significant erosion of democratic values, norms, and institutions. Populist policies have challenged the quality of governance in the country. The main objective of this research, therefore, is to investigate the relationship between Erdoğan's populist policies and governance quality from 2013 to 2023, utilizing critical approaches to populism and a combination of quality of governance indicators and "quality of democracy" dimensions. Statistical data is extracted from databases such as the World Governance Indicators, Varieties of Democracy Project, Freedom House, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, as well as The Legatum Prosperity Index. The research findings show that Erdoğan's policies have had an adverse impact on the quality of governance and democratic values in the country during his second term in office since 2013, compared to the early years of coming to power.

Keywords

democratic backsliding; Erdoğan; populism; quality of governance; Turkey

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the rise and spread of populism seem to have posed a significant threat to democratic values and norms worldwide. It could be said that Turkey stands out as one of the countries where the level of democracy has consistently declined since 2013. Notably, after the 2016 coup attempt, Turkey earned the label of "the world's biggest jailer of journalists" (Amnesty International, 2017). Consequently, experts and analysts of Turkish affairs have recently been involved in intense discussions and debates over how to classify the current regime regarding the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Terms like "competitive authoritarianism," "authoritarian neoliberalism," "neoliberal populism," and "crony capitalism" have all been employed to describe this regime. However, it seems that what such reports generally agree on is Turkey's gradual authoritarian shift (Smith Reynolds, 2023, p. 2). According to the Global Populism Database and a 2019 *Guardian* report, Erdoğan was ranked between 1.5 to 2 on the "extremely populist" index from 2014 to 2018 (McKernan, 2019). Additionally, the Legatum Institute (2023) placed Turkey's government 128th globally in terms of governance quality, with Turkey's overall governance score declining from 52.8 in 2013 to 36.9 in 2023 (Legatum Institute, 2023).

The AKP ascended to power in the wake of Turkey's major economic crisis in 2001, articulating its political discourse around the idea of a "new Turkey" in opposition to the secular, Westernized elites, and their military and bureaucratic strongholds, which Erdoğan referred to as the "old Turkey." The AKP's new discourse emerged as a Turkish–Islamic synthesis, in such a way that some analysts categorize "the ideological foundation and type of populism in Turkey as right-wing" (Aytaç & Öniş, 2014, p. 43) with Islamist and authoritarian tendencies (Baykan, 2018). After winning two electoral victories (in 2002 and 2007) and the constitutional referenda of 2010 and 2012, Erdoğan consolidated his position as Turkey's charismatic political leader. However, by 2013, Turkish society and politics seemed to experience a form of democratic reversal. The suppression of the Istanbul Gezi Park protests in 2013, the July 2016 coup attempt, and the brutal crackdowns that followed, culminating in the 2017 constitutional amendments that significantly expanded presidential powers, marked a gradual authoritarian turn. The 2016 coup attempt was used to justify the transition to a presidential system and consolidate Erdoğan's rule, with the executive branch becoming the largest anti-democratic actor in such a way that liberal democratic and reformist actors in Turkey lack the capacity to reverse the authoritarian trends of Erdoğan and the AKP. Following the theoretical framework of this study, the relationship between Erdoğan's populist policies and governance quality will be analyzed based on five key indicators, introduced in the next section.

2. Theoretical Framework

Populism is an ambiguous and contested term, having been examined from diverse ontological perspectives. While a considerable amount of research has been conducted on populism, the term still lacks a clear conceptual definition, and scholars continue to disagree on its classification, labels, and boundaries. The ambiguity surrounding the concept arises from its multifaceted nature. Populism is usually understood "as an ideology" (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008), "a political strategy" (Barr, 2018; Weyland, 2001), "a discursive logic of articulation" (Aslanidis, 2016; Laclau, 2005), or "a performative style" (Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy et al., 2021). In a general sense, populism can be defined as a form of mass politics based on claims to represent or act on behalf of "the people," particularly the common or majority population, in opposition to the elites, privileged groups, or established power structures (Collier, 2001).

There is an extensive body of literature on the impact of populism on the quality of governance and democratic values. However, there is ongoing debate in the academic literature regarding how the rise of populist forces affects the quality of democratic governance. Broadly speaking, two theoretical approaches to the relationship between populism and democracy can be identified. From a practical point of view, some scholars have an optimistic view of populism. In other words, they argue that populism, by supporting democracy and the sovereignty of the people, represents the purest and most genuine form of democracy, thus having the potential to enhance the quality of democratic governance (Canovan, 1999; Dahl, 1998; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Moffitt, 2017; Mouffe, 2005).

However, another group of scholars, focusing on the consequences of populists coming to power, examines the impact of populist leaders and parties coming to power on the quality of democracy. This group has a pessimistic and critical approach to populism, viewing populism as a serious challenge to democracy. They argue that populism disregards the liberal democratic features of checks and balances on political power, the competition of ideas, the rule of law, and pluralism (Albertazzi & Müller, 2013; Batory, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Plattner, 2010; Spittler, 2018). Critics contend that "while a form of democracy persists in populist regimes through elections, populists undermine institutions of democracy and challenge the very 'practice' of democracy" (Daly & Jones, 2020, p. 526). As Alston (2017, pp. 1–15) remarks: "In many instances, populist leaders advocate for direct representation, bypassing intermediary institutions, such as public media, civil society, parliaments and courts, that ensure accountability and power distribution." In this regard, Urbinati (2019, p. 9) argues that "while populism's core ideas are not inherently anti-democratic, they could be exploited to undermine democracy and pave the way for authoritarian leaders to rise." Pasquino (2008) views populism as antithetical to democracy, suggesting that in a populist democracy, access to power is more direct and bypasses intermediary institutions. Sartori (2009), criticizing the Berlusconi government, similarly sees populism as naturally opposed to liberal democracy, leading to societal "polarization" and undermining democratic coexistence. Müller (2016, p. 101) argues that populism's illiberal tendencies pose a threat to democracy and pluralism, as populists often disregard the rights of those not considered part of "the people" and bypass mechanisms of state oversight, which they perceive as stifling the "will of the people." Levitsky and Loxton (2013) further argue that populist leaders in power provoke "constitutional crises" and, through tactics like mass rallies and referenda, seek to change fundamental laws, ultimately leading to the entrenchment of competitive authoritarianism. If they win, they can seize unrestricted power over institutions by implementing drastic constitutional reforms, carrying out widespread purges, and appointing loyalists to critical public positions. This consolidation of control over the state powers enables populists to foster the rise of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013).

As opposed to liberal democracy, populist democracy rejects multiple cleavages in society. Instead, it acts as if there is only one single cleavage: the pure people vs. the corrupt elites. Populists are also against deliberation, negotiation, and compromise. Populists have nothing to debate with the corrupt elites because any compromise will eventually be harmful to the people's will (Pappas, 2019). In this context, democratic erosion refers to the gradual decline of democratic institutions and values, resulting in reduced accountability, transparency, and the protection of human rights (Krygier, 2024). Therefore, particularly when populists are in power, a significant decline could be seen in the democratic levels of countries.

As a result, pessimistic and critical approaches to populism have emphasized the negative and destructive effects of populism on the quality of governance, as well as the erosion of democratic values and institutions.

Assuming a connection between the type of political regime and governance quality, this study adopts a critical approach to populism to evaluate the effects of Erdoğan's populist policies on governance quality and democratic functioning in Turkey from 2013 to 2023.

Methodologically, two other concepts need to be explained here; the "quality of governance" and the "quality of democracy." The most common definition of "quality of governance," is based on the World Bank's concept of governance. It is broadly described as the traditions and institutions through which authority is exercised within a country. This includes: (a) the processes through which the governments are selected, held accountable, and replaced; (b) the government's ability to set and implement effective policies; and (c) the mutual respect between citizens and state for the institutions that regulate economic and social interactions (Kaufmann et al., 1999). Based on the previous definition, Kaufmann et al. (1999) developed a set of indicators to measure the governance quality of the countries. These indicators were grouped into six categories: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption.

As for the "quality of democracy," this study uses the definition of Diamond and Morlino (2004, pp. 20–31), who contended that:

> While there is no absolutely objective way of laying out a single framework for gauging democratic quality, there are eight dimensions on which democracies vary in quality: freedom, the rule of law, vertical accountability, responsiveness, equality, participation, competition, and horizontal accountability. These dimensions are closely linked and tend to move together, either toward democratic improvement and deepening or toward decay.

Due to the overlap between Diamond and Morlino's dimensions of the quality of democracy and Kaufman and the World Bank's indicators of the quality of governance, we have used a combination of the above indicators for measurement. To do so, the current study gathered data from databases such as the Worldwide Governance Indicators, Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), Legatum, and Freedom House, based on the following indicators: rule of law, voice and accountability, respect for civil rights and freedoms, government effectiveness, and control of corruption. These composite indicators provide a model for measuring and explaining the quality of Erdoğan's populist governance, as well as the extent to which his government has adhered to the quality of democracy during the years under study.

3. Rule of Law

One of the defining characteristics of populist regimes is their tendency to monopolize and centralize power, often sidelining established democratic and bureaucratic institutions. According to Kirişci and Sloat (2019, p. 1) "in Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party, initial promises of democratic reform have been replaced by authoritarian policies and practices that undermine the rule of law." As Gumuscu (2023, p. 136) states:

> While Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party initially came to power in 2002 as a conservative democratic party with a reformist agenda focusing on EU accession, democratic consolidation, and economic growth, it enacted only limited liberal reforms in its early years.

However, since 2013, Erdoğan's governance has faced significant internal and external challenges, prompting him to adopt a populist strategy to maintain power and secure mass political support. Before this period, between 2002 and 2013, the AKP enjoyed continuous electoral success, allowing Erdoğan to rule without needing populist tactics to consolidate political authority (Samiee Esfahani & Farahmand, 2023, p. 174). Turkey's turn towards "illiberal democracy" became evident following the election of Sarkozy as France's president in 2007, which dispelled any lingering hopes of EU membership. In fact, changes in the political climate, especially the July 15, 2016 coup, were a turning point in Turkey's domestic and foreign relations. The declaration of a state of emergency and the implementation of a political system that concentrated power in the president led to tensions and accusations between Turkey and the EU, with the EU accusing Turkey of democratic backsliding. After that, Erdoğan's stance towards the West became more harsh and populist themes became more prominent in his foreign policy discourses (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2021; Rogenhofer, 2018).

By the June 2015 parliamentary elections, Erdoğan could still claim popular support, but after losing the parliamentary majority, he embarked on a more aggressive path to retain control (Bayart, 2017). Following the 2016 failed coup in Turkey, the country witnessed a significant erosion of the rule of law. The coup attempt, which was reportedly orchestrated by the Gülen movement, accelerated Turkey's shift toward authoritarianism, resulting in the widespread repression of regime opponents and the purging of tens of thousands of public sector workers, including police officers, teachers, and academics. The controversial 2017 constitutional referendum approved Erdoğan's desired changes, establishing a presidential system and marking the end of Turkey's long-standing parliamentary democracy. In 2018, Erdoğan was elected as Turkey's first president under this new presidential system (Bertelsmann Stiftung [BTI], 2024, p. 5; Narin, 2019, p. 87). This referendum expanded the power of the president and eliminated the office of the prime minister, thus giving the president the role of head of state. The amendments also greatly increased the president's influence over the judiciary and judicial appointments (Lecce, 2022, p. 11). Since then, authoritarian tendencies have taken deep root in Erdoğan's "new Turkey." By holding the roles of both the head of state and government, as well as the leader of the ruling party, which some researchers refer to as the one-man government of the AKP (Taş, 2015), or "one-man rule" (Kuru, 2015, pp. 97–115) filled with populist rhetoric and polemical style, President Erdoğan remains unaccountable to the parliament.

As noted in the theoretical discussion, populist leaders frequently centralize authority within the executive, bypassing democratic institutions that are meant to ensure checks and balances. This centralization enables them to push forward policies with limited oversight or accountability. In Turkey, after 2017:

> The transition to a presidential system through a series of decrees—namely emergency and presidential decrees—bypassed the legislative process required by constitutional law. The lack of essential legal mechanisms governing administrative procedures, which would provide greater legal certainty for citizens and businesses, has exacerbated administrative arbitrariness and further entrenched the regime's autocracy. (Schulz et al., 2021, p. 35)

Thus, "the current Turkish regime under AKP hegemony rests primarily on personal rule, the criminalization of opposition, restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, and the erosion of the rule of law and judicial independence" (Smith Reynolds, 2023, p. 3). Given such developments, Freedom House, in its 2018 report, classified Turkey as "not free" for the first time since the series began in 1999 (Freedom House, 2018). Also,

according to the World Bank (n.d.), Turkey's rule of law index fell from 54.46% in 2013 to 32.55% in 2023 (Table 1).

Table 1. Worldwide governance indicators: rule of law.

Indicator	Country	Year	Number of sources	Governance (−2.5 to 2.5)	Percentile rank	Standard error
Rule of law	Turkey	2013	16	0	54.46	0.14
		2018	11	−0.39	38.10	0.16
		2023	10	−0.51	32.55	0.17

Notes: The World Bank Group's worldwide governance indicators are reported in two ways: (a) in their standard normal units, ranging from approximately −2.5 to 2.5; (b) in percentile rank terms from 0 to 100, with higher values corresponding to better outcomes. Source: World Bank (n.d.).

Similarly, the Legatum Institute's 2023 report reveals a decline in Turkey's rule of law index from a score of 42.8 and a global ranking of 89 in 2013 to a score of 30.9 and a rank of 145 in 2023. The index on constraints on executive power also dropped from a score of 30.3 to 21.3, with Turkey's global rank falling from 141 to 162 (Legatum Institute, 2023). Also, according to the V-Dem database, the index of "executive respects constitution" in Turkey has dropped from 0.02 in 2013 to −1.84 in 2023 (Figure 1).

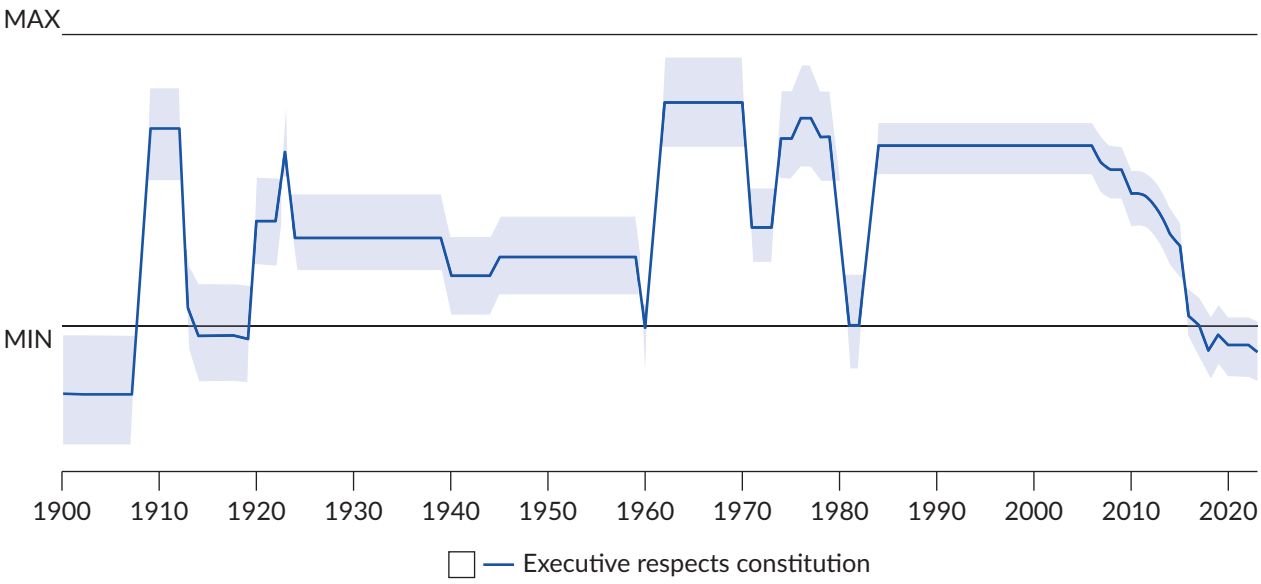

Figure 1. V-Dem executive respects the constitution. Source: V-Dem (n.d.).

In short, while Turkey experienced significant democratic reforms and a relatively liberal political atmosphere during Erdoğan's first decade in power, domestic unrest and crises in foreign relations ultimately led the AKP to abandon its inclusive and conciliatory policies in favour of authoritarianism.

4. Voice and Accountability

While the AKP was initially credited with some democratic advancements, growing concerns over democratic backsliding emerged during Erdoğan's second term (Taş, 2015). Erdoğan's majoritarian interpretation of

democracy and his efforts to establish personal ties through successive referenda and controlled elections have been a crucial mechanism for neutralizing and weakening accountable democratic institutions.

By dividing society into two opposing camps, Erdoğan and the AKP have consistently portrayed themselves as the genuine voice and true representatives of the people's will against corrupt elites. One of the party's early slogans was, "Enough! It's Time for the People to Speak!" positioning the AKP as the voice of the silenced masses against the powerful state elites (Fisher Onar, 2011). As Erdoğan in Directorate of Communications (2019) stated: "Ballot boxes are impassable, unshakeable and indestructible strongholds of national will. Ballot boxes are very important gains that our people acquired by paying prices and waging struggles, so they are our honor." For this reason, AKP leaders have often resorted to referendums to bolster popular participation and have consistently defended their use. Whenever the party was unable to secure the necessary parliamentary majority for constitutional amendments, it called for referendums (Gumuscu, 2023, pp. 134–136). Therefore, as Özbudun (2014) rightly points out, Erdoğan's accountability during his second term in power, is dependent on the ballot box (vertical accountability) "as the only instrument of accountability and the only source of democratic legitimacy" (Özbudun, 2014, p. 163).

However, despite this populist rhetoric, "according to a survey by Istanbul-based Yöneylem Social Research Center in 2022, 66% of Turkish citizens preferred a parliamentary system over a presidential one, with only 28.5% supporting the continuation of the current system" (Turkish Minute, 2022). This reflects a growing mistrust of the presidential system and its "unaccountable" nature among Turkish citizens. A prior survey revealed that by December 2020, fewer than 35% of Turks backed the presidential system, down from 56.5% in 2017 and 44.1% in 2018. While just 35% believed Turkey should maintain its existing system, 58% supported a shift back to the parliamentary system (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 17). Surveys conducted by Kadir Has University in January 2022 also showed the lowest levels of public trust in institutions largely dominated by the executive, including the Central Bank (46.6%), Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu (46.2%), and the media (42.6%). The lowest level of institutional trust, at 40.6%, was found in opposition parties (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 17).

According to the Legatum Institute's 2023 report, Turkey's government accountability and institutional responsibility index dropped from a score of 76.4 in 2013 to 37.1 in 2023, with its global rank falling from 62 to 132. Furthermore, during the same period, the overall score for institutional trust dropped from 50.5 to 42.3, and Turkey's global rank fell from 72 to 117. The World Bank's (n.d.) report also shows a decline in Turkey's voice and accountability index from 40.85 in 2013 to 25 in 2023 (Table 2).

Table 2. Worldwide governance indicators: voice and accountability.

Indicator	Country	Year	Number of sources	Governance (−2.5 to 2.5)	Percentile rank	Standard error
Voice and accountability	Turkey	2013	16	−0.25	40.85	0.11
		2018	12	−0.85	24.76	0.13
		2023	10	−0.86	25	0.13

Source: World Bank (n.d.).

Therefore, under Erdoğan's populist governance since 2013, the interpretation of democracy as a mechanism of "vertical accountability" through elections and referenda, combined with the elimination of checks on executive power, restructuring of the judiciary, reliance on executive decrees, and unchecked

bureaucratic appointments, has paradoxically facilitated the weakening of "horizontal accountability" institutions and, in general, the decline of democratic processes.

5. Respect for Civil Rights and Freedoms

Many analysts believe that alongside anti-elite positions, which were a key feature of Erdoğan's appeal during his two presidential terms, his anti-pluralist tendencies, which emerged after 2007, gradually intensified and became a defining feature of his populist policies (Çinar & Sayin, 2014). Generally, for the government and the AKP, protests and civic activities are seen as anti-democratic actions, and the only legitimate space for political expression is through elections (Gumuscu, 2023, p. 144). In this sense, the process of weakening the quality of governance and democratic regression is evident in Turkey's declining scores reported by the Freedom House and the V-Dem. Following the AKP's rise to power in 2002, there was a short period of progress in political rights and civil liberties, but both indicators have consistently worsened over time. In 2018, Freedom House downgraded Turkey from "partly free" to "not free," arguing that the country no longer qualifies as a democracy (Freedom House, 2018, p. 102; see Figure 2).

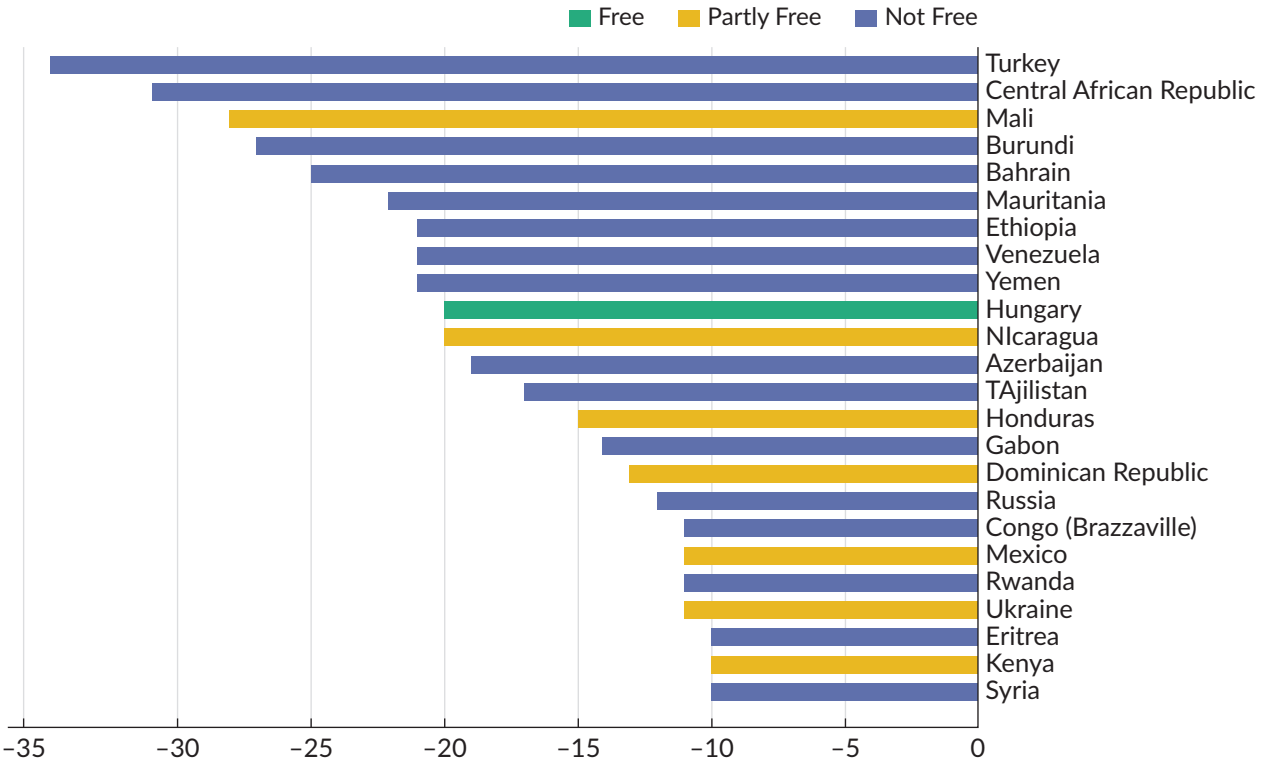

Figure 2. Freedom House global decline of freedoms and civil rights. Source: Freedom House (2018).

V-Dem shows a similar trajectory, tracing Turkey's democratic decline to 2006, with both its liberal democracy and electoral democracy scores worsening over the past 14 years (Gumuscu, 2023, pp. 134–139). According to the V-Dem database, the civil liberties index in Turkey has dropped from 54% in 2013 to 39% in 2023 (V-Dem, n.d.).

Although Turkey's accession process to the EU in 1999 created new momentum for the development of Turkish civil society, the Gezi Park protests later emerged as a turning point, signalling a sharp decline in the country's democratic backsliding. Especially after the July 2016 coup attempt, Erdoğan lost his restraint. The mass purges targeted the police, military, judiciary, universities, and opposition parties, condemning tens of thousands of individuals and their families to "social death," depriving them of their official papers and jobs (Bayart, 2017). The 52,000 public employees were arbitrarily dismissed in the aftermath of the attempted coup and were permanently prohibited from working in the public sector, leaving them subject to lasting social and professional stigmatization (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 14). In June 2021, the Constitutional Court agreed to hear a case seeking the dissolution of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) based on the allegation of the party's ties to terrorism. Notably, the People's Democratic Party represents the second-largest opposition force in Turkish politics (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 9). Furthermore, Amnesty International (2019) reported that, during that year, hundreds of people—including journalists, social media users, and demonstrators—were detained for voicing criticism against Turkey's military offensive in Syria.

The situation of minorities has also worsened over the past decade under the AKP's rule. Despite the legal framework in Turkey upholding the principle of equal treatment, women as well as ethnic and religious minority groups continue to encounter different forms of discrimination. For instance, Alevis and non-Muslims are reportedly disadvantaged in employment opportunities, especially when it comes to securing high-ranking positions within the public sector, while gender-based disparities in the workplace remain widespread. Civic and cultural rights of linguistic minorities, especially the Kurds, are also restricted, including legal limitations on the use of Kurdish in primary and secondary education, while public services are provided solely in Turkish. The renewed conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has served as a pretext for heightened repression targeting Kurdish political parties, media platforms, and civil society organizations—a trend that has deepened under the state of emergency. Beyond widespread arrests, dismissals, and closures, appointed state authorities have in some cases dismantled initiatives introduced by Kurdish municipal authorities amid at promoting Kurdish language and culture identities. Refugees also face unfavourable conditions in the country. According to official figures, 3.7 million Syrian refugees are under "temporary protection" status and are barred from acquiring Turkish citizenship. While the government has made efforts to offer basic services to refugees, a significant portion of refugee children remain excluded from the education system, and only a limited number of adults are able to secure formal employment. According to the International Crisis Group (2018), intercommunal violence escalated in 2017, resulting in the deaths of at least 35 individuals amid rising local hostility towards Syrians (International Crisis Group, 2018). Trust and tolerance towards LGBTIQ+ groups, ethnic minorities, and non-Muslims have declined. According to the European Commission's 2022 report, there is increasing concern over the rise in hate speech and hate crimes targeting LGBTIQ+ individuals, Syrian refugees, Armenians, and other non-Muslim ethnic communities (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, pp. 7–18).

In addition, Erdoğan and the AKP have consistently used the state's media monopoly as a tool in the existential battle between "the people" and their internal and external "enemies." According to the European Commission, as of September 2022, 69 journalists and media personnel were imprisoned. According to Twitter's transparency report, Turkey leads in censoring social media. The 2021 Free Web Türkiye annual report reveals that at least 11,050 URLs were blocked in Turkey that year. Turkey's ranking on the World Press Freedom Index has shifted from 154 out of 180 countries in 2020 to 153 in 2021 and 148 in 2022.

The 2022 Civicus Monitor continues to classify Turkey's civil society as "repressed" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, pp. 7–18).

According to Freedom House's 2023 report, over the past decade, the Turkish government has imposed significant restrictions on social media platforms and internet domains. For example, a Turkish court has restricted access to a 2021 report on internet censorship in Turkey, published by the Freedom of Expression Association's EngelliWeb initiative. The report disclosed that in 2021 Turkish courts blocked access to more than 107,000 websites and domains, predominantly over alleged violations of personal rights involving government officials, including President Erdoğan, his son, and members of the ruling party ("Internet freedom in Turkey," 2023). Therefore, based on these limitations and other obstacles, Freedom House, by evaluating the three indicators of "access barriers," "content restrictions," and "user rights violations," gives the country a score of 32 out of 100 (0 least free, 100 most free), placing it in the "not free" category (Freedom House, 2023).

As a result, the personalization and centralization of power in the presidency, polarisation of the political space, and Erdoğan's anti-pluralist approach based on his populist governance style are among the most important reasons for the democratic backsliding and the decline of citizens' constitutional rights and freedoms.

6. Government Effectiveness

Once in power, populist parties and leaders often fail to transform their radical pledges into coherent and efficient public policies. Some argue that these parties lack the sort of skills and knowledge associated with political professionalism, which negatively reflects on the quality of governance (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Canovan, 1999). In the same way, Erdoğan's populist style of governance over the past decade has had detrimental effects on the effectiveness and efficiency of government policymaking. According to the World Bank report, the governance effectiveness index of Turkey fell from 65.88 in 2013 to 41.51 in 2023 (as shown in Table 3; World Bank, n.d.).

Table 3. Worldwide governance indicators: government effectiveness.

Indicator	Country	Year	Number of sources	Governance (−2.5 to 2.5)	Percentile rank	Standard error
Government effectiveness	Turkey	2013	10	0.40	65.88	0.20
		2018	8	−0.07	49.52	0.22
		2023	7	−0.25	41.51	0.26

Source: World Bank (n.d.).

The Legatum Institute (2023) also reports that Turkey's government effectiveness Index dropped from 66.4 in 2013 to 46, with the country's global ranking declining from 39th to 78th. The Legatum report on inflation volatility, which is closely related to government effectiveness, indicates that inflation rose from 1.7% in 2013 to 3.4% in 2023, with Turkey's global ranking plunging from 63rd to 146th. (Legatum Institute, 2023). Over the past decade, the Turkish lira has depreciated by approximately 75% compared to the US dollar. World Bank statistics reveal that due to the lira's depreciation, Turkey's per capita GDP dropped from $12,600 in 2013 to $9,100 in 2019 (Samiee Esfahani & Farahmand, 2023, p. 178). In response to the economic crisis, Erdoğan has frequently labelled interest rates as "evil" through polarizing policies, arguing that lowering interest rates

will reduce inflation. This perspective has led to frequent changes in the Turkey's Central Bank leadership, negatively impacting the institution's performance and effectiveness.

Rising inflation levels have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of Turkey's most disadvantaged populations. The *Global Inequality Report* (Chancel et al., 2022) highlights that income and wealth inequality, regional disparities, and gender inequalities in the labour force have all worsened over the past 15 years in Turkey. According to Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024, p. 19), the wealthiest 10% of the population earn 23 times more than the bottom 50%. A report by the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey and the Public Services Workers Union in August 2021 revealed that Turkey has the largest income gap between the wealthiest and poorest quintiles of the population in all of Europe (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 19). As of March 2023, Turkey recorded the highest annual inflation growth rate among world countries, reaching 50.5% as shown in Figure 3 (OECD, 2023).

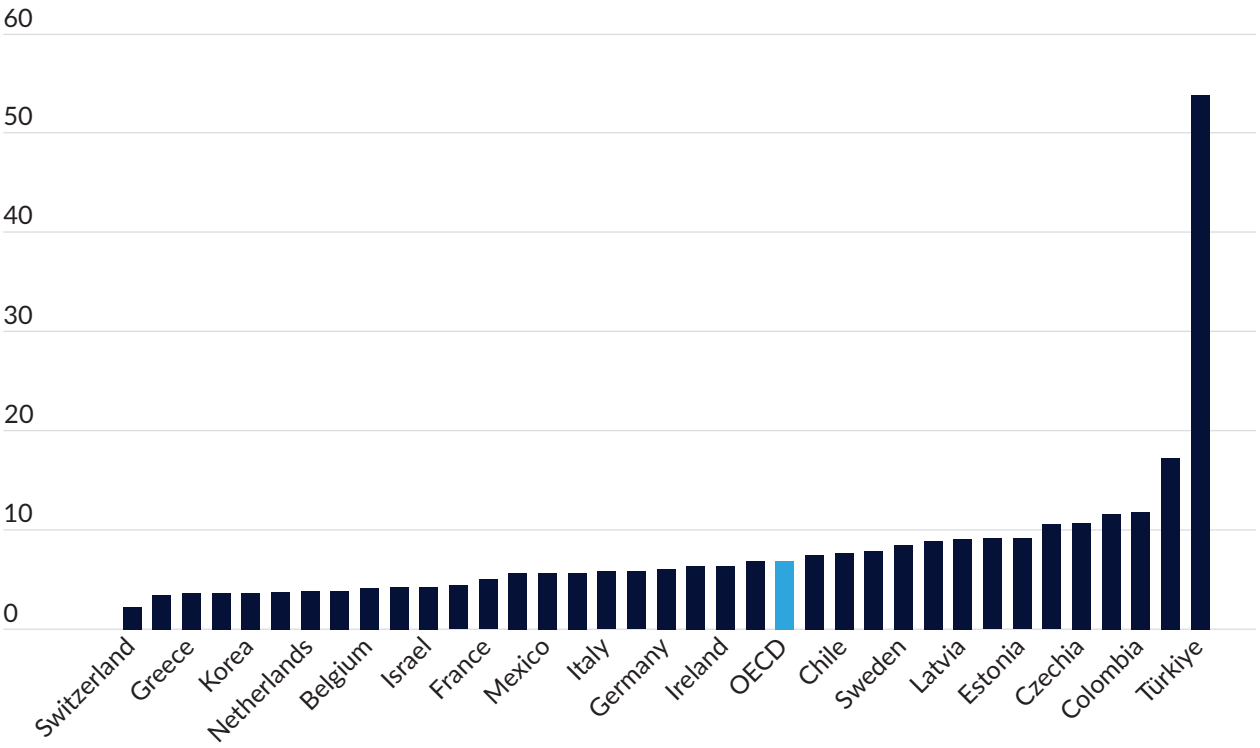

Figure 3. Total annual inflation growth rate as of March 2023. Note: Consumer price index in %. Source: OECD (2023).

Throughout the 2010s, Turkey's unemployment rate followed a rising trend, peaking at 13.7% in 2019—marking the highest rate under the AKP rule. The OECD 2021 data shows that the percentage of Turkish youth not in employment, education, or training stands at 28.69%, the highest among OECD countries, compared to the OECD average of 14.38% (see Figure 4; OECD, 2023). Over the last three years, the unemployment rate has been declining slightly, reaching its peak of 13.73% in 2019 to 9.41% by 2023 (Statista, 2024).

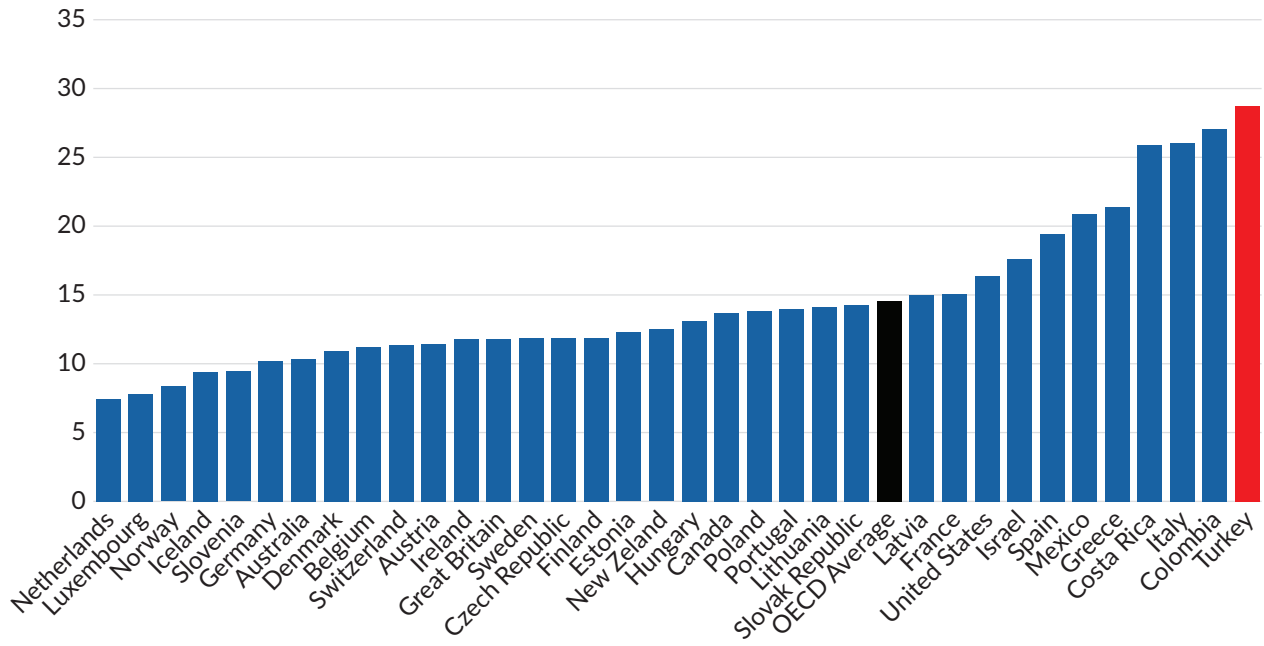

Figure 4. Youth not in employment, education, or training as of 2021. Note: 15–29-year-olds in %. Source: OECD (2023).

One of the main reasons for this economic crisis is directly related to the inefficient administrative system, which over the past decade has become highly personalized and marginalized in the decision-making and policy-making system due to the government's populist tendencies. Over the past decade, bureaucracy in Turkey has grown increasingly cumbersome and inefficient. Between 2003 and 2018, the ratio of public employees increased from 2.7 to 4.2 per 100 people. By June 2020, the number of individuals working in public service had reached 4,767,286 in Turkey. However, despite this significant growth in the public sector workforce, government administration appears paralyzed for various reasons (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 17). Unexpected events such as the two major earthquakes in February 2023, which affected 11 cities and millions of people, further exposed the decay and inefficiency of government institutions under the current governance model, leading to a significant destruction of both human and urban resources. The earthquakes revealed that the highly centralized and personalized system of power had weakened state institutions and undermined their capacity to respond effectively. The earthquakes also revealed the extent of political and institutional decline in Turkey. One aspect of this weakening state capacity is the neglect of merit-based appointments, as assigning bureaucratic positions based on political loyalty has become increasingly common. While partisanship has undermined the effectiveness of state institutions, the introduction of the presidential system in 2018 further rendered them dysfunctional (Aksoy & Çevik, 2023, pp. 1–6).

7. Control of Corruption

One of the key indicators of good governance and ethical governance is the absence of corruption and the integrity of government institutions. Some scholars have argued that populists oppose and attack all state institutions (Canovan, 1999). Therefore, one characteristic of populist governments has been to promote mass patronage policies as a means of capturing government and civil service systems. In this vein, the report of Transparency International's anti-corruption helpdesk, which examines the effects of populist

leaders coming into power on anti-corruption policies concludes that populism and corruption are inherently interlinked (Kossow, 2019).

Following Turkey's transition to a presidential system in 2017 and the emergence of Erdoğan and AKP's populist tendencies, arbitrary rule has become an embedded characteristic of the system, marked by a lack of transparency and weakened legal and administrative supervision. According to the World Bank report, Turkey's corruption control index dropped from 60.66% in 2013 to 34.91% in 2023 (Table 4).

Table 4. Worldwide governance indicators: control of corruption.

Indicator	Country	Year	Number of sources	Governance (−2.5 to 2.5)	Percentile rank	Standard error
Control of corruption	Turkey	2013	14	0.09	60.66	0.14
		2018	11	−0.35	42.86	0.14
		2023	9	−0.50	34.91	0.17

Source: World Bank (n.d.).

In response to criticism from opposition parties regarding corruption in government institutions, Erdoğan has employed populist rhetoric, consistently portraying his supporters and the AKP as virtuous, upright, and devout, while framing the affluent and financial elites, both domestic and international, as immoral, corrupt, and greedy. Erdoğan often asserts: "If they have dollars, we have our people, justice, and our God…the interest rate lobby cannot crush this nation" (Vitale & Girard, 2022, p. 563). This Rousseau-like populist rhetoric implies that the "general will" of the people is incorruptible, unchanging, and pure, in contrast to the will of the elite. However, over the past decade, Turkey has shown a reverse trend, with corruption emerging as a major issue in the "new Turkey," affecting the efficiency and quality of government operations.

In this vein, according to the Statista (2024) database, Turkey's corruption perception index (CPI) score decreased from 49 in 2012 to 34 in 2023, indicating a rise in perceived corruption. The index itself is a composite indicator that includes data on the perception of corruption in areas such as bribery of public officials, kickbacks in public procurement, embezzlement of state funds, and effectiveness of government anti-corruption efforts. The report ranks Turkey 115th out of 180 countries worldwide (Statista, 2024; see Figure 5).

According to the mentioned reports, one of the most prominent and obvious forms of corruption in populist regimes is "clientelism" or social engineering through "inclusionary policies." Over the past two decades, many people have benefitted economically from the AKP government, with the main beneficiaries being segments of the new bourgeoisie closely aligned with the party. This dynamic has facilitated the implementation of various redistribution mechanisms and social welfare programs, helping to build a cross-class coalition in support of electoral campaigns (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2023, pp. 80–93).

At the social level, the AKP government has utilized redistribution policies to maintain the loyalty of its voters. Supporters were appeased through "the provision of public welfare as 'charitable patronage,' redistribution of public resources, and access to public jobs, health services, and public housing" (Kirdiş & Drhimeur, 2016, pp. 599–617). In this way, the party used welfare as part of its clientelist network in which "providers are patrons and beneficiaries are clients"; thus, loyalty to the party is rewarded while distrust and criticism are punished (Yılmaz & Bashirov, 2018, p. 1819).

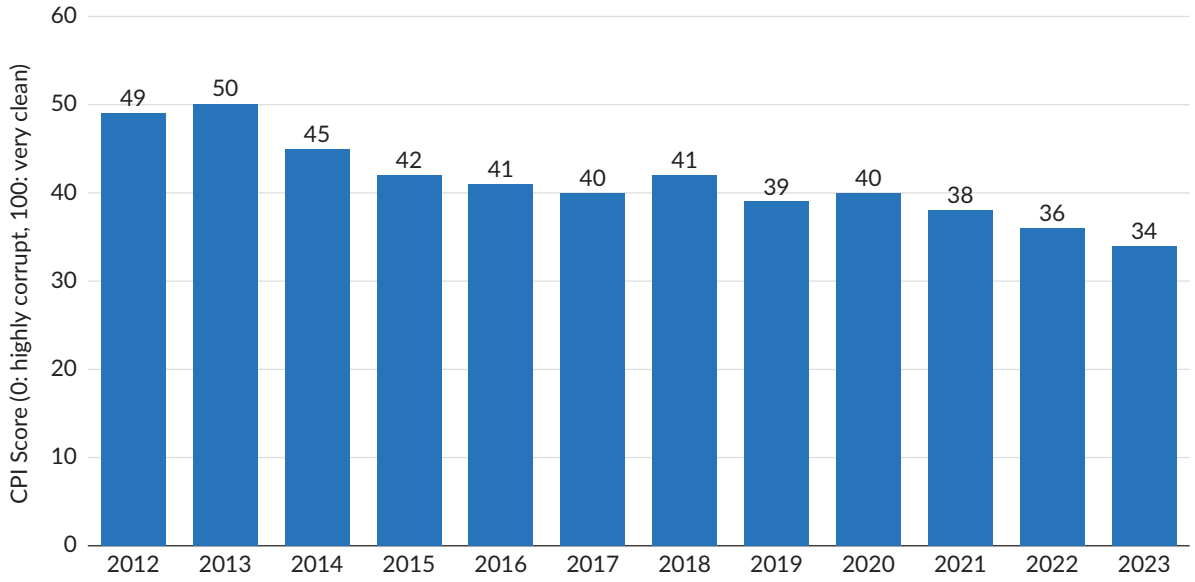

Figure 5. Corruption perception index score of Turkey from 2012 to 2023. Source: Statista (2024).

The allocation of funds, the financing of local administrations, and especially land management and procurement processes have shown significant vulnerability to corruption. Awarding major public contracts to affiliates of Erdoğan's has become a widespread practice, often at the expense of public welfare. A notable example is the 2020 Isparta incident, where a snowstorm led to prolonged power outages, resulting in numerous fatalities (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024, p. 14). None of the top political figures responsible for this corrupt system have been held accountable.

In addition, there are numerous examples of institutional deterioration, particularly concerning the lack of objectivity and political neutrality, from the highest levels of government down to local administrations. A prime example is the Turkish Wealth Fund. In September 2018, President Erdoğan appointed himself as the head of the Fund's executive board through a presidential decree and appointed his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, as his deputy. Albayrak resigned on November 27, 2020. Managing resources valued at approximately US$33.5 billion—roughly 40% of the national budget—the Fund has effectively evolved into a political and financial instrument under the president's authority, allowing him and, until recently, his family, discretionary control over state-owned economic resources (Adar & Seufert, 2021, p. 18).

In December 2013, a group of 47 individuals, including businessmen, government officials, and the sons of AKP ministers, were arrested by the police on charges of financial corruption. This revealed the extensive network of cronyism and the awarding of lucrative construction contracts to AKP supporters. Dozens of officials were forced to resign (Türk, 2018, p. 161). Since Erdoğan embodies the nation, any accusation against him is then an assault against the nation:

> Referring to the corruption probe targeting Erdoğan's close circle, he retorted "Turkey has never been subjected to such an immoral attack," and he portrayed the investigation as one against the nation as a whole. In this reckoning the faith of the country depends on Erdoğan's political success. Accordingly, if Erdoğan falls, Turkey will fall. (Taş, 2015, p. 785)

Following the enactment of new legislation in 2014, Erdoğan managed to terminate the investigations, remove the Gulenists-affiliated members from the judiciary, and reestablish his control over this critical institution (Müftüler-Baç, 2016; Özbudun, 2015).

The integrity and quality of elections have also deteriorated in recent years under populist governance. In this regard, access to resources and facilities has also been unequal: "Alongside Erdoğan's alleged misuse of public funds during recent elections, he has also reportedly utilized private resources to gain a competitive advantage over his opponents" (Castaldo, 2018, p. 14). For example, according to Turkish media monitoring, in the 2023 presidential election, Erdoğan was allotted nearly 33 hours of airtime on the main state television channel, while Kılıçdaroğlu received only 32 minutes (Klimek et al., 2023, pp. 15–16). Therefore, some researchers highlighted the emergence of a pattern termed "*familial electoral coercion* during the 2018 Turkish general election" (Toros & Birch, 2019, p. 1–14, emphasis added). Additionally, data from the Electoral Integrity Project indicates that Turkey's electoral integrity score experienced a significant decline, dropping from 51 in 2014 to 35 by 2018. Researchers argue that this decline stems from the populist tendencies of the ruling AKP (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Baykan, 2018; Selçuk, 2016). In general, according to the V-Dem database, the "executive corruption index" in Turkey has increased from 0.73 in 2013 to 0.87 in 2023 (as seen in Figure 6).

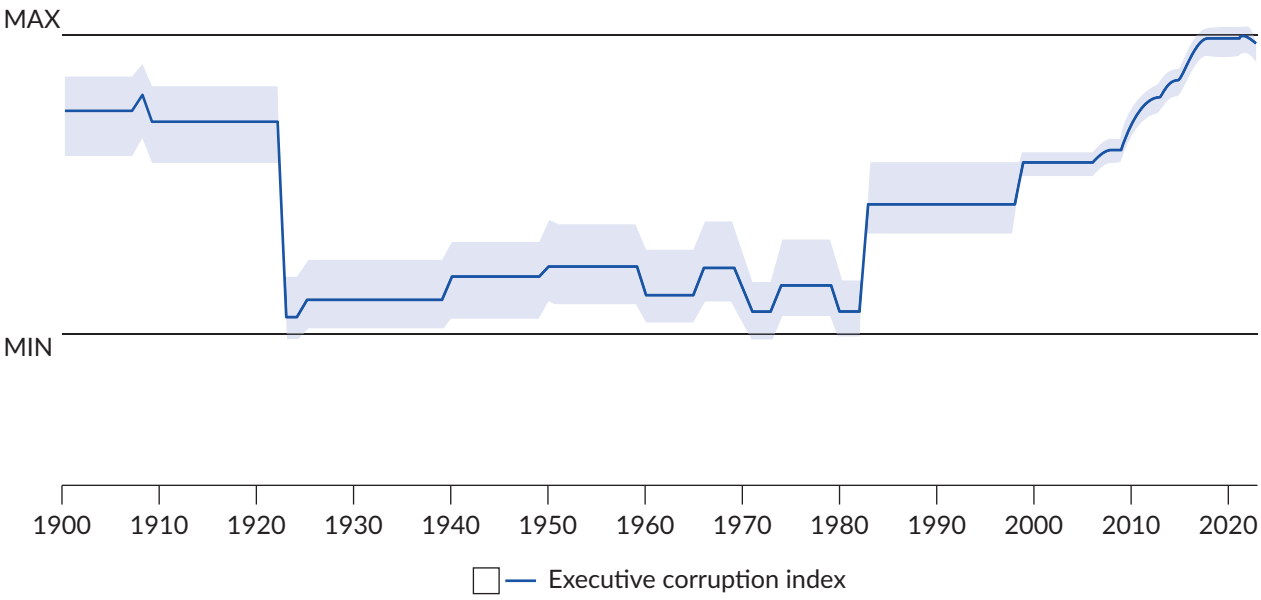

Figure 6. V-Dem executive corruption index. Source: V-Dem (n.d.).

Thus, although populists generally come to power with anti-establishment rhetoric targeting the corrupt power elite, it is not long before they use corruption as a tool and mechanism to consolidate their power and marginalize opponents. As the data and figures above show, the AKP has not been an exception to this pattern, and especially in the second decade of its rule, it has used public resources and facilities in line with the politics of inclusion/exclusion ("us" vs "them") and strengthening authoritarianism.

8. Conclusion

Although populism may offer some corrective functions for democracy, evidence from a decade of country-case studies consistently indicates that populist incumbents tend to undermine the quality of

governance and also the values of liberal democracy. Our research findings also highlight that populist leaders are among the primary drivers of democratic backsliding today. Turkey, as a country that in the first decade of the 21st century had many of the criteria for a democratic system and was a candidate for joining the EU, experienced a democratic regression in the second decade of the rule of the AKP under Erdoğan and shift towards authoritarianism and populism. Therefore, examining and assessing the reasons behind this regression was the main issue of this research. In doing so, the study, using a critical approach to populism and statistical data from sources such as the worldwide governance indicators, V-Dem, The Legatum Prosperity Index, and Freedom House, concludes that nearly all political governance indicators—especially the rule of law, institutional accountability and responsibility, respect for civil rights and freedoms, government effectiveness, and corruption control—have declined under the populist rule of Erdoğan and the AKP over the past decade (since 2013). As mentioned, according to the 2023 Legatum report, the Turkish government ranks 128th globally in governance quality, with its overall governance score dropping from 52.8 in 2013 to 36.9 in 2023. The Gezi Park protests, the failure to join the EU, and particularly the 2016 coup attempt, followed by the transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system, have dramatically revealed Erdoğan's populist tendencies as a strategy for maintaining and expanding power, mobilizing the masses, and suppressing opposition. Thus, the practical experience of the AKP's governance over the past decade supports the critical perspective of populism theorists, who argue that the rise of populist leaders and parties leads to the erosion and weakening of democratic values, norms, and institutions such as pluralism, checks and balances, the rule of law, and the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. It also undermines horizontal accountability institutions and intermediary bodies. This, in turn, creates fertile ground for widespread corruption, weakens government effectiveness and efficiency, and results in the overall deterioration of governance quality. Finally, the findings of this study, based on the Turkish sample, show that despite the expansion in the quantity of democracy, the level of democracy has been declining in many countries over the past few decades, and the quality of governance is facing serious challenges from authoritarian forces. Therefore, despite some limitations and obstacles in accessing up-to-date and reliable statistics and data on the performance of such regimes, addressing these challenges and determining how to deal with them seems essential in future research. Two key steps can strengthen research in this field. First, applying more precise measures of populism and expanding cross-regional comparisons can offer clearer evidence of its impact. Second, research designs that directly test competing causal explanations will advance both theoretical and empirical understanding.

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Conflict of Interests

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Democratic Leadership Revisited

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Abstract

Political theorists such as James MacGregor Burns (1978/2010), J. Ronald Pennock (1979), and Eric Beerbohm (2015) have argued that democratic leaders, to be democratic, must forge joint commitments with their followers before they act. But what happens when leaders act without doing so? Does this make them undemocratic? In this article, I challenge this standard, stepwise model of democratic leadership. I outline alternative models of democratic leadership that do not require leaders to forge joint commitments with their followers *before* they act. Democratic leaders must provide justifications for their actions, and they must be held accountable for them, but they might nevertheless act before they forge joint commitments with followers. In a trust-based model of democratic leadership, for example, trust functions as a temporary stand-in for justification, giving democratic leaders leeway to make decisions without first consulting their publics or forging joint commitments with them. In the hindsight model of democratic leadership, the consequences of actions can take the place of—or supplement—the justifications leaders provide. I argue that these alternative models of democratic leadership are more consistent with practices of leadership in the real world of politics. I illustrate the theory with two examples: The first focuses on Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's decision to introduce the Goods and Services Tax in 1991; the second examines German Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership during the European "migrant crisis" in 2015.

Keywords

accountability; Angela Merkel; Brian Mulroney; democracy; democratic leadership; trust; persuasion

1. Introduction

In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela (1994) explained that there "are times when a leader must move out ahead of his flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way" (p. 457). This statement challenges our notions of *democratic* leadership. Democratic leaders should do—or at least try to

do—what their people want. This basic expectation aligns with our democratic intuitions, but it also aligns with most theories of democratic leadership. Eric Beerbohm (2015), for example, argues that democratic leaders must forge joint commitments with their followers *before* they act. Democratic leaders must be authorized by their followers, and they must refrain from intentionally misleading or lying to their followers in order to forge joint commitments with them. But democratic leaders, according to this theory, must forge those joint commitments before they act.

Beerbohm's theory aligns with what I call the "standard model" of democratic leadership. According to this model, democratic leaders must decide what to do with their followers (or constituents) before taking actions to achieve shared goals. That is what makes them democratic leaders. James MacGregor Burns (1978/2010) and J. Ronald Pennock (1979) outlined theories of democratic leadership that also align with the standard model. First, democratic leaders aid the thinking of others, justify their objectives, and make plans with their followers; then they coordinate collective actions to achieve those plans.

In this article, I challenge the claim that democratic leadership, to be democratic, requires leaders to go through a stepwise process that starts with joint commitments and ends with actions. In practice, that is not how democratic leadership normally works. Democratic leaders often make promises to followers or constituents before votes are cast and before actions are taken. But even when leaders win elections (or are authorized in other ways), they rarely (if ever) act on joint commitments that have been forged with all of their constituents. Political constituencies are diverse, and the people within them disagree about what should or should not be done. Disagreement is what makes them political constituencies (e.g., Waldron, 1999, p. 102). The demands of democratic leadership thus require leaders to navigate political disagreements in order to get things done, and leaders often have to act—or decide to act—without forging joint commitments with everyone who may be affected by their actions. Furthermore, there are times when leaders need to act and large numbers of people (even majorities) actively oppose their plans, objectives, or policies. Does this make those leaders and their actions undemocratic? Not necessarily.

To explore this situation in more detail, I examine two case studies of leaders acting without first forging joint commitments with their followers. The first case focuses on Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's decision to introduce the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 1991. The second case examines German Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership during the European "migrant crisis" in 2015. Many people within these leaders' constituencies, and even within their own parties, opposed their actions—and they acted anyway. I use these cases to illustrate that democratic leadership does not always require leaders to forge joint commitments with followers before actions are taken.

The article proceeds as follows: In Section 2, I review the theoretical literature on democratic leadership, giving special attention to the theories of Burns (1978/2010), Pennock (1979), and Beerbohm (2015). I show that these theories align with a standard, stepwise model of democratic leadership. I then argue that these theories are not sufficient given the practical demands facing political leaders. Indeed, I go so far as to suggest that democratic leadership may not be possible if joint commitments between leaders and followers are required before actions are taken. In Section 3, I develop a theory of democratic leadership that does not require leaders to forge joint commitments before they act. This theory is, I argue, better attuned to the practical demands of political leadership. The theory presents three alternative models of democratic leadership: a trust model, a hindsight model, and an action model. Each is democratic but they do not require leaders to forge joint

commitments in advance of taking action. In Section 4, I use the Mulroney case to illustrate the hindsight model of leadership, and the Merkel case to illustrate the trust model of leadership. In Section 5, I conclude with some observations about democratic leadership in practice and a brief mention of Nelson Mandela to illustrate the action model of leadership.

2. The Standard Model of Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership is often understood as a stepwise process. Democratic leaders work with potential followers to identify shared commitments, aims, or objectives. They respond to the needs and demands of potential supporters while at the same time trying to persuade people to support their own aims and objectives. If leaders get enough support from potential followers—if people join their parties and vote them into office—then democratic leaders have to figure out how to put their shared plans or intentions into action. All along this pathway, followers—and publics more generally—should have opportunities to influence their leaders and accept or reject the leadership claims they make. This is the standard, stepwise model of democratic leadership.

James MacGregor Burns (1978/2010), J. Ronald Pennock (1979), and, more recently, Eric Beerbohm (2015) each articulate different versions of the standard model of democratic leadership. In Burns' theory, effective leaders leverage power resources to achieve collective goals or objectives that will elevate or change themselves and their followers in some way. Power resources include money, time, numbers, charisma, celebrity, need, identity, and conflicts, which may be leveraged to unify and mobilize potential supporters.

In Burns' theory of leadership, there is an ongoing and mutual exchange between leaders and followers. Good leaders do not merely seek to serve the existing aims or goals of potential followers. They do not simply seek power by offering followers what they think those followers might want. Doing so would be retail politics. But neither do leaders impose their own aims or objectives on potential followers. Instead, good leaders, in Burns' theory, take the aims of their followers into account, and they integrate those aims into their own objectives to forge a shared understanding of what needs to be done, of what needs to change. And then they act to make change happen.

Burns' theory of leadership is iterative. There are, or should be, regular interactions between leaders and followers as leaders seek to identify and shape shared aims and objectives while mobilizing people to act for change. Good leaders, on Burns' account, start by identifying and forging shared aims and objectives, and then they mobilize collective actions to achieve those objectives. In practice, these processes will be iterative because leaders and followers must continually adjust their aims and objectives in response to their achievements and failures. But it is clear in Burns' analysis that leaders must work with their potential followers to identify shared aims and objectives before action is taken to achieve those objectives.

J. Ronald Pennock (1979) also develops a stepwise theory of democratic leadership. He argues that leaders serve several (essential) functions in democracies, and these functions must be performed in an ordered process. The first function (or step) is to aid the thinking of others. As Pennock explains:

> In part this is simply a matter of identifying and pointing out problems for which political action is appropriate. The problems may already exist in the sense that the public welfare is in some respect

> suffering, or its improvement is being hampered; or the leader may anticipate problems. (Pennock, 1979, p. 485)

The second function (or step) "after people's opinions are formulated" is to enable those "opinions to be effective" (Pennock, 1979, p. 485). The leader, still playing the aiding-the-thinking-of-others role, helps people connect their general preferences or opinions to specific goals or actions that people might unite around. Leaders also speak for their followers. They articulate their shared preferences and opinions, and they propose specific plans for how their shared aims and objectives are to be achieved. Thus, according to Pennock (1979), the "leader's success is determined in no small measure by his ability to anticipate how his would-be followers will react to his plan" (p. 486).

The third function of leadership, and the next step in the process, is to build coalitions of others who are not yet followers but whose support will be needed if a leader's plans are to be implemented. In doing so, leaders will have to change the minds and wills of others. As Pennock (1979) explains, they may have to compromise or "alter their purposes and those of their followers" (p. 486) in order to bring others on board. Or they may be able to "discover and suggest means for integrating apparently contradictory purposes" (Pennock, 1979, p. 486) and thereby encourage those who were previously opposed to support their aims, objectives, and plans. All the tools of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise will be needed to build coalitions for action.

The fourth function of leadership in Pennock's theory has to do with translating collective agreements and shared objectives into action. The leaders must energize their followers, they must encourage them to act, and they must mobilize them to make whatever changes are needed to achieve their shared goals (Pennock, 1979, pp. 486–487).

In Pennock's account of leadership, as in Burns' theory, democratic leaders influence their potential followers while at the same time being influenced by them. Leaders and followers work together to make change happen. The stepwise processes of leadership happen over and over again as leaders and followers grapple with new political issues or collective problems, or when they fail (for whatever reasons) to achieve their shared objectives. Nevertheless, in each iteration, the stepwise character of these theories is plain to see: First, leaders aid the thinking of others, then they make specific plans with others, then they build larger coalitions, and then they finally take action.

Eric Beerbohm's (2015) theory of democratic leadership has a similar structure to that of the others. Beerbohm identifies two conditions for democratic leadership and two constraints. The first is the "commitment-setting condition" (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 642). This condition is met when leaders forge joint commitments with potential followers to achieve some shared objective. The second is the "commitment-mobilizing condition" (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 644). This condition is met when leaders "coordinate political action" aimed at achieving the joint commitments they have forged with followers. As Beerbohm explains, "the theory's core element is the creation and sustenance of joint intentional activity among followers" (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 642). Leaders make this joint intentional activity possible. In Beerbohm's theory, these two conditions for democratic leadership must be met in the prescribed order: the first, and then the second.

But leaders, to be democratic, cannot forge joint commitments in any way they might like. They have to do so in democratic conditions using democratic means. Beerbohm thus identifies two constraints on leadership practices that distinguish democratic from undemocratic leadership. The first is a "relational constraint." Leadership is undemocratic when power relations between leaders and followers are imbalanced and unauthorized by followers (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 645). Beerbohm gives the example of a prison warden engaging in "democratic" decision making with prisoners. It is not democratic leadership because of the power imbalances between prison officials and prisoners (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 645). In practice, democratic followers must be free and empowered to accept or reject the leadership claims that potential leaders make. Democratic followers will follow if they are persuaded to do so, but not otherwise. But they must also be persuaded in ways that are democratic. That is the essence of Beerbohm's "means constraint," according to which leadership practices are undemocratic if leaders deceive or otherwise manipulate followers into forging joint commitments with them (Beerbohm, 2015, p. 646). In short, democratic leaders do not lead on false pretenses or "persuade" people using lies, misinformation, or other forms of deception.

Beerbohm argues that this four-part theory can reliably distinguish democratic from undemocratic leadership. He argues that the theory avoids both the over inclusion problem—where undemocratic actions are treated by the theory as democratic—as well as the under inclusion problem—where genuine democratic leadership is not considered democratic by the theory. I agree with Beerbohm that his theory successfully avoids problems of over inclusion, but I am not convinced that it avoids problems of under inclusion. In particular, Beerbohm's suggestion that leaders must first forge joint commitments with potential followers, and then find ways of mobilizing action to achieve those commitments, excludes examples where leaders act before they have forged joint commitments—and, more subtly, where the actions of leaders help persuade people that the leader's aims or objectives, and thus their actions, are desirable in some way and worth supporting.

Furthermore, Beerbohm does not clearly specify who democratic leaders are meant to be forging joint commitments with. In other words, he does not specify who a leader's followers are. We know that the followers are people who freely choose to align with a leader and that leader's goals or objectives. For example, party members might forge joint commitments with party leaders. Or party members might make people who share their existing aims and objectives the leaders of their party.

But what happens when a leader represents a political constituency? In that position, a leader will need to serve the interests of a group of people (a city, region, or country) that does not agree with itself. If political constituencies are defined as groups of people who live together but disagree about what should be done (e.g., Waldron, 1999, p. 102), elected leaders must always act—if they are going to act—against the interests, preferences, aims, or objectives of at least some members of their constituencies.

Pennock's (1979) theory of democratic leadership addresses this problem, at least to some extent, because leaders, in his theory, must work to forge coalitions with others once they have forged joint commitments with their own followers. Nevertheless, coalitions are never comprised of whole constituencies. They are, instead, only ever as large as they need to be to make collective action possible. It seems obvious that elected leaders in all ordinary political situations must act without the explicit support of at least some of their constituents. If this is the case, and if we accept the standard model of democratic leadership, then genuinely democratic leadership, which always takes place in a political constituency that does not agree

with itself, would be an impossibility. This represents an extreme version of Beerbohm's (2015) under inclusion problem. On this account, all the actions of elected leaders, as we know them, would fail to meet the criteria of democratic leadership set out in Beerbohm's theory.

Democratic leaders owe justifications to those who will be affected by their actions. They should be in continual communication with their potential followers as they work together to forge shared plans and objectives. But in almost all cases, leaders will act before they have forged commitments with all the people who may be affected by, or represented in, their actions. Furthermore, the effects or consequences of the actions taken by leaders may themselves serve as justifications for those actions.

Democratic publics—committed followers, potential followers, and opponents—must be empowered to accept or reject their leaders and the decisions that they make. But the idea that commitment-forming processes must take place before democratic leaders can legitimately take any sort of actions is unduly restrictive—it would, in effect, mean that very few (if any) actions could be taken by democratic leaders. Leaders would be unable to respond in the moment. They would be unable to make quick decisions in emergency situations, and they would be unable to take bold actions that many people oppose but which might be precisely what is needed to serve the short- or longer-term interests of society. To render such actions democratic—and to give leadership its proper place in democratic politics—we need a theory of democratic leadership that does not require justification to (always) come before action. In the next section of the article, I explain how this might be done.

3. Democratic Leadership Revisited

Leaders who act before they have forged joint commitments with their followers (or their constituents more generally) might nevertheless be considered democratic leaders if the circumstances of their leadership meet certain criteria. I identify four criteria—(a) justification, (b) accountability, (c) trust, and (d) hindsight—but these criteria might be combined in various ways to render the actions of leaders democratic. The first criterion—justification—must go hand-in-hand with the second criterion, accountability. By justification, I mean that leaders must provide followers, and more generally, all those affected by their actions, with reasons that explain those actions in terms that the affected might plausibly accept. This is similar to what Hanna Pitkin, for example, means by explanation (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 209–210). By accountability, I mean that leaders must be subject to removal by followers and affected publics. Thus, democratic leaders must justify their actions to their constituents, and those constituents must be empowered to either accept or reject those justifications and hold their leaders accountable for their actions.

This account of democratic leadership differs from the standard models that we have just reviewed because it does not require leaders to justify their actions, and seek authorization for those actions in joint commitments, before actions are taken. If justifications are provided and followers are empowered to accept or reject the actions of their leaders, the fact that leaders took actions without or before forging joint commitments with their followers does not render their actions undemocratic. Nevertheless, justification without accountability is not enough, because that would leave democratic publics disempowered; and accountability without justification is insufficient because people need to know why their leaders have acted before they can make informed judgments of those actions.

The third criterion, trust, is a temporary replacement for justification and accountability. When we trust, we empower others to make decisions for us independently and without justification. When I hire a sitter to take care of my child, I am empowering that person to make decisions without me about something I value and care deeply about. Trust, therefore, makes us vulnerable, and as such, when we trust, we are always in danger of having our trust betrayed (e.g., Baier, 1986). In politics, (as in life more generally), trust gives others leeway to act on specific decisions without consultation, justification, or forging joint commitments. As political scientist Richard Fenno explains:

> When a constituent trusts a House member, the constituent is saying something like this: "I am willing to put myself in your hands temporarily; I know you will have opportunities to hurt me, although I many not know when those opportunities occur; I assume—and I will continue to assume until it is proven otherwise—that you will not hurt me; for the time being, then, I'm not going to worry about your behavior." (Fenno, 1978/2003, p. 56)

On this account, trust is a temporary replacement, or stand-in, for justification and accountability. But it will be democratically legitimate only to the extent that it is, in practice, temporary. Democratic followers might trust their leaders and thereby give them leeway to act without consultation, justification, and the forging of joint commitments, but followers will need future opportunities to accept or reject those leaders and the actions they have taken. If those opportunities are not realized, warranted trust, which may be democratically legitimate, will be rendered democratically illegitimate. On this account, trust is a sufficient criterion that will render leadership legitimate, but only temporarily, and only when there are future opportunities for followers to judge and accept or reject the explanations and actions of their leaders.

The fourth criterion, hindsight, may be viewed as an alternative form of justification. The familiar form of justification involves leaders articulating arguments or rationales for their actions that followers might find persuasive. As we have seen, these justifications might come either before or after actions have been taken. Hindsight, as an alternative form of justification, always happens after actions are taken. Hindsight involves assessing the real-world consequences of actions, and judging them on those grounds, rather than judging the persuasiveness of the arguments and claims leaders make to justify their actions. In some cases, the leaders who take actions may be rejected by followers, but the actions they took may be accepted and sanctioned as legitimate in subsequent, and repeated, accountability processes.

We can see how these criteria operate when we compare different models of democratic leadership. Figure 1 presents the standard model of democratic leadership, which involves a series of steps that must be taken in a specific order to render the actions of leaders democratic. Leaders must first provide justifications for actions they seek to take. They must "aid the thinking" of their followers and persuade them to forge joint commitments to act. It is only then that leaders are legitimized to act. Once leaders have acted, they might decide to justify their actions again before they are held accountable by empowered publics. We could include trust in Figure 1 but it is not relevant if Fenno (1978/2003) is right that trust is a temporary replacement for justification. Instead of trusting leaders to act without prior justifications, leaders and followers in the standard model must agree to act together before actions are taken.

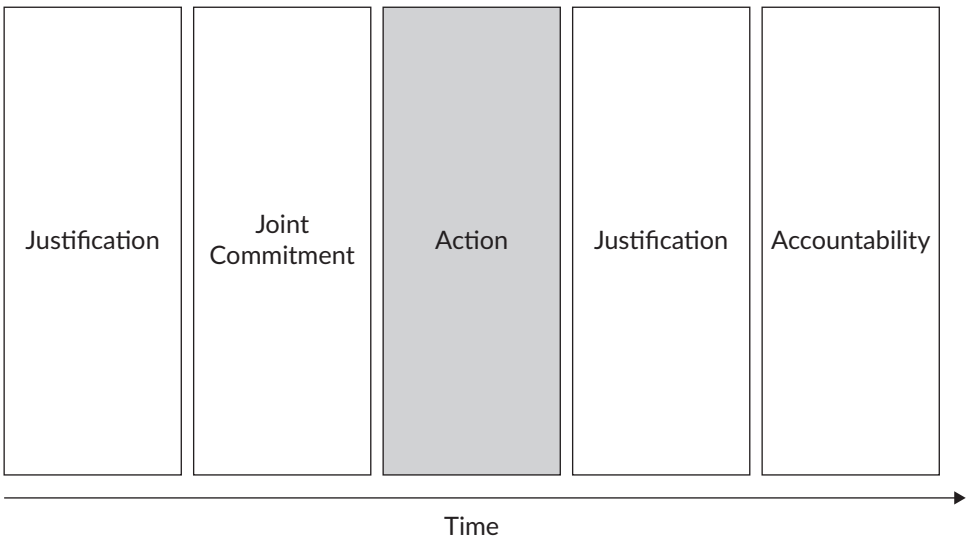

Figure 1. Standard model of democratic leadership.

Figure 2 depicts a trust-based model of democratic leadership. In this scenario, trust precedes actions that are taken before justifications are provided. This form of leadership is democratic because trust involves a willing agreement to let others act in our stead without justification for specific actions. To be democratic, trust must be empowered, conscious, and not predicated on misinformation or deception (e.g., Warren, 1999). But if trust meets these conditions, it can legitimately stand in for justification, at least temporarily. Once actions have been taken, democratic leaders should, nevertheless, justify their actions and be held accountable for them. But in this case, actions are taken before a leader justifies them to followers in a context where no joint commitments to act have been forged between leaders and followers. And yet, such a scenario is democratic because followers are free (or not) to trust, they are given justifications for actions that have been taken, and they are empowered to hold their leaders accountable for those actions.

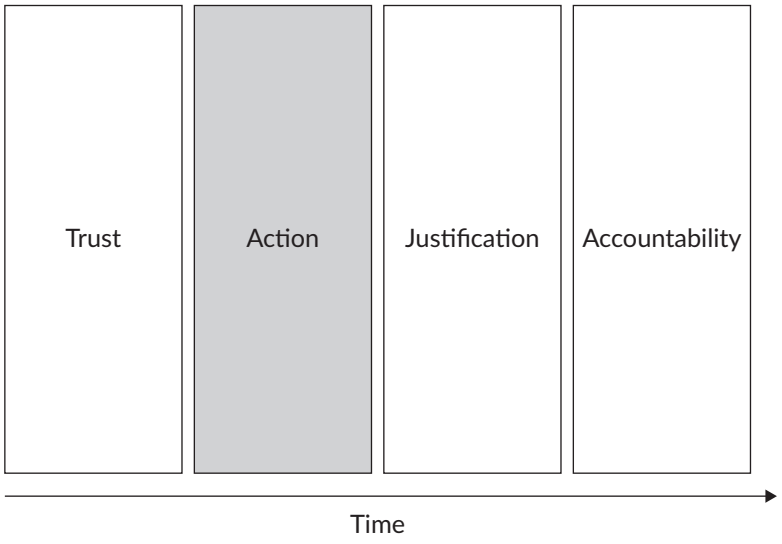

Figure 2. A trust-based model of democratic leadership.

Figure 3 extends the timeline to include hindsight. In this model, no joint commitments are forged, no justifications are provided before actions are taken, and no trust is assumed. Nevertheless, the leader takes action and is held accountable. With the benefit of hindsight, the leader's actions are reassessed and either sanctioned or not in an election or in some other accountability process where followers (or constituents more generally) are empowered to remove the leader and replace that person if they choose to do so. Let's assume, as well, that the followers are able and empowered to accept or reverse the actions their leaders have taken (they might, for example, elect a new leader who then reverses the policies adopted by the previous leader). In this model, the actions of leaders are justified (or not) by their real-world consequences and not (solely) by the rationales provided by leaders themselves. This is, nevertheless, democratic leadership because followers are empowered to make informed judgments about whether to accept or reject their leaders and their actions.

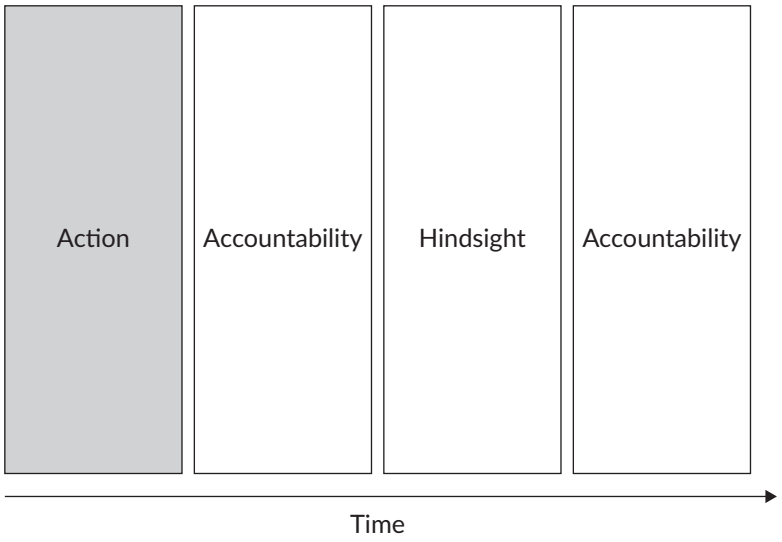

Figure 3. A hindsight model of democratic leadership.

Figure 4 presents a pure action model of democratic leadership. In this model, followers do not actively trust (or distrust) their leaders. Trust does not come into it. And there are no claims that the policies or actions adopted will, in hindsight, be vindicated (although they might be). Instead, leaders simply act. Once they have acted, they justify their actions and they are then held accountable for them.

In practice, democratic leaders will often provide justifications both before and after they act, but they are not required to do so (or forge joint commitments) before they act if they are to be held accountable after they act. This model of democratic leadership is consistent with standard models of retrospective voting, and it is consistent with Pitkin's theory of representation, in which representatives who act against the expressed preferences of (at least some) of their constituents owe those constituents retrospective justifications for their actions that track their constituents' (supposed) interests (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 209–210). The representational relationship remains democratic if constituents are empowered to hold their representatives (or leaders) accountable for those actions in elections or other empowered accountability processes. One reason to reject the actions of leaders—and the leaders themselves—might be that their actions were taken without joint commitments. But it is equally democratic for constituents (or followers) to accept the justifications leaders provide for actions already taken even in the absence of joint commitments.

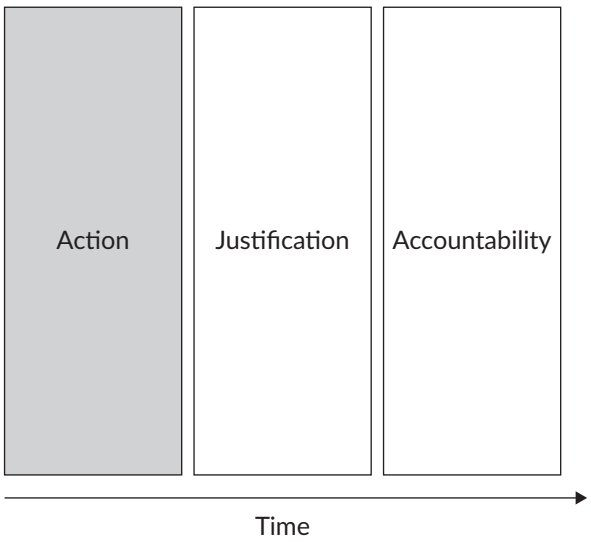

Figure 4. An action model of democratic leadership.

Justification and accountability are necessary and sufficient criteria for democratic leadership. But trust can function as a temporary stand-in for justification, and hindsight—or the real-world consequences of actions—can also stand in for the justifications or rationales provided by leaders themselves. Importantly, as Figures 2–4 illustrate, there is no requirement for justification to precede action as the standard model of democratic leadership implies. All of these models depict different forms of democratic leadership.

4. Democratic Leadership in Practice

In what follows, I briefly outline two examples of democratic leaders acting in advance of obtaining joint commitments with their followers and publics. The first case—focusing on Brian Mulroney's introduction of the GST in Canada in 1991—illustrates the hindsight model of leadership. The second case—focusing on Angela Merkel's response to the 2015 "migrant crisis" in Europe—illustrates the trust model of leadership. In both cases, the leaders acted democratically: they provided justifications for their unpopular decisions and they were held accountable for those decisions.

4.1. Mulroney and the GST

In 1991, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of the Progressive Conservative Party and his Minister of Finance, Michael Wilson, adopted the GST, which replaced the Manufacturers' Sales Tax. While the Manufacturers' Sales Tax was hidden in the cost of manufactured goods, the GST was made visible as a price added to the costs of most non-essential goods and services.

Mulroney's GST policy was one response to the massive report of the Macdonald Commission (Government of Canada, 1985), which argued that Canada's economy needed to be modernized to become more productive. Among dozens of other recommendations, the Macdonald Commission's report argued that the Canadian government should negotiate a free trade deal with the United States. This became a primary objective of the Mulroney government in the late 1980s. But Canada's tax system would have to be realigned to meet the requirements of a free trade environment. As Mulroney later explained:

> The proposed tax [the GST] had other advantages. It was consistent with a free trade environment because it provided a mechanism to remove taxes on the inputs of exported goods and service, and did not put our exports at a competitive disadvantage. It also removed a subsidy we were unwittingly providing to imports by taxing them at the value for duty as they came across the border, thus catching them before all sorts of costs were added. (Mulroney, 2007, p. 823)

Mulroney saw the GST as a crucial component of his free trade policy, but the new tax was not widely discussed—or justified—in the 1988 election campaign, which became known as the "free trade election." For example, although Michael Wilson started talking to Mulroney about the tax in 1987 (Mulroney, 2007, p. 822), the party's 1988 election manifesto made no mention of new consumption taxes (Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, 1988). Furthermore, although the election was widely regarded as a referendum on free trade, political scientist Lawrence LeDuc (1989) concluded that "the Conservative victory was achieved as much in spite of free trade as because of it" (LeDuc, 1989, p. 167). According to polls at the time, only 34% of Canadians approved of the agreement that Mulroney had negotiated with the United States (LeDuc, 1989, p. 167). As such, the 1988 election cannot be seen as a sweeping mandate from Canadians to radically modernize the economy, nor was it a mandate to introduce new consumption taxes.

Nevertheless, Mulroney and Wilson moved ahead with the GST after the election. Wilson insisted that the introduction of the tax should be combined with big reductions in personal income taxes. But Mulroney knew that even this approach would be politically toxic:

> I knew enough about politics to predict that this innovation, however neat in its design and conception, was going to cause one helluva big political row. Voters would never accept that this [the GST] was just a simple replacement for the MST [Manufacturers' Sales Tax], a tax that they had never even heard of. (Mulroney, 2007, pp. 823–824)

Initially, the government had set the GST at 9%, but it reduced the rate to 7% in response to strong opposition from retail businesses, the public, and opposition parties. This did not help. The GST was wildly unpopular, as Mulroney predicted it would be. Two Conservative members of parliament resigned from Mulroney's caucus over the tax (Simpson, 2011). By some estimates, 80% of people polled opposed the introduction of the GST (Claiborne, 1990, p. a18). Canadians did not want to pay an additional 7% on the cost of most of their goods and services. Most provinces (except for Alberta) also charge a sales tax which means that with the introduction of the GST, Canadians would be paying two sales taxes on goods and services. This was a difficult proposal for most people to accept.

Despite all of this, Mulroney's government pushed ahead with the tax. At one point, Mulroney employed an archaic constitutional rule to appoint eight additional representatives to Canada's unelected Senate in order to ensure that the GST bill would pass into law (Simpson, 2011). Some have argued that packing the Senate was an undemocratic move. Mulroney responded that allowing an unelected Senate to block the tax bill would have been a "violation of fundamental democratic principles" (Claiborne, 1990, p. a18).

Mulroney's government persisted because it believed that introducing the GST was the right thing to do. As he explained: "I knew immediately that I had a significant choice to make between the easy political way out and a policy that was good for the country" (Mulroney, 2007, p. 824). The GST would provide the federal government

with much-needed revenues to support government services, such as health care, that all Canadians rely on. But it would also help facilitate trade with the United States and enhance Canada's position within an increasingly competitive global economy (Curtis & Kingston-Riechers, 2010, p. 505).

The justifications for the GST that Mulroney and Wilson provided (after the election) did not help win support for the policy. Canadians remained strongly opposed to the tax. There were protests and rallies aimed at forcing the government to reverse course. Quebec called the tax unconstitutional. Alberta, Ontario, and British Columbia took legal action against the federal government, claiming that they were overstepping their powers of taxation.

Did Mulroney act undemocratically when he introduced the GST against the strong preferences of members of his own party and the public more generally? Not necessarily. He was acting in ways consistent with the hindsight model of democratic leadership depicted in Figure 3. He believed that the GST would, with hindsight, serve as its own justification. Its introduction was intended to function as a demonstration of the benefits of the tax itself. The tax was a form of persuasion. During an interview with Joe Chidley in 2006, Mulroney justified the GST in precisely those terms: "popularity," he explained, "is often the antithesis of leadership. Leadership is about having the capacity to look beyond tomorrow and bring in policies that will effect structural change—not for easy headlines in 10 days, but for the country in 10 years" (Mulroney, 2007, p. 44). Mulroney and Wilson were confident that Canadians would come to see, in the long run, that the GST was worth paying and maintaining. But that strategy did not help their re-election prospects.

Shortly after introducing the GST, Mulroney's popularity plummeted: "In November 1992, his popularity was a mere 12 percent—the lowest of any prime minister in Canadian history" (Hillmer & McIntosh, 2025). In February 1993, Mulroney announced his decision to leave politics and Kim Campbell became leader of the Progressive Conservative Party and Canada's first female prime minister. That did not last long. In October 1993, the Progressive Conservatives suffered the worst electoral defeat in Canadian history, going from 154 seats before the election to only 2 seats after the election. It was an electoral earthquake.

The fall of the Progressive Conservatives in 1993 cannot be wholly attributed to the introduction of the GST. Canada was in the middle of a major shakeup in the party system, with the surging Reform Party in Western Canada and the formation of the separatist Bloc Québécois in response to failed constitutional talks (e.g., Erickson, 1995). Nevertheless, the GST was a key factor in the decimation of the Progressive Conservatives. It was a major issue in the election campaign, with Jean Chretien's Liberal Party promising to eliminate the tax immediately after taking power.

Mulroney did not enjoy the trust of Canadians when he introduced the GST. Nor did he forge clear joint commitments with Canadians before introducing the tax. But his actions were not undemocratic. Mulroney did not lie, deceive, or manipulate people into supporting the tax. He provided justifications that could be reasonably defended, and Canadians were empowered to reject those justifications and Mulroney's leadership—which is exactly what happened. But Mulroney's decision to introduce the GST has been largely vindicated by history. Chretien's government never followed through on its promise to eliminate the tax. Stephen Harper's Conservative government reduced the GST from 7% to 5% between 2006 and 2008, but it did not eliminate the tax. The GST has never been popular, but Canadians have largely learned to accept it. Today, the GST is begrudgingly recognized as an essential revenue stream for the federal government. It has

been replaced in Newfoundland, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia by a Harmonized Sales Tax which combines the provincial and federal sales taxes in those provinces. But the basic idea of a federal GST is not going away.

Justin Trudeau's Liberal government implemented a brief "tax holiday" which removed the GST from selected items (including Christmas trees) between December 15, 2024, and February 14, 2025. This was interpreted by some as a desperate move by an unpopular government. It was, for example, described by Trudeau's own Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland as a "costly political gimmick" in her resignation letter (e.g., Rendell & Kirby, 2024). After the tax holiday, the GST was fully reintroduced.

Ultimately, Mulroney was right in predicting that this unpopular tax would be a net benefit to Canadians. It was introduced against the expressed wishes of most Canadians—and Mulroney paid a high political price for introducing it—but the actions that he took to establish the tax were not undemocratic. The tax itself has served to persuade Canadians (and all subsequent prime ministers) of its value and necessity. As journalist Jeffrey Simpson concluded 20 years after the introduction of the tax, and despite its unpopularity, "the GST proved to be a wise move by Brian Mulroney's government. That the tax has stood the test of time underscores its utility" (Simpson, 2011). As Mulroney himself explained in 2006:

> So, history will decide who did the right thing. I'm satisfied that we did the right thing for Canada, and on these major issues [GST and free trade], despite their unpopularity in some quarters. Because popularity has very little to do with leadership. (Chidley, 2006, p. 44).

4.2. Merkel and the European Migrant Crisis

The second case comes from Germany. During the 2010s, millions of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other conflict and war-torn areas came to Europe. Many migrants preferred to settle in Germany and France rather than in smaller European countries. This led to large numbers of refugees seeking asylum in Europe's two biggest countries. In the summer of 2015, during the height of what became known as the Syrian "migrant crisis," German Chancellor Angela Merkel made a decisive decision to adopt an open-door refugee policy. There would be no limit to the number of asylum claims that Germany would accept. The country would not allow everyone to stay; each claim would be processed and assessed on its merits, and many claims would be rejected. But Merkel made a commitment to accepting as many refugee claims as necessary with the intention of then negotiating a more equitable distribution of refugees across Europe with her counterparts in the other EU countries.

As the number of refugee claims kept rising, Merkel famously addressed the nation, saying: "I put it simply, Germany is a strong country. The motive with which we approach these matters must be: we have already managed so much, we'll manage this" (Oltermann, 2020). This last phrase, "We'll manage this"—which in German is "*Wir schaffen das*"—became a much-maligned shorthand for Merkel's open-door refugee policy.

Merkel's decision was made at a time when a new brand of right-wing—Eurosceptic—populism was emerging in Germany, but which had not yet firmly established itself. A new right-wing party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), had failed to meet the 5% threshold required to win seats in the Bundestag in the 2013 elections. The AfD strongly opposed Merkel's open-door policy. At the same time, the policy was supported by some sections of the German public. People donated money and goods, such as clothes, toys, and food,

or volunteered their time to help refugees settle (Helms et al., 2019, p. 359). But Merkel's policy was, according to Charles Lees, "far less popular with many of her own supporters" (Lees, 2018, p. 301). When Merkel failed to negotiate a new EU policy on refugees, and the number of refugees applying for asylum in Germany kept increasing, many people who had previously supported the policy came to oppose it:

> Merkel's refusal to accept an upper limit on Syrian refugees had unleashed hostility. As the summer of 2015 turned into autumn, 10,000 asylum seekers a day had arrived in Germany and political opposition to Merkel's open-door policy began to brew. The anti-euro party AfD, which had been sliding in the polls since the easing of the euro crisis, quickly switched focus to immigration and began to attract supporters. Merkel's chief opponent, Horst Seehofer of the CSU [Christian Social Union, the Bavarian sister-party of Merkel's own Christian Democratic Union], pledged to stop the migrants from coming, threatening to sue the federal government. Merkel's popularity began to wane, both in terms of recorded personal job approval ratings and the electoral performance of her party at state level. It appeared that her principles were undermining her domestic authority and thus her political interests. (Helms et al., 2019, p. 361)

Lees agrees that the 2015 migrant crisis, and Merkel's response to it, drove the radicalization—and subsequent support of the AfD (Lees, 2018, p. 307), which is now, after the 2025 German federal elections, the second largest party in the Bundestag.

The longer-term consequences of Markel's open-door policy will continue to be debated. The pertinent question here has to do with whether she acted undemocratically. It is clear that her decisions on this policy were made in a fashion that departed from her typical leadership style. Helms and van Esch describe Merkel as normally adopting "a deliberately chosen strategy of leading exceptionally cautiously, sometimes coming close to not leading at all" (Helms & van Esch, 2017, p. 39). But this was not how she led during the migrant crisis. Her leadership on this issue is described by Helms and van Esch (2017, p. 30) as "a unique break with her style."

Merkel did work with others, such as Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann, to keep Germany's and Austria's borders open during the migrant crisis (e.g., Hertner, 2022, p. 464). But in doing so, she nevertheless acted without forging joint commitments with many of her followers, and her decisions were actively opposed by many people in her own party. The party's youth organization opposed her. As did some of the party's regional associations, especially those in East Germany. Some members of her party started a new association, the WerteUnion, or Values Union, in 2017 to reaffirm the conservative values that they believed were violated by Merkel's open-door policy (Hertner, 2022, p. 474; the WerteUnion became a new party in 2024, and it is no longer associated with the Christian Social Union/Christian Democratic Union). In short, her response to the migrant crisis provoked deep dissent in her party (Helms & van Esch, 2017, p. 37).

But was this undemocratic leadership? Merkel acted decisively without first building coalitions of support among members of her party, and many people in the general public also came to oppose her decision (e.g., Helms et al., 2019, p. 361). If we accept the standard model of democratic leadership put forth by Burns (1978/2010), Pennock (1979), or Beerbohm (2015), we would have to say that this was an example of undemocratic leadership. Merkel was very clearly leading, and doing so decisively, but she was acting before she had forged joint commitments with her followers to act.

But this conclusion—that Merkel was acting undemocratically—does not feel quite right. Merkel was acting against the expressed preferences of many of her supporters, but her actions were nevertheless consistent with the trust-based model of democratic leadership depicted in Figure 2. Over the course of her entire 16 years as chancellor, Merkel enjoyed extraordinarily high levels of public trust. Using the Leadership Capital Index, van Esch (2021) shows that Merkel scored an average rating of 3.65 on a 5-point scale during her time in office. A score of three indicates that between 40% and 60% of respondents in an aggregation of polls over a period of time trusted the leader. A score of four on the measure indicates that between 60% and 80% of those surveyed trusted the leader (Bennister et al., 2017, p. 13). There were a few periods when Merkel's trust score was a three, and one of them was during the 2015 migrant crisis. For most of the rest of her term, her score on the Leadership Capital Index's trust indicator was around four. An average score of 3.65 over 16 years is unprecedented among democratic leaders (van Esch, 2021).

Indeed, Merkel enjoyed a special sort of trust among the German public. They did not always like what she was doing, or agree with her, but even those who opposed her on policy expressed trust in her leadership. As Thomas Peterson, a researcher at the Allensbach Institute, a polling organization in Germany, explained:

> There is something in [Merkel's] personality that makes people believe that Germany is in good hands with her….They don't like her very much, they don't love her. There is no obvious charisma, but at the same time people have the impression that she's responsible, she's intelligent, she rules the country more or less in a way that you can trust her. And that's a very strong position. (Horn, 2016).

The fact that Merkel was trusted by the public gave her latitude to act legitimately without first forging joint commitments with her party's followers and the public more generally. As explained above, trust can be understood as a temporary stand-in for justification and accountability. When we trust, we empower others to make decisions for us (or without us) without prior justification. We might demand justifications after the fact, and we might decide that we oppose the decisions that were made for us. But trust is an empowerment for others to act in our stead. We might say that Merkel was acting democratically when she adopted her open-door policy because—or at least *in part* because—those she was leading had already entrusted her to make independent decisions without their prior consent. They had entrusted her to do so, and their trust endured when she did so.

But trust, alone, is not sufficient to render an action democratic. In a democratic context, followers must be empowered to accept or reject the decisions that their leaders make and, to do that, they need to know why those decisions were made. That is why "action" in Figure 2 is preceded by "trust" and followed by "justification." Merkel justified her open-door policy after it was adopted. She gave a speech in the Bundestag which emphasized core European values such as freedom, unity, diversity, and solidarity. She pointed out that many of those in EU countries, such as Serbia and Croatia, who now wished to close their doors to refugees were only relatively recently escaping persecution in their own countries and seeking refuge in a united Europe. She argued that it was imperative to treat the refugees in humane ways (e.g., Jacob, 2018, pp. 224–226). During a visit to Switzerland after the announcement of her open-door policy, Merkel explained that "Germany is doing what is morally and legally required of it. Nothing more, nothing less" (Helms et al., 2019, p. 358).

And her justifications were followed by accountability. Merkel acted without forging joint commitments with her followers, but she justified her decisions to them, and they were empowered to accept or reject those justifications. Her coalition partners could have left the government if they opposed the open-door policy strongly enough. The leadership of the Christian Social Union threatened to leave the coalition but ultimately did not act on the threat (van Esch & Erasmy, 2022, p. 195). Merkel's party lost support in the 2017 federal election, but they remained the largest party in the Bundestag and formed a governing coalition with the Social Democratic Party (Lees, 2018). In 2018, Merkel announced that she would not run again, but she stayed on as chancellor until the 2021 election, completing her fourth term.

In the end, Merkel acted decisively without first forging joint commitments with her followers or the public more generally, but she did so in conditions of trust, and she followed those actions with justifications. When she was held accountable for those decisions, she retained power and a very high level of trust among voters.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have challenged the standard model of democratic leadership, according to which leaders must forge joint commitments to act with followers before any actions are taken. I have challenged the practical utility of the standard model as well. Democratic leadership does not—and cannot—work in ways that align with the demands of the standard model because political constituencies are defined by disagreement. That is what makes them political constituencies. If political leaders are to act, they will be acting without joint commitments from at least some (and sometimes a large number) of those who will be affected by their decisions. But does that make their actions undemocratic? Not necessarily. In this article, I have outlined different models of democratic leadership that involve various forms and temporal patterns of justification and accountability, but which do not require joint commitments to be forged before actions are taken.

Merkel acted on a trust-based model of democratic leadership. According to this model, trust can be viewed as a temporary alternative to justification. She acted before she had forged joint commitments with her followers, but she acted in a context of trust, and she did not neglect justification. She justified her decisions and she was held accountable for them. There were consequences: Some people left her party because they were opposed to her open-door refugee policy. The rise of the AfD in subsequent elections has been fueled, in part, by anti-immigration sentiments (e.g., Lees, 2018). But Merkel did not lose her job. The people did not reject her or her open-door policy when they had a chance to do so.

Mulroney, unlike Merkel, did not enjoy high levels of public trust when he introduced the GST in Canada. He was held accountable and his party (badly) lost the next election. But the policy itself has endured. With hindsight, it is clear that Mulroney made a bold (and politically costly) decision to introduce an unpopular tax that has produced public benefits. With hindsight and accountability, and many opportunities for subsequent governments to get rid of the tax, Mulroney's actions were vindicated.

Before concluding, it is worth considering one additional example, because it illustrates the action-based model of democratic leadership depicted in Figure 4. In 1985, Nelson Mandela negotiated with South Africa's racist apartheid government. He started the negotiations by proposing secret "talks about talks." These were to be preliminary talks about the conditions for future negotiations aimed at bringing an end to the apartheid system. Mandela felt that the talks had to be kept secret because he knew that members of his

own party—the African National Congress—would not agree to negotiations with the government, and they certainly would not agree to talk without preconditions. But Mandela also knew that the government would not talk if there were preconditions, and not talking would perpetuate the apartheid system (Read & Shapiro, 2014). This is the context of the quote that begins this article: "There are times when a leader must move out ahead of his flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way" (Mandela, 1994, p. 457).

Once Mandela had gotten the negotiations started, he justified his secret "talks about talks" to his party members. And he was accountable to them. He knew that his party would replace him if they did not agree with his initiative (Mandela, 1994, p. 457). Ultimately, he was supported by his party and his actions helped end apartheid.

Although the standard model of democratic leadership requires leaders to forge joint commitments with followers before they act, we probably do not want our leaders to be bound by this requirement. In many cases, political leaders—to really be leaders—must move out ahead of their flocks, go off in new (and possibly unpopular) directions, in order to lead their people well. Leaders who only ever act on the instructions of their publics would be delegates or "tools," to use Hanna Pitkin's (1967) phrase. Or they would be transactional leaders or retail politicians and managers, to use James MacGregor Burns' (1978/2010) language. Such leaders might fail to act when action is needed because they do not yet have joint commitments with their followers. They might not act at all because they represent constituencies that do not agree with themselves, and thus, they cannot forge joint commitments with everyone they must act for. It is safe to say that we probably want more from our leaders than that. For leaders to adequately aid the thinking of others and solve collective problems so that shared objectives can be achieved, they may have to act before they have forged joint commitments with their followers and publics. And their actions might then, as in the case of Mulroney's GST, have a persuasive force of their own. Instead of (only) making arguments, sometimes leaders must persuade through action and demonstration. They must be held accountable for their actions as well, but those actions, to have their persuasive force, may have to come before joint commitments are made.

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Trust in Political Leaders as Trustworthiness

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Terminological Difficulties

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

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

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

3. Existing Theories of Trust

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.1. Entrusting Theories of Trust

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

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

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

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

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

3.2. Trusting Theories of Trust

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

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

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

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

3.3. Trustworthy Theories of Trust

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

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

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

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

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

4. Trust in Political Leaders

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

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Politicians, Electoral Integrity, and Electoral Management Bodies: A Cross-National Study on Satisfaction With Democracy

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Abstract

Competitive elections that are free and fair are the bedrock of stable representative democracies. In this critical moment, in which there is an increase of democratic decline across states, it is imperative to (re-)examine fundamental democratic processes, like elections. In addition to citizens, politicians are key actors in the electoral process. Politicians can influence the views of citizens, make changes within political institutions, and contribute to democratic breakdown or backsliding. Therefore, understanding their views about the way democracy works is crucial. While there has been a recent increase in the scholarship on politicians' perceptions and behaviours, it has not yet considered whether aspects of the electoral process might affect politicians' democratic satisfaction. Furthermore, while the literature on citizens' democratic satisfaction is well-established, our understanding of politicians' satisfaction with democracy (SWD) is not. This article begins to address these gaps in the scholarship on SWD and politicians by examining whether electoral integrity and the characteristics of electoral management bodies influence politicians' levels of SWD. By analyzing cross-national data from The Comparative Candidates Survey covering 49 elections, in 21 countries, from 2005 to 2021, this article highlights three key findings: first, while electoral integrity affects levels of politicians' SWD, it matters more for politicians who lost the election. Second, electoral management bodies' independence does not affect politicians' levels of SWD. Third, while electoral management bodies' capacity influences politicians' levels of democratic satisfaction, the strength of the effect differs for politicians on the ideological right and left. The implications of these findings are explained in the article.

Keywords

democratic stability; electoral integrity; electoral management bodies; politicians; satisfaction with democracy

1. Introduction

The study of democracy is a vast field of political science that examines topics like the conditions of democratic consolidation (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Schedler, 1998), whether there is a relationship between democratization and economic growth (Doucouliagos & Ulubaşoğlu, 2008; Knutsen, 2012; Rueschemeyer et al., 1992), the types of outcomes that democracy produces (Gerring et al., 2022), and more recently, what might cause stable democracies to breakdown or resist decline (Carugati, 2020; Coppedge et al., 2022). With an increase of democratic decline occurring across states (Gora & de Wilde, 2022; Grillo & Prato, 2023; Mechkova et al., 2017), it is imperative for researchers to (re-)examine the processes and institutions of democratic countries in this critical moment. Past works have established the importance of competitive elections with high levels of electoral integrity (Møller & Skaaning, 2013, p. 144) and the ability of citizens to participate in those elections (Dahl, 1971) as necessary conditions for having a democratic political regime (or what Dahl calls polyarchy), and that the core aspect of the democratic process is the selection of leaders (Schumpeter, 1943). Put differently, competitive elections that are free and fair are the bedrock of democracy. However, recent research shows that democratic breakdown can occur when checks on elected leaders erode (Carugati, 2020, p. 60) and that political elites are often the drivers behind democratic backsliding (Wunsch, 2022, pp. 1–2). In addition to the powers elected officials have within political institutions, politicians more generally (candidates running in elections) can also influence the views of citizens (Bullock, 2011; Clayton et al., 2021; Zaller, 1992). Therefore, it is essential to consider the views of politicians in discussions about democratic stability and the electoral process.

Taking these points together highlights an important intersection in democratic studies that is sometimes taken for granted: elections and the key actors that participate in the electoral process (citizens and politicians) are the fundamental components of having and maintaining a stable representative democratic country. It therefore follows that the electoral process and these actors' overall satisfaction with the democratic system that they participate in are key considerations for democratic stability. However, while there is extensive literature on citizens' democratic satisfaction (see Singh & Mayne, 2023, for a recent review of this literature), we know very little about politicians' satisfaction with democracy (SWD). Although there has been a recent increase in the scholarship on politicians' perceptions and behaviours (Lucas et al., 2024; Sevenans et al., 2023; Walgrave et al., 2023), this has not included studies on SWD, or how various aspects of the electoral process (such as electoral integrity or the administration of elections by electoral management bodies [EMBs]) might affect SWD. This article therefore examines politicians' SWD and elements of the electoral process for the sake of better understanding an important component of democratic stability. It specifically investigates the following question: Does electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs affect politicians' SWD? Electoral integrity and EMBs serve as an important starting point for studying politicians' SWD, as electoral integrity is fundamental to the electoral process (and in turn, democratic stability), while the characteristics of EMBs could advance or inhibit electoral integrity. Furthermore, the article examines if other attributes of politicians (such as whether they won or lost the election and their left-to-right political ideology) might impact these effects.

Electoral integrity matters for politicians because the presence (or lack of presence) of electoral integrity during election processes provides confidence (or doubt) in the legitimacy of the election. Electoral integrity is especially important for democratic stability since it could play a pivotal role for politicians to accept the results of the election when they lose (Anderson et al., 2005, p. 4). Because electoral integrity both

legitimizes the victory or loss of politicians and helps to maintain democratic stability in the country they reside (or govern) in, the article's main expectation about electoral integrity is that politicians' SWD will be higher in countries with more electoral integrity. If the electoral process has low levels of electoral integrity (or there is the presence of electoral fraud), then politicians have reasons to doubt the outcome of elections—resulting in less democratic stability, since free and fair elections are fundamental in democratic systems. Because electoral integrity also legitimizes the victory of the winner, it is also expected that the effect of electoral integrity on SWD will be more important for winners than losers. This is based on the rationale of citizens' SWD, since citizens whose preferred choice won are usually more satisfied than citizens whose preferred choice lost (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Blais et al., 2017; Curini et al., 2012; Henderson, 2008). Since politicians occupy important positions of power in democratic systems, it is important to assess whether the connection between electoral integrity and SWD is the same for both politicians and citizens or if it differs depending on the type of actor being examined.

EMBs are tasked with organising the election process, certifying election results, and monitoring the conduct of political actors during an election (James et al., 2019). The characteristics of an EMB (its institutional design) are important for politicians because the way EMBs operate can greatly impact the legitimacy of the election process, and in turn, affect democratic stability through the presence (or lack of presence) of electoral integrity. Because of the connection between EMBs and electoral integrity, these institutions are important to examine as a key democratic safeguard. Previous work has found that when confidence in election officials decreases (or increases) there is also a decrease (or increase) in citizens' SWD at both the regional and national levels of government (Lundmark et al., 2020). This is also expected for politicians' SWD since the failure of EMBs to freely or fairly administer elections could result in electoral fraud (or at least yield lower electoral integrity). This article therefore has two main expectations about the characteristics of EMBs. First, that SWD will be higher in countries with EMBs that are more independent from the government. This is because having more independence in an EMB is more likely to create a level playing field for all politicians during elections and decreases the likeliness of government interfering in that electoral process. Second, that SWD will be higher in countries with EMBs that have a greater capacity (more resources) to administer the election since more resources should improve the administrative and procedural aspects of an election. If an EMB lacks the resources to administer elections, then its ability to conduct procedures relating to free and fair elections (such as ensuring access to the vote or counting ballots in a timely manner) may diminish. Additionally, because politicians on the ideological left are usually in favour of expanding procedures that increase voter turnout (James, 2012, p. 20), it is expected that the effect of EMB capacity on SWD will be greater for politicians on the ideological left than for those on the ideological right. The overarching rationale of the expectations for both electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs is that in most cases when electoral processes follow norms that are consistent with stable democracies—specifically, practices that allow for free and fair competitive elections—SWD will be higher.

To assess these expectations, the article uses cross-national data from The Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS) from politicians in 49 elections, across 21 countries, from 2005 to 2021. The results highlight three key findings in response to the research question. First, while politicians' SWD increases when there is more electoral integrity, the significance of the effect differs for politicians who won and lost the election. Specifically, when electoral integrity is low, politicians who lost the election will have lower levels of SWD than those who won. However, as electoral integrity increases, the SWD of losers becomes closer to that of winners. In contrast, SWD for winners remains relatively similar, irrespective of electoral integrity. This

implies that politicians care more about low levels of electoral integrity (at least in terms of their SWD) when they lose, but not when they win. Second, EMB independence from the government does not have a significant effect on politicians' SWD. While the independence of an EMB may still be important for the administration of elections, it seems to matter less for SWD once other electoral factors are considered. Third, when EMBs have a higher capacity (greater resources to administer an election), politicians' SWD will be higher. However, in contrast to what was expected from the literature, the effect of EMB capacity on SWD is greater for politicians on the ideological right than those on the ideological left.

These results are theoretically important for better understanding SWD, electoral integrity, and EMBs, but are also relevant to practitioners of politics, election officials, and those concerned with democratic stability. To present these findings, the article is divided into four more sections. In Section 2, the article's theoretical framework for the concepts of SWD, electoral integrity, and the characteristics of EMBs are presented, along with the expectations about how electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs might influence politicians' SWD. In Section 3, the methods, datasets, as well as the measurements used in the article's empirical models are explained. Section 4 shows the article's results and analysis. Finally, Section 5 provides the main findings of the analysis, its implications for democratic stability, and potential future avenues for research.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this article describes three key concepts: SWD, electoral integrity, and the characteristics of EMBs. Each concept is described in turn, along with the associated expectations for both electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs. Two hypotheses also consider whether winning or losing, as well as politicians' left-to-right political ideology, might influence the theoretical expectations about electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs. The overarching rationale of these expectations is that in most cases, when electoral processes follow norms that are consistent with stable democracies—specifically, practices that allow for free and fair competitive elections—SWD will be higher. However, this overarching expectation could be influenced by certain circumstances of politicians (such as whether politicians won or lost the election and their left-to-right political ideology).

2.1. SWD

Given there is no research on politicians' SWD (at the time of writing), a review of the vast and well-established literature on citizens' SWD provides a helpful understanding of SWD. SWD is rooted in studies on the political culture associated with democracies (Almond & Verba, 1963) and captures attitudes and feelings about how governance or politics is working. Scholars now consider SWD as a mid-level indicator of political support (Norris, 1999, p. 1), between individuals' diffuse support for regime preferences (Easton, 1975), and specific support for actors like political parties and politicians (Ferland, 2015) or evaluations of government (Weatherford, 1992). More specifically, this conceptualization of SWD assesses "how well people generally think politics or governance is working" (Singh & Mayne, 2023, p. 9) and captures an individual's "perceptions of the performance of their country's political system, which happens to be democratic" (p. 10). Several studies examine how levels of citizens' SWD are affected by their desired candidate (or party) winning or losing an election (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Blais et al., 2017; Curini et al., 2012; Henderson, 2008). Results consistently show that winners are more satisfied than losers. There is also substantial research in the SWD literature on how representation and citizens-elites ideological or policy

congruence affects citizens' SWD (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Ferland, 2016; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). At large, the literature shows that citizens feeling like their preferences are represented by political parties and governments is important for their levels of SWD. Research also exists on whether an individual's socio-demographics influences SWD, such as how Aarts et al. (2017) found that individuals with more education are typically more satisfied with democracy. Additionally, many studies have been conducted on how the quality of government and its institutions (Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014; Erlingsson et al., 2014; van Ham et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2009), as well as various electoral factors (Farrell & McAllister, 2006; Morgan-Jones & Loveless, 2023; Singh, 2018), affects citizens' SWD. Few studies have examined the connection between electoral integrity (or its antonym, electoral fraud) and SWD (Fortin-Rittberger et al., 2017), or whether the performance of EMBs might influence SWD (Lundmark et al., 2020). While these studies on citizens serve as a helpful starting point for understanding SWD relative to the electoral process, it is important to examine politicians on their own because of their distinct roles in elections. Unlike citizens, politicians are elected to, removed from, or prevented from accessing, a position of power within government following an election. This means the way in which their SWD may be influenced by electoral processes could also differ. However, while it is plausible that politicians may be affected differently than citizens, past studies on SWD only focus on citizens, so there is no guiding research that clearly indicates *how* politicians' and citizens' SWD may differ. Therefore, this article's expectations serve as a starting point for understanding how politicians' SWD may be connected to electoral processes.

2.2. Electoral Integrity

Electoral integrity is an essential aspect of the electoral process in a representative democratic system and is important for maintaining democratic stability. Electoral integrity captures several aspects of an election such as the quality, fairness, or impartiality of the election process (Schnaudt, 2023), the norms that govern elections (Norris et al., 2014), or the absence of these norms (van Ham, 2015). Norris (2014) explains that electoral integrity also legitimizes the offices of the newly elected winners and legitimizes the outcome for those who lost (p. 115), which could be pivotal for democratic stability (Anderson et al., 2005, p. 4). Additionally, when there are failures of electoral integrity, citizens' attitudes towards democracy become more negative (González et al., 2024). There are ongoing debates about how to assess if electoral integrity is present or absent in an election, for example: whether the parameters of electoral integrity are determined by international norms and standards (Norris et al., 2014), the cultural context of the country, or its public's perception (Elklit & Reynolds, 2002), or if it is rooted within democratic principles (Beetham, 1994; Garnett & James, 2021). However, there is a broad agreement that electoral integrity matters throughout several stages of the election process. Given this context, this article looks at Fortin-Rittberger et al.'s (2017) research on electoral fraud (the antithetical of electoral integrity) and citizens' SWD. Fortin-Rittberger et al.'s (2017) broad expectation was that the presence of electoral fraud should generally decrease SWD. This should also apply to politicians, who are typically favourable towards democracy (Best & Vogel, 2018), and would in turn be more satisfied when election processes reflect the norms of stable democracies. Therefore, the presence of electoral integrity should generally increase SWD:

H1a: If the level of electoral integrity is greater in a country, then politicians' SWD will be higher.

Fortin-Rittberger et al. (2017) also expected that the effect of electoral fraud on SWD would be weaker amongst citizens whose preferred choice won. This is because winners would be willing to accept the costs

of electoral fraud (and a lower-quality election) when they benefit from receiving the policy gains associated with having their preferred choice in a position of power. Yet, they found that the presence of electoral fraud resulted in lower levels of citizens' SWD for both winners and losers. Winning an election increases SWD (in comparison to losing) under the conditions of the election being administered in a free and fair manner. However, in cases when electoral fraud occurs, Fortin-Rittberger et al. (2017, p. 362) found that the winner–loser gap disappears, which suggests that both winners and losers value the absence of electoral fraud. This rationale should also extend to politicians in national elections. If politicians win (or lose) under free and fair conditions, then the legitimacy of their victory (or defeat) is less likely to be questioned. Electoral integrity helps to legitimatise the winner's elected position and limits the ability of losing politicians to blame their loss on the election process. Therefore, the following hypothesis is given with respect to the effects of electoral integrity on SWD for winners and losers:

> H1b: If the level of electoral integrity in a country affects politicians' SWD, then this effect will be greater for winners than for losers.

2.3. EMBs

EMBs are tasked with organising election processes, monitoring the conduct of actors during elections, and certifying election results (James et al., 2019). These institutions are connected to electoral integrity, as their designs can increase or impede electoral legitimacy (Langford et al., 2021), but more work is needed to better understand the connection between election administration and democratic performance (Norris, 2019, pp. 391–392). EMBs are responsible for several aspects of the electoral process that influence electoral integrity such as the rules that govern elections (Garnett & Keir, 2022, p. 333) and the counting process (Atkeson et al., 2015). The design of EMBs and how they operate can greatly impact the legitimacy of the election process, and these designs vary by country. There are seven dimensions (or characteristics) of EMBs: independence, capacity, centralisation, the scope and division of tasks, technology, personnel, and the EMB's relations with external actors (James et al., 2019). This project focuses specifically on independence and capacity (the EMB's available resources) since these two characteristics are frequently discussed in research on EMBs. Additionally, these characteristics serve as good starting points for deepening our understanding of the connection between EMBs and SWD, as it is less theoretically clear how other characteristics of EMBs might affect politicians' SWD.

An EMB's overall independence is based on different aspects of the institution, such as its institutional design, the way its personnel are chosen, how it is financed, the types of powers it has, and to whom it is accountable to (van Aaken, 2009). Independence is examined as both de jure and de facto (van Ham & Garnett, 2019). De jure independence consists of formal autonomy from the government that is recognized by law or norms, while de facto independence (independence in fact) is mediated by de jure independence as well as other variables that fall outside of the scope of EMBs (e.g., free media, civil society, and the presence of election observers). To the author's knowledge, there are no studies that examine how the independence of EMBs affects SWD, but some articles examine how the independence of EMBs might affect politicians' confidence or trust in the election process (Estévez et al., 2008; Rosas, 2010). Some research proposes that granting politicians and their political parties influence within EMBs will give political actors more confidence or trust (Estévez et al., 2008), while others like Rosas (2010) found that in most cases, politicians' confidence in elections increases when EMBs are independent. However, it should be

noted that both Estévez et al. (2008) and Rosas' (2010) research examine countries in Latin America, whose political circumstances as newer democracies differ in comparison to older democracies. Specifically, in newer democracies, there may be concerns about government control over EMBs (since these institutions have been around for less time), so political parties and politicians may trust these institutions more if they are involved in these election processes. In more established democracies, there may be fewer concerns about government control over EMBs, so these political actors might be more comfortable being less involved in electoral processes. Furthermore, even if political parties or politicians have influence within EMBs, it does not necessarily mean that *all* politicians or parties have the same level of involvement or leverage in those institutions. While there are mixed findings about the effects of EMB independence on electoral integrity (van Ham & Garnett, 2019), there is a reoccurring trend which argues that democratic countries should have EMBs that are independent of the government (Onishi, 2012, p. 62; Pal, 2016, p. 86). Overall, because having an independent EMB is more likely to create a level playing field for politicians, the article's expectation for this characteristic is as follows:

> H2: If EMB independence is greater in a country, then politicians' SWD will be higher.

The article now examines EMB capacity, which pertains to the resources it has at its disposal to deliver an election. In addition to simply being able to administer the election, "capacity further helps to ensure elections that are legitimate by improving confidence" (Langford et al., 2021, p. S65), and makes it more difficult for political actors to perform acts of electoral fraud like vote-buying (Lundstedt & Edgell, 2022). EMB capacity is therefore important for electoral integrity, and by consequence, the overall electoral process. Since giving EMBs more resources usually improves the administrative and procedural aspects of an election, it is unlikely that politicians will have higher levels of SWD if the EMB has fewer resources. Because politicians are typically favourable towards democracy (Best & Vogel, 2018), it is unlikely that they would be more satisfied with the performance of their country's political system when EMBs have a lower capacity, especially since a lower capacity could increase the likeliness of electoral fraud:

> H3a: If EMBs have greater resources in a country, then politicians' SWD will be higher.

EMB capacity also affects the ease by which citizens can access the vote. Because some politicians or political parties may attempt to (de)mobilise various groups of the electorate for the purposes of winning (Daniels, 2020, pp. 2-4; Tamas, 2023), the way EMB capacity influences a politician's SWD may vary depending on the political ideology of the politician. James (2012, p. 20) argues that in many cases, politicians on the ideological left attempt to expand procedures that increase voter turnout, while politicians on the ideological right attempt to restrict procedures that increase turnout. Even though politicians might not control the number of resources made available to EMBs, their desire to (de)mobilise various groups may play out indirectly based on the EMB's capacity. While politicians should in general be more satisfied when EMBs have a higher capacity, this effect may be greater for politicians on the ideological left:

> H3b: If EMBs having greater resources in a country affects politicians' SWD, then this effect will be greater for politicians on the ideological left than politicians on the ideological right.

3. Methodology, Datasets, and Measurements

3.1. Datasets

To test the article's expectations, I combine four distinct datasets: the CCS, the Parliaments and Governments Database (ParlGov) project, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) survey, and the Comparative Political Data Set (CPDS). The CCS is a multi-national dataset that surveys candidates running in national parliamentary elections. Module I (2005–2012; CCS, 2012) collected data from 32 elections in 24 countries, Module II (2013–2018; CCS, 2018) collected data from 30 elections in 21 countries, while Module III (2019–2024; CCS, 2024) was still in advance release at the time of writing. Due to missing observations of key variables for some elections, the analysis only considers 49 national elections from the CCS datasets between the period of 2005 to 2021. These 49 national elections occurred in the following 21 countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Therefore, the cases of this study are limited to those available in the CCS dataset. The ParlGov (Döring et al., 2022) project provides additional context about which candidates won (those whose political party formed government) and those that lost (all other candidates) for each election in the CCS datasets so that this article's dataset can determine which politicians were winners or losers in each election. The final two datasets, the V-Dem survey (Coppedge et al., 2024) and the CPDS (Klaus et al., 2022), provide country-level data for each election in the CCS dataset. The V-Dem survey is informed by responses and judgements from experts, while the CPDS uses annual data from the surveyed countries. The variables that each dataset informs are discussed throughout the remainder of this section.

3.2. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of this article, politicians' SWD, is informed by data from the core questionnaire of the CCS. The CCS datasets have the common indicator used in studies of SWD (Singh & Mayne, 2023, p. 7; Valgarðsson & Devine, 2022, p. 580) for measuring individuals' level of SWD, which is: "On the whole are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?" (The Comparative Candidates Survey, 2024, p. 17). The individual-level data from the CCS is transformed into country-election aggregated scores for the purposes of this analysis. While conducting an individual-level analysis over an aggregate-level analysis is usually ideal, missing data on several individual variables prevents the use of the former empirical strategy. Specifically, some individual-level demographic data that are generally controlled for (like age, gender, or education) are not included in some CCS national surveys for confidentiality reasons. This is because politicians are a small population and can in some cases be easily identified in surveys with their demographic data. Since these missing variables vary across countries and election years, opting for individual-level analyses would significantly reduce the number of countries that could be analyzed and would undermine the statistical power of this cross-national analysis. Conducting the analysis at the aggregate level has the advantage of circumventing this problem. Reassuringly, the article's conclusions are substantively the same when replicating the analysis at the individual level without demographic controls. The individual-level data from politicians is therefore transformed into weighted aggregate variables so that there is a single weighted mean of politicians' SWD for each country and election year (the same is done for the CCS data on politicians' self-placement on the ideological spectrum, which is discussed more in Section 3.3). Creating aggregate variables ensures that

responses from politicians can be regressed with the other variables in this study that are at the country level. Politicians' responses from the CCS are weighted by political parties within each country—based on the number of respondents in each political party relative to the total responses from politicians in that country—to adjust for any unequal number of responses from a political party within a country. In total, 26,183 observations from politicians surveyed by the CCS were used to create the aggregate variables for this article (see Supplementary Materials A for the average level of SWD by country according to the CCS data).

3.3. Independent Variables

The CCS data also informs one of the article's independent variables, where a politician self-places on a 0–10 left-to-right ideological spectrum. Additionally, by merging data from the CCS and the ParlGov datasets, the analysis can determine whether a politician's political party is part of the cabinet at the time that they responded to the CCS survey. This is important for identifying whether a politician won or lost during the election year in which they were surveyed.

As of Module III, existing CCS surveys do not pose questions about politicians' views of electoral integrity or the characteristics of EMBs in their country. Because of this, the V-Dem survey is used to measure the study's three remaining independent variables: electoral integrity, EMB independence, and EMB capacity. V-Dem is the only established dataset that has measurements of electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs for each election year that this article examines. Other datasets like the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (Garnett et al., 2024), the Electoral Learning and Capacity Building survey (Norris et al., 2016), and the Electoral Management Surveys (James & Garnett, 2023), only cover some of the election years surveyed by the CCS. Therefore, this article limits its analysis to the V-Dem dataset's country-level variables to prioritize having a larger sample size. To measure electoral integrity, V-Dem uses its electoral democracy index, which is based on five distinct indicators: freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, elected officials, and suffrage. Electoral integrity is measured on an overall score of 0 to 100. Meanwhile, EMB independence and EMB capacity are measured on an overall score of 0 to 4. EMB independence is measured by the EMB's autonomy from government when it comes to the impartial application of administrative rules and election laws in national elections, whereas EMB capacity is measured by whether the EMB has the resources and staff needed to administer a well-run national election.

3.4. Control Variables

The control variables for this study are informed by the CPDS. The CPDS provides country-level data about national institutions and economic measurements. The analysis for this article considers the following country-level controls: whether the country is a federation (federalism), whether the country has a parliamentary or mixed system (system type), the country's effective number of parties (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979), and the percentage change of the country's real GDP from the previous year for that election year. These country-level control variables were chosen because different types of political institutions might impact SWD differently (van Ham et al., 2017) and perceptions of the economy can influence democratic satisfaction (Kim, 2009). For federalism, any country that was categorized as having either "weak federalism" or "strong federalism" was coded as a federal country. Because the CCS dataset only surveys countries with parliamentary systems (meaning these countries are either full parliamentary systems or mixed systems with

some parliamentary characteristics), the variable "system type" is recoded to identify whether a country has either a full parliamentary system or a mixed system (semi-presidential or hybrid). Because full presidential systems are not captured by the CCS, presidential systems are not included within the scope of this study. If cross-national data on politicians' SWD in presidential systems becomes available, then future articles might consider whether these results change in presidential systems. Readers interested in seeing a table containing the complete list of the main variables for this study may consult Supplementary Materials B.

3.5. Empirical Models

To investigate whether politicians' levels of SWD are influenced by electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs, a series of OLS regressions are estimated using the previously listed variables. The analysis covers 49 observations (49 elections across 21 countries). Each observation represents an election, consisting of an aggregation of politicians' responses and country-level variables. However, due to missing responses in some elections for winning or losing, and politicians' political ideology, some models contain fewer observations. Specifically, the model assessing the conditional effects of winning or losing (Table 2) uses 44 observations, while the model examining the conditional effects of politicians' left-to-right political ideology (Table 3) uses 47 observations.

4. Results

4.1. The Effects of Electoral Integrity, EMB Independence, and EMB Capacity

In Table 1, the results of the linear regression of politicians' level of SWD on electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs are shown. Each column adds a variable of interest to control for (EMB independence in column two, EMB capacity in column three, and the remaining control variables in column four). Overall, the adjusted R-squared indicates that the models adequately explain the variation in levels of politicians' SWD in the countries being analyzed.

Table 1. Explaining politicians' SWD.

	(1) Integrity	(2) Independence	(3) Capacity	(4) Controls
Electoral Integrity	0.03 (0.01)***			0.03 (0.01)**
EMB Independence		0.28 (0.16)*		−0.22 (0.20)
EMB Capacity			0.75 (0.20)***	0.58 (0.23)**
Federalism				0.19 (0.10)*
Mixed System				0.17 (0.09)*
Effective Number of Parties				−0.05 (0.03)*
GDP				0.04 (0.02)**
Constant	−0.18 (0.44)	1.54 (0.56)***	−0.29 (0.74)	−1.81 (0.96)*
N	49	49	49	49
adj. R-sq	0.160	0.025	0.219	0.394

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

The results confirm that politicians' SWD will be higher in countries with more electoral integrity (H1a) when other factors are held constant. As expected, the effect of electoral integrity on politicians' SWD is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$) in both models. In the final regression with each independent and control variable included, politicians' SWD increases by 0.03 points ($p < 0.05$) along each point of electoral integrity on the x-axis (0 to 100). Furthermore, a multicollinearity test indicates that there is a low level of multicollinearity in the final model (mean VIF of 1.52). The substantive effect of electoral integrity is illustrated in Figure 1. The graph shows that levels of SWD are just under two out of four points for elections with a low level of electoral integrity (score of 70) while just above 2.5 for elections with a high score of electoral integrity (90).

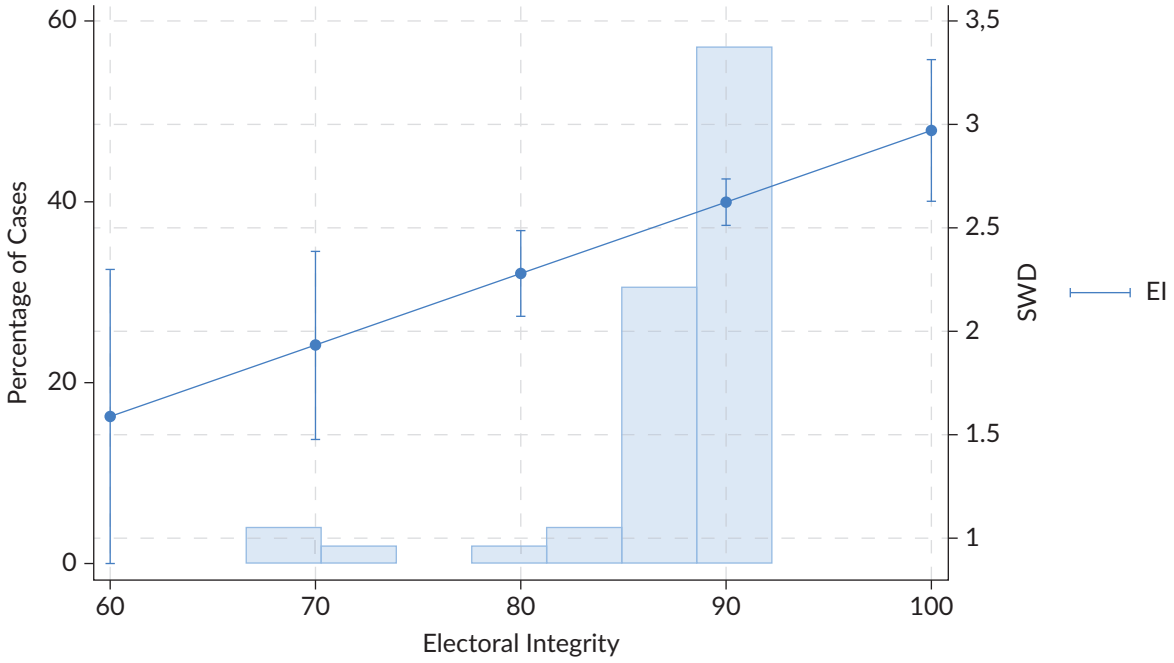

Figure 1. Predicted values of SWD across electoral integrity. Note: The rectangular bars represent the percentage of cases along the x-axis, while the vertical lines at each point represent 95% confidence intervals.

Moving to the effects of the characteristics of EMBs on SWD, the results in column two of Table 1 indicate that EMB independence does not substantially influence politicians' SWD. While the effects of EMB independence on SWD are initially somewhat significant in column two ($p < 0.10$) when regressed individually, the effect is no longer significant once the remaining variables are added in column four. Therefore, H2 is not supported.

In contrast, the results for column three of Table 1 show that the effect of EMB capacity on politicians' SWD is positive and as expected, statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). The effect also holds when controlling for additional variables in column four ($p < 0.05$). This confirms that politicians' SWD will be higher in countries with EMBs that have greater resources (H3a).

4.2. The Conditional Effect of Winning/Losing

Next, the effects of the interaction between winning or losing on electoral integrity, and whether this interaction might influence politicians' levels of SWD (H1b) are examined. "Winners" are politicians whose

political party is part of the cabinet while "losers" are all other politicians in the sample. Two aggregate dependent variables are created to test whether the effect of electoral integrity is greater for winners than losers: the first is the mean of SWD among winners within each country-election, and the second is the mean of SWD among losers within each country-election. Each country's average SWD for winners and losers are weighted to ensure that any political party is not over or underrepresented. This makes it possible to test for the effect of electoral integrity on the SWD of winners and losers respectively.

Table 2 replicates the same model of column four from Table 1, but for winners and then for losers. The model considers 44 elections instead of all 49 elections because in five country-level observations (Canada in 2008, Czech Republic in 2017, Greece in 2012, Iceland in 2016, and Romania in 2016) there were no responses from politicians whose political party formed cabinet (winners). However, even if these five observations are included, the overall effect of electoral integrity on winners' and losers' SWD does not change substantially (see Supplementary Materials C for the model with all 49 elections). The results in Table 2 show that while the effect of electoral integrity on winners' SWD is not significant, electoral integrity is significant for losers ($p < 0.05$) and increases their SWD by a coefficient of 0.05. This goes against what was expected for H1b.

Table 2. The effect of electoral integrity on winners' and losers' SWD.

	(1) Winner	(2) Loser
Electoral Integrity	0.01 (0.01)	0.05 (0.02)**
EMB Independence	−0.08 (0.18)	−0.24 (0.24)
EMB Capacity	0.29 (0.25)	0.66 (0.29)**
Federalism	0.25 (0.11)**	0.15 (0.11)
Mixed System	−0.04 (0.11)	0.21 (0.10)**
Effective Number of Parties	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)*
GDP	0.04 (0.02)**	0.03 (0.02)
Constant	1.42 (1.22)	−3.48 (1.96)*
N	44	44
adj. R-sq	0.159	0.411

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 2 displays how levels of SWD for winners and losers change as the score of electoral integrity increases. When electoral integrity is low, losers are significantly less satisfied than winners on average. However, once electoral integrity is higher, losers have closer levels of SWD to winners, whereas winners' SWD does not change substantially across electoral integrity scores. This implies that so long as politicians win, they are more satisfied with democracy, even if the elections in their country have lower electoral integrity. This finding differs from what occurs with citizens' SWD and electoral integrity. In contrast, both citizens who won and lost value the absence of electoral fraud when it comes to their SWD (Fortin-Rittberger et al., 2017), whereas politicians who won appear to be agnostic on electoral integrity, at least when it comes to their own SWD.

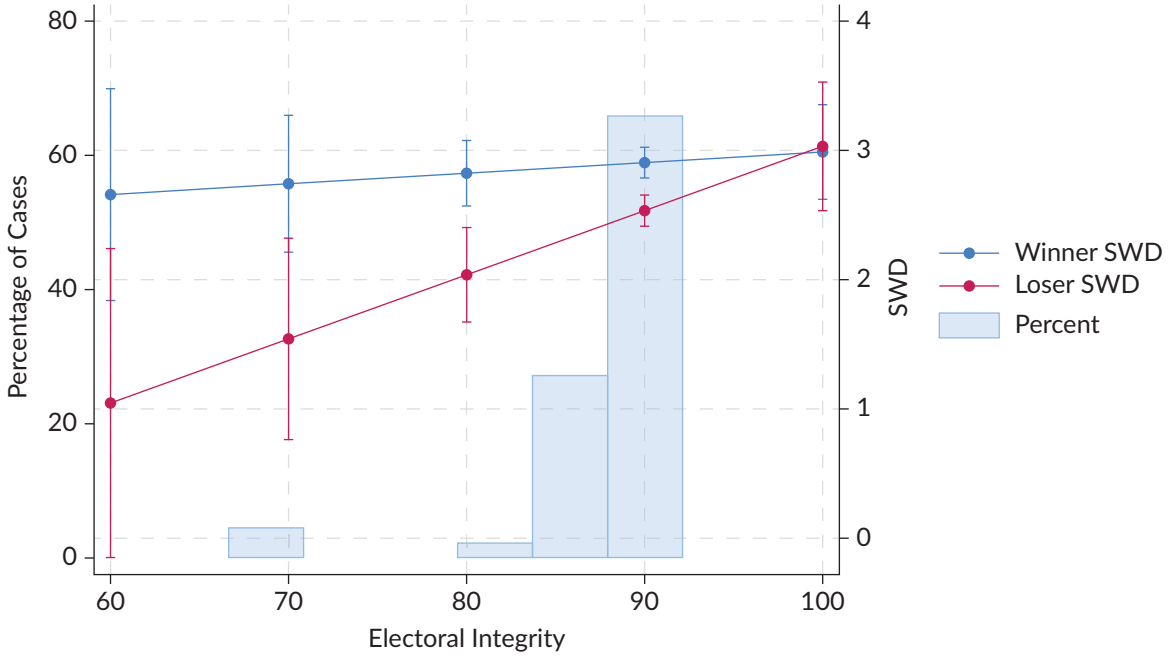

Figure 2. Predicted values of SWD across electoral integrity (for winners and losers). Note: The rectangular bars represent the percentage of cases along the x-axis, while the vertical lines at each point represent 95% confidence intervals.

4.3. The Conditional Effect of Left-to-Right Political Ideology

The final model examines whether politicians' position on the left-to-right ideological spectrum influences the effect of EMB capacity on politicians' SWD. Politicians self-rank their ideological position on a scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right), with 5 being the ideological centre. This expectation is tested using the same method that was used for the conditional role of winning or losing. For these models, two aggregate dependent variables were calculated: the first is the mean level of SWD for politicians on the left (0–4), and the second is the mean level of SWD for politicians on the right (6–10). Because the rank of five is the exact cutoff point on the scale, politicians who self-placed at five were excluded from both measures since they represent the centre of the ideological spectrum. Even if politicians who self-placed at the rank of five are included, the results do not change substantially (see Supplementary Materials D for this model). Each country's averages are once again weighted to ensure any political party is not over or underrepresented. The model only contains 47 out of the 49 elections since political ideology is excluded from the surveys for Finland in 2007 and New Zealand in 2011. The effect of EMB capacity on SWD for left-wing and right-wing politicians is subsequently regressed.

The results in Table 3 indicate that while EMB capacity is not significant for politicians on the ideological left, it is significant ($p < 0.05$) for politicians on the ideological right. These findings reject the article's final expectation (H3b). Interestingly, this means that we should instead expect that in countries with EMBs that have greater resources, SWD will be greater for politicians on the ideological right. Figure 3 displays how levels of SWD change across the score of EMB capacity for politicians on the ideological left and right. When EMB capacity is lower, levels of SWD for leftist and rightist politicians are similar. While SWD increases for both politicians on the left and right as EMB capacity increases, it does not increase at a significant rate for politicians on the left, whereas it does for politicians on the right.

Table 3. EMB capacity on SWD for politicians on the ideological left and right.

	(1) Left SWD	(2) Right SWD
EMB Capacity	0.20 (0.32)	0.67 (0.31)**
Electoral Integrity	0.04 (0.02)**	0.02 (0.01)*
EMB Independence	−0.21 (0.24)	−0.12 (0.22)
Federalism	0.12 (0.10)	0.20 (0.11)*
Mixed System	0.15 (0.10)	0.15 (0.11)
Effective Number of Parties	0.01 (0.02)	−0.09 (0.04)**
GDP	0.03 (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)**
Constant	−1.39 (1.78)	−1.30 (0.86)
N	47	47
adj. R-sq	0.237	0.305

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

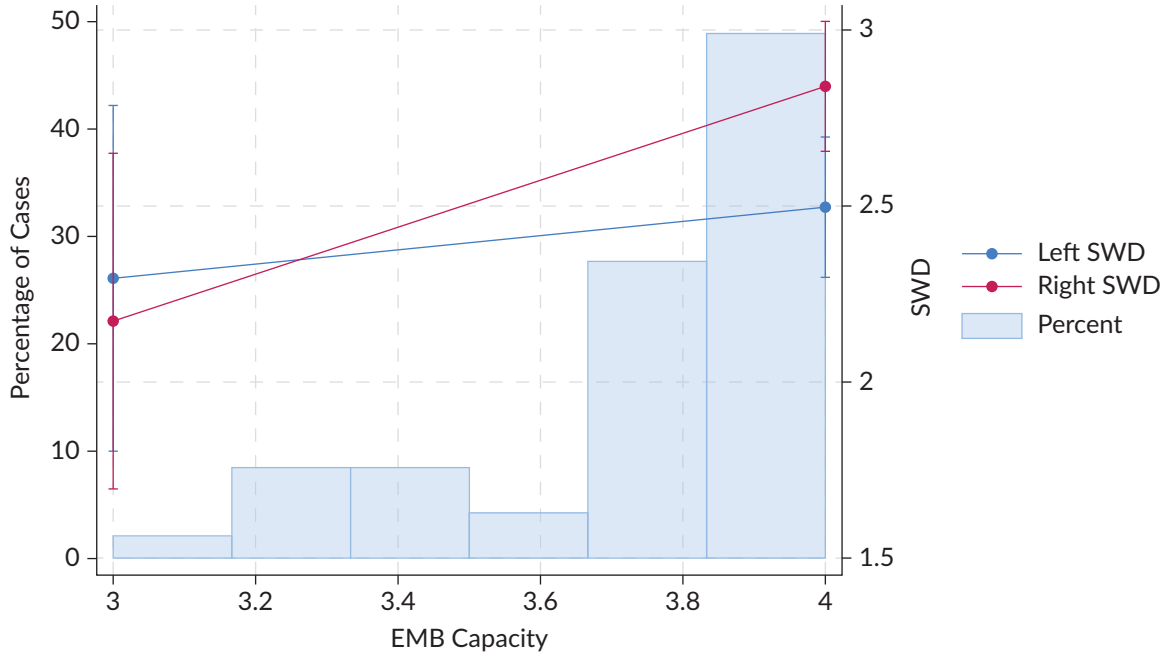

Figure 3. Predicted values of SWD across EMB capacity (for left-to-right ideology). Note: The rectangular bars represent the percentage of cases along the x-axis, while the vertical lines at each point represent 95% confidence intervals.

These findings are in direct contrast to what was expected. James's (2012) argument about politicians and voter turnout states that politicians on the right attempt to restrict voting procedures that increase turnout, while those on the left attempt to expand procedures that increase turnout. Because more resources result in better election procedures (which helps to expand voting procedures or access to the vote), it would be expected that those interested in having lower turnout would be more satisfied when EMBs have fewer resources. Interestingly, electoral integrity is significant ($p < 0.05$) for politicians on the left (coefficient: 0.04) while only somewhat significant ($p < 0.10$) for politicians on the right (coefficient: 0.02). While both electoral integrity and EMB capacity are important for free and fair elections, future work should continue to examine

the relationship between a politician's political ideology and which part(s) of the election process concerns them most.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article serves as a starting point for developing theories about the relationships between politicians' SWD, electoral integrity, and the characteristics of EMBs. It examined whether electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs affect cross-national levels of politicians' SWD. Overall, it finds that electoral integrity and at least one characteristic of EMBs influence cross-national levels of politicians' SWD. Because of the limited available data on politicians' perceptions of electoral integrity and the characteristics of EMBs, future research should build on this article by surveying politicians about these topics in conjunction with questions about SWD, to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms at work. These findings therefore serve as a starting point to help address a major gap in the SWD literature and have important implications for discussions on democratic stability. Both topics are highlighted by the article's key three findings.

First, levels of politicians' SWD are higher in countries with higher electoral integrity. However, the impacts of electoral integrity on politicians' SWD are not the same among all politicians. Specifically, when electoral integrity is lower in a country, politicians who lost the election have significantly lower levels of SWD than winners. When electoral integrity is higher in a country, losers' SWD increases. Politicians that won therefore have much higher levels of SWD relative to losers when electoral integrity is low. This result should concern readers: politicians care more about electoral integrity (in relation to their own SWD) when they lose, while politicians who win are not as substantially concerned about the way democracy is working in relation to the integrity of the election. Since low levels of electoral integrity negatively effects SWD for citizens regardless of winning or losing (Fortin-Rittberger et al., 2017), these results highlight a key difference between citizens' and politicians' SWD in the context of elections. Interestingly, this finding about politicians matches Fortin-Rittberger et al.'s (2017, p. 353) original rationale about winning being more important than electoral fairness for SWD. While this rationale is rejected when examining citizens, it holds for politicians, inferring that when politicians win, their commitments to electoral fairness are weaker than their equivalent citizens. This is important because politicians can influence institutional processes in their country (Friedman & Wong, 2008), yet winners in elections are less supportive of changes to institutions (Bowler et al., 2006). If politicians are less concerned about electoral integrity so long as they win, then they might (further) lack the incentive to change electoral processes when electoral integrity is low. This is not an issue when electoral integrity in a country is high but could make maintaining democratic stability more difficult when electoral processes are weaker since politicians that won would be less concerned about issues of electoral integrity.

The second key finding is that after considering the article's control variables, EMB independence from the government does not significantly influence the average level of SWD of politicians in the surveyed countries. Because there are contradictory theories in the literature about how an EMB's independence might affect politicians' confidence or trust in the election process (Estévez et al., 2008; Rosas, 2010), it may not be surprising that there are no significant results about the relationship between EMB independence and politicians' levels of SWD. Yet, there is also a convention among both practitioners and academics that having an independent EMB is part of the ideal of election management since it better enables election officials to impartially and neutrally administer elections (Garnett, 2022, p. 148; Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002,

p. 15). While the independence of EMBs may still be important administratively, it seems to matter less for SWD once other factors are considered. However, it is difficult to provide definitive reasoning to explain the lack of significant results given the available data. Future studies could therefore assess politicians' perceptions of their country's EMB(s) independence to better understand this relationship.

The third and final key finding of this article is that the level of politicians' SWD increases in countries with EMBs that have a higher capacity (greater resources) to administer elections. EMB capacity may significantly influence politicians' levels of SWD (in contrast to EMB independence) because the relationship between an EMB's capacity and the quality of the election processes is clearer (more resources means that the EMB has a higher capacity to prevent malpractice or electoral fraud). However, it is important to note that a politician's position on the left-to-right ideological spectrum influences the degree to which EMB capacity has a positive effect on their SWD. In contrast to what was expected from the literature, the effect of EMB capacity on SWD is greater for politicians on the ideological right than those on the ideological left (since the effect is not significant for politicians on the left). Future work could assess why EMB capacity might be more important for politicians' SWD on the right than those on the left.

In conclusion, while these findings serve as a starting point for examining the relationships between politicians' SWD, electoral integrity, and the characteristics of EMBs, more work must be done by assessing the individual opinions of politicians about these electoral determinants. More broadly, understanding these relationships is important for the study of democratic stability, especially as more countries experience some form of democratic decline. Because politicians can influence the views of citizens and the processes of democratic institutions, it is crucial that we better understand their attitudes towards both the electoral process and the way that democracy works in their country. Future research might also consider whether other democratic-related determinants like legislative processes, political institutions, and party politics, influence politicians' SWD. While these attitudes may not be concerning when representative democratic systems are working as intended, they can become harmful in cases where democratic processes begin to weaken or fail. In this critical moment for democracy, it is imperative that researchers (re-)examine the processes and institutions of democratic countries—this must also include a better understanding of the politicians that lead these systems.

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Conflict of Interests

Valere Gaspard is a part-time employee at Elections Canada. His views do not reflect those of his employer.

Data Availability

Replication files are available in the Harvard Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VUWCLV

Supplementary Material

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

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