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# A behavioral foundation for understanding unethical populist leadership

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This contribution is set up as a conceptual paper aimed at the development of a framework for a behavioral explanation and a moral assessment of populist leadership.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A literature review is performed, resulting in 16 propositions. The propositions can be used for a QCA study.

**Findings** – The framework is conceptually extended to the exercise of control by trust and distrust in the relation between leaders and potential followers. The dominance of symbolic expressions in the contest for leadership is covered by the theory of social comparison. These concepts help to explain why and how specifically unethical populist politicians gain advantages over ethical populist and non-populist competitors.

**Research limitations/implications** – The propositions are still conceptual in nature. A research design is not yet developed just like testable hypotheses and measures.

**Practical implications** – The paper offers a new and comprehensive approach for understanding and moral assessment of populist leaders.

**Social implications** – The paper offers new ideas for the response from constitutional democracies on the threats of unethical populist leaders.

**Originality/value** – A behavioral approach to populism and unethical leadership is provided. New is the integration of psychological fields of personality, social motivation, perceptions of control, trust and distrust dynamics and social comparison processes. The integration led to a considerable reduction of theory to explain human agency and leadership.

**Keywords** Ethical leadership, Leader-member exchange, Leader traits, Political leadership, Toxic leadership, Trust

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

This conceptual paper aims to develop a framework for a behavioral explanation and moral assessment of populist leadership. A heated debate is ongoing in countries where populism appears to offer a window of opportunity to transform fragile and stagnating democracies into authoritarian or even totalitarian regimes (Panizza and Miorelli, 2009; Loewenstein, 2013; Weyland, 2021; Diehl, 2024). Populism is a contested concept. A common element is that supporters are receptive to the narrative that good people suffer under the policies of a corrupt elite with vested interests. This opposition reflects a Manichean worldview (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). It is important to distinguish between populism as a movement, an ideology, and a practice (Laclau, 2005). Some movements emerge and operate without distinct leaders (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). Where politicians do take the lead, their styles vary considerably (MacDonald, 2019; Pappas, 2015). Populism and democracy differ in their normative foundations, although both appeal to the collective will of the people (Panizza and Miorelli, 2009). In contrast to populism, constitutional democracies include safeguards to protect the interests and human rights of minority groups. Essential to democracies are safeguards such as the separation of powers (*Trias Politica*) that institute a system of checks



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and balances (Panizza and Miorelli, 2009). However, there are populist leaders who, whether in coalition or in majority positions, try to dismantle the safeguards of constitutional democracies (Panizza and Miorelli, 2009; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; Weyland, 2021; Diehl, 2024). What may begin as a movement to give voice to people who feel excluded and unrepresented by established political parties can evolve into a situation where dissent is no longer tolerated. Populist leaders who claim to rule in the name of the people may turn into indisputable sovereigns (Panizza and Miorelli, 2009). Weyland (2021) asserts that these leaders behave as selfish, opportunistic agents with deliberate strategies. In the end, the collective will of the people becomes subject to the will of an unethical leader, often with detrimental consequences. It is plausible to argue that the movement, ideology, and practice of populism have drifted apart. At its core, the integrity of populism has been compromised by the behavior of unethical leaders.

Thus, this study can be classified within a specific strand of research—namely populism as a pathology of democracy (see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). However, different lenses have been applied. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a form of unethical leadership behavior. This framework is generic and applicable to various instances of unethical leadership. A conceptual framework is derived from a review of literature on personality, motivational, psychological, sociopsychological, sociological, and institutional phenomena. Where relevant and promising, recent biological and socio-ecological substantiations are included in the framework. The framework focuses specifically on leadership and ethics. Its underlying aim is the theoretical integration of concepts and insights from disciplines that address human behavior. This integration offers a considerable reduction in the approach of human agency.

This study addresses the need for a behavioral foundation in the investigation of populism, particularly addressing the emotional aspects of populist leadership. This contribution approaches such aspects through the lens of offensive personality traits, the need for affiliation, and the distinction between System 1 and System 2 cognitive processing. The literature highlights gender differences in several key processes, indicating that males are more prone to offensive behavior, moral dissociation, and escalation. The gender factor can be attributed to both unethical populist leaders and their followers.

### **Structure, conceptual coherence, and normative principles**

A preliminary assumption is that human behavior is a whole. It integrates personality, social motivation, perceptions of control, and social interactions within dyadic relations and exchanges in sociopsychological fields. Given this focus, these interactions are presented within the framework of leader–follower relations, drawing on the literature concerning the dynamics of trust and distrust. The interactions among leaders, followers, audiences, and authorities are based on the theory of social comparison processes. The level of analysis is at the (inter)personal level. In the section on trust and distrust, an organizational account is used (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). However, the concepts of benevolence, competence, and integrity are applicable at both lower and higher levels of analysis.

The problematic leadership of some populists can be studied using the toxic triangle framework by Padilla *et al.* (2007). The toxic triangle is a descriptive framework that outlines attributes for each of the following three components: leader, followers, and environment. The aim of this study is to shed light on the interactions between these components. For this reason, a more explanatory framework is developed in this paper. Brown and Treviño (2006) propose a comparable framework. However, they focus on the relationship between ethical leaders and followers in workplaces. Referring to psychological scales and questionnaires, they use attributes similar to those used in this study. In a study examining the differences between populists and other politicians, Nai and Martínez i Coma (2019) apply a framework combining the Big Five of psychology with the so-called Dark Triad (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism). The Big Five is based on descriptive character attributions through

self-reports and other reports (Hough, 1992). Furthermore, the Big Five include character and temperament traits (Carver and Scheier, 2000). Two of the Big Five traits—extraversion and neuroticism/emotionality—are less extreme expressions of pathological phenomena (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1967; Eysenck, 1994). By presenting these concepts side by side, the connections between them remain unspecified. Therefore, this framework is less suitable for explaining the unethical behavior of leaders.

Figure 1 presents the structure of the framework. In this presentation, the leadership triangle of Padilla *et al.* (2007), comprising a leader, followers, and environment, is used as a template. Since populists and their supporters fiercely oppose other leaders and their alleged followers, these two subjects are added to the triangle. The concentric circles around the leader, followers, and environment represent the main elements and sections of the framework. The idea is that behavior originates from the center and progresses stepwise from internal to external. The most salient behavioral expressions are presented at the arrows.

The main elements of this framework are developed in five sections. Each section contains propositions regarding instances of unethical behavior that can be derived from the relevant literature. Table 1 provides a preview of the lines of argument, core concepts, key features of unethical behavior, and the corresponding proposition numbers.

This paper applies concepts from several scientific disciplines. It is based on the conviction that an integrative approach will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior, including its darker aspects. However, the respective bodies of literature are often incongruent. For this reason, Carver and Scheier (2000) divide psychology disciplines into separate perspectives. In contrast, Heckhausen and Heckhausen (2018) propose an integrated expectancy-value model that bridges traits, social needs, trust, and situational factors in both *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluations. In developmental psychology, aggression and authoritarianism are linked to three social needs and social comparison processes (Veroff and Veroff, 1980). Furthermore, connections between psychological, sociological, and social-psychological concepts are supported by multidisciplinary scholars who have drawn similar links. For example, legal philosopher Luhmann connects perceptions of control, informational

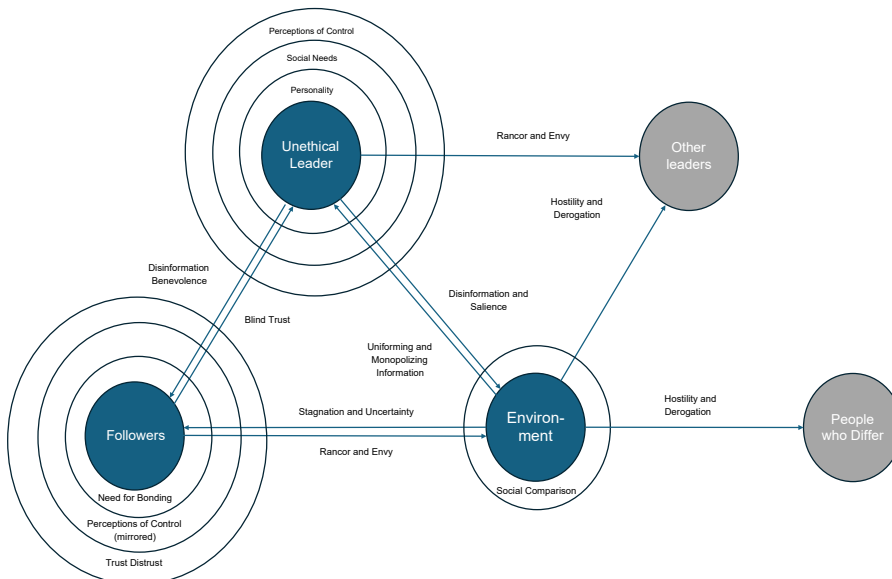


Figure 1. The main elements of the framework projected on the leadership triangle. Created by author

**Table 1.** Elaboration of the five main elements of the framework

Main elements of framework	Line of argument	Concepts	Key features unethical behavior	Proposition no.
Personality	Narcissisms and Anti-social disorders joined in analysis Degree of behavioral expression depends on motivation and situation Normal trait extraversion include indicators for unethical behavior as well	Narcissistic disorder	Entitlement, lack of empathy and sacrificing people	1
		Anti-social disorder	Law-breaking, recklessness, lying, and emotional manipulation	2
		Situational narcissism	Self-advancement, hostility, irrationality and denial of events	3
		Extraversion	Absence of doubt and shame	4
Social needs	Selfish instead of socialized phenotypes of the needs for power, achievement, and affiliation	Personalized power	Retaliation toward opponents	5
		Performance goal orientation	Manipulation of the judgments on achievements through exchange of false information	6
		Need for bonding and instrumental need for intimacy	Instigation of hostility by exchange of rancor and envy	7
Perceptions of control	Relations with followers and the environment are approached through perceptions of control Leaders instigate mirrored perceptions of control among followers. The selection and sequence of the perceptions of control emerge from a personalized need for power	Anticipation of non-enforcement, example for sucker-effect	Gaining a rise in status by norm violations and law-breaking	8
		Illusion of control, relinquishment of control	Irresponsible acts in the belief to be invulnerable	9
		Sel-serving short-term locus of control	Blaming others for negative expectations and outcomes	10
Trust Distrust interaction	This section explains how people come to rely on untrustworthy leaders. Some leaders display trust at their approach of followers but behave thereafter untrustworthy	Disinformation	Distribution of disinformation and fueling of distrust	11
		Blind trust through profound distrust Benevolence without integrity and competence	Acquiring blind trust among followers Abuse of trust	12 13
Social comparison	Prevalence of opinion formation over growth of abilities cause further stagnation. Social comparison processes reinforce polarization and hostility to those who differ. Traditional and social media favor leaders with self-serving and short-term power strategies and a sense for symbolic expressions that pretend decisiveness	Inner-circle members and force to uniformity	Homogenizing and polarization of opinions	14
		Hostility and derogation	People who differ in abilities and opinions are mistreated	15
		Monopolizing media toward a dominance of system one reasoning	Hostility toward people and groups who search for verification of claims and outcomes	16

**Source(s):** Created by the author

complexity, and the rationality of personal and social systems to trust (Luhmann, 1968, 1973, 1995). In his later work, the mechanism of self-reference is introduced synchronously with the discovery of mirror neurons. Festinger and Schachter combine social psychology with social network analysis (Festinger *et al.*, 1950). Schachter also lays a foundation for the psychology of affiliation (Schachter, 1959). Notably, these authors contributed to a study of believers in the Doomsday theory (Festinger *et al.*, 1956).

Conceptual coherence is maintained throughout the development of these sections. The concept of personality forms the basis for personalized phenotypes of the three social needs. These personalized needs for power, achievement, and affiliation direct perceptions of control. Trust is based on the willingness to accept vulnerability in interactions with others, while the illusion of control stems from the desire for invulnerability. Furthermore, the conditions for trust, benevolence, competence, and integrity correspond to the unselfish phenotypes of the needs for affiliation, achievement, and power. These social needs represent the core of social comparison processes.

Identifying unethical behaviors requires specifying the normative principles underlying these indications. In a cross-cultural study, unethical leadership is associated with leaders' dishonesty, corruption, egocentrism, and manipulation (Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck, 2014). However, these are behavioral expressions and enactments, not normative principles. Eisenbeiss (2012) lists the following normative orientations: (1) humane, (2) justice, (3) responsibility/sustainability, and (4) moderation. In addition to responsibility/sustainability, leaders should foster the development and participation of followers (see Voegtlin, 2016).

All four orientations are relevant to this study, although the moderation orientation is applied implicitly to the regulation of temperaments and the inhibition/activation systems discussed in the personality section. It is postulated that leaders who choose to act contrary to these orientations behave unethically.

## **A personality-psychological perspective on leaders**

### *Narcissism and anti-social personality disorder*

Analyses of large-scale corruption often describe disastrous decisions by chief executive officers (CEO) that cause significant harm to others. Media and scholarly commentary frequently attribute these fiascos to the alleged narcissistic personalities of business leaders. CEO narcissism has become a prominent theme in business administration literature. For instance, Chatterjee and Hambrick (2007) argue that, during times of societal turmoil and stagnating problem-solving, people place their hopes in narcissistic leaders who dare to undertake unprecedented endeavors. These leaders either fail or succeed spectacularly (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007).

A similar argument appears in the populism literature. Crises require leaders with special personal qualities who dare to act unconventionally. This argument is derived from Weber's concept of charisma, defined as followers' attribution of extraordinary qualities to leaders. These leaders distinguish themselves through a personalized and authoritarian exercise of power (Pappas, 2015). Thus, Weber's definition is affected by the romance of leadership (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). A recent empirical study finds that populist leaders express more narcissistic traits than political leaders from other countries (Nai and Martínez i Coma, 2019). Due to the study's methodology—indirect assessments of communication content—it can be ascertained whether populists truly have narcissistic personalities or are motivated to behave narcissistically (Nai and Martínez i Coma, 2019).

The selection of leaders with narcissistic personality attributes implies a gamble, as narcissism is classified as a Cluster B personality disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association. These disorders often overlap (Ambardar and Bienenfeld, 2023). For instance, recklessness through irresponsible risk-taking—frequently associated with CEO narcissism—is also a symptom of another Cluster B disorder: anti-social personality disorder (SAMHSA, 2023). Anti-social

personality disorder is more frequently observed in males. To diagnose narcissism, an individual must exhibit at least five of nine symptoms (Ambardar and Bienenfeld, 2023). Individuals with symptoms of these disorders tend to avoid diagnosis and treatment (Ambardar and Bienenfeld, 2023), often due to their cunning disposition that helps them conceal symptoms. Furthermore, narcissism ranges from covert to overt. The more overt the narcissism, the more individuals experience positive feelings in their interactions with others (Rose, 2002). Expressions of narcissistic traits generates a persistent amplification of positive affect, which others without this disorder would attempt to dampen (Gilbert *et al.*, 2013).

Similarly, individuals with anti-social disorders vary along a scale between covert and overt expressions of their disposition. Here, two Cluster B personality disorders are applied in conjunction. Narcissists are self-serving, whereas those with anti-social disorders find pleasure in maltreating others. These behavioral expressions represent two sides of the same coin.

Table 2 provides an overview of both disorders.

One indicator of narcissism requires special attention: a leader who appeals to entitlement places themselves in a position of moral superiority.

Due to a low or absent level of empathy, entitlement may easily justify immoral behavior toward those who are not beneficiaries of that entitlement. Entitlement elevates the leader above anything other than themselves. It is a solemn right privileged with impunity. A lack of empathy ultimately enables the sacrifice of the well-being and lives of others.

From the taxonomy of anti-social personality disorder, four attributes stand out: breaking the law, disregarding the safety of others, lying, and manipulating others' emotions. The further narcissistic leaders shift from covert to overt types, the greater the chance of proactive aggression toward those they perceive as inferior.

Unethical behavior emerging from Cluster B personality disorders can be summarized in the following two propositions.

- P1. Narcissistic leaders behave unethically when they use their entitlement to leadership as a justification for the inhumane treatment of non-beneficiaries.
- P2. Anti-social leaders behave unethically through repeated patterns of law-breaking, recklessness, lying, and emotional manipulation of others.

Recent studies have focused on the interaction between narcissism and situational conditions. Some individuals begin to exhibit narcissistic traits when exposed to changes, such as a sudden

**Table 2.** Symptoms of narcissistic and anti-social disorder according to DSM V

Indicators of narcissistic personality disorder*	Indicators of anti-social personality disorder#
1. A grandiose sense of self-importance	1. Ability to act witty and charming
2. Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty	2. Good at flattery and manipulation of emotions of others
3. Belief of being special, need for association with other special high-status people	3. Breaking the law repeatedly
4. A need for excessive admiration	4. Disregard for the safety of self and others
5. A sense of entitlement	5. Inclination to substance abuse
6. Interpersonally exploitive behavior	6. Often telling lies
7. Lack of empathy	7. Often being angry or arrogant
8. Envy of others or a belief that others are envious of self	
9. Demonstration of arrogance or haughtiness	

**Note(s):** \* (Ambardar and Bienenfeld, 2023)  
# (SAMHSA, 2023)

**Source(s):** Table created by the author

increase in status, an imbalance between positive and negative feedback, and impactful events. In this study, this phenomenon is referred to as situational narcissism.

First, some individuals who become famous or acquire positions of power display behavioral traits that resemble narcissistic personality disorder and, implicitly, anti-social disorder as described in the DSM (Preston, 2017). Second, a gradual increase in perceived control during social interactions may stimulate narcissistic attitudes (Maass *et al.*, 2018; Bauditz *et al.*, 2024), such as the impact of positive feedback and perception of negative interactions, whereas negative feedback alone does not have affect the state of narcissism (Maass *et al.*, 2018). Remarkably, negativity triggers narcissistic antagonism (Bauditz *et al.*, 2024). Third, a more instantaneous trigger is considered. One study proposes a model connecting situational leadership with charismatic leadership, including leader–follower exchange (Humphreys *et al.*, 2010). Charismatic leadership refers to the personal qualities of leaders that persuade followers by envisioning a compelling future for them. However, a difference exists between competing visions: the vision of a self-advancing leader versus the vision of superordinate goal attainment through collective self-activation. Leaders with narcissistic dispositions tend toward self-glorification. High-impact events evoke confusion and uncertainty among followers. In contrast to socialized charismatic leaders, situational narcissists display denial, self-aggrandizement, attributional egotism, and entitlement. They encourage their followers to focus on the leader’s persona and priorities. The personalized leadership of situational narcissists results in follower exploitation and dependency (Humphreys *et al.*, 2010, p. 120).

Both accounts indicate a self-serving drive toward situational narcissism. This leads to the following proposition.

- P3. In response to emergent events, situational narcissists use their charisma to advance themselves as decisive leaders while actually responding with hostility, irrationality, and denial of problems.

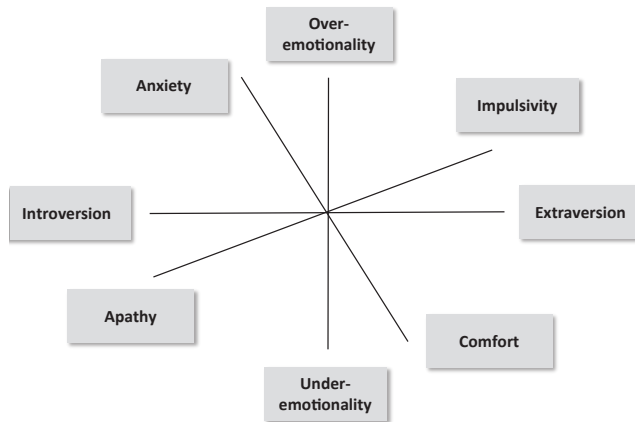
#### *Traits associated with unethical behavior*

Narcissism and anti-social personality disorders correspond to personality concepts such as extraversion and impulsiveness. In this paper, a reduction of traits from the Big Five framework (Costa and McCrae, 1992) is applied. Brown and Treviño (2006) argue that extraversion is not relevant to their model of ethical leadership. Conversely, extraversion is found to be more prominent among populist leaders (Nai and Martínez i Coma, 2019). At present, it remains unclear whether extraversion is suitable for explaining unethical populist leadership. A closer examination of the Big Five and the role of extraversion is required.

In a more recent study, the Big Five factors are aggregated into two higher-order factors (De Young, 2006): extraversion and openness to experience are grouped under the inclination to change, whereas neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are grouped under stability. In higher ordering, a direct relationship can be drawn between homeostasis of the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin (Block, 2010). A small residual factor remains, for which self-regulation is an appropriate choice (Block, 2010). Self-regulation improves impulse control, guides learning, and facilitates adaptation to constantly changing environments (Kuhl, 2018). These traits are presented in the two-dimensional model in Figure 2. The obsolete term, neuroticism, is replaced with emotionality (Broadhurst, 1957).

Impulsiveness and, to a lesser degree, extraversion are preferable traits in situations where radical change is on the agenda. However, both impulsiveness and extraversion are less benign than commonly assumed. In particular, the downsides of extraversion are often overlooked, such as disinhibited, talkative, demonstrative, ambitious, aggressive, and shameless behaviors (Goldberg and Rosolack, 1994).

The discussions on these downsides can be summarized as follows: First, research provides persistent and compelling evidence that extraverts perform poorly in detecting and processing contextual information. Their propensity for action and change detaches them from situational problems. Their orientation is guided by the rewards and pleasure of excitement seeking



**Figure 2.** A combination plot of Eysenck's and Gray's dimensions of personality. Adoption of model Boyce and Ellis (2005). Reprint from (Courtesy fo Koolma and Van Dreven, 2021)

(Carver and White, 1994; Campbell *et al.*, 2011). They switch easily from their assignments to more attractive projects and salient issues. Second, they do not properly detect and process error signals. Third, extraverts and impulsive individuals are prone to disinhibition (Newman *et al.*, 1985; Carver and White, 1994; Campbell *et al.*, 2011), which manifests as acting without caution. Action or restraint is controlled by two interdependent but distinct brain systems: the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) and the behavioral activation system (BAS) (Gray, 1987; Carver and White, 1994; Campbell *et al.*, 2011). Impulse regulation enables individuals to delay decisions until sufficient information is acquired and properly processed. This postponement creates time for rational deliberation and moral reasoning. Disinhibited individuals disable the BIS and ignore negative cues. When observed by an audience, such leaders are often assessed as more decisive and convincing. Disinhibited leaders support the realization of their reckless decisions with persistently positive stories (Newman *et al.*, 1985). In this vein, unethical leaders will have a comparative advantage over more prudent ones. Fourth, shamelessness is a salient expression of extraverted leadership. Shame divides the left and right halves in Figure 2. Shamelessness is inversely related to moral awareness and conscience. Leaders who shamelessly violate norms and break the law are insensitive to social and legal punishment, in contrast to conscientious leaders.

- P4. Impulsive and extraverted leaders who present themselves as bold decision-makers are inclined to act without doubt or shame, and are drawn to sensation-seeking.

### Needs for power, achievement, and affiliation

Leaders' motivations are framed within a social needs framework. In 1938, Murray presented a taxonomy of physical and social needs. This framework provides a robust empirical foundation (Heckhausen, 2018). Assessments of these needs have been shown to predict the behavior of leaders and of employees in the workplace (Hough, 1992; Heckhausen, 2018). Social needs include power, achievement, and affiliation. During development, individuals exhibit variance in the degree to which these needs are expressed as personalized or socialized phenotypes (Veroff and Veroff, 1980).

It is less common to distinguish between personalized and socialized forms of the need for affiliation. A closer investigation reveals a distinction between the need for belonging or bonding, and the need for intimacy (Veroff and Veroff, 1980; Carver and Scheier, 2000;

Höfer and Hagemeyer, 2018). The term “need for affiliation” is often used to refer to both the overarching concept and to its personalized phenotype. In this study, the term refers to the overarching concept. The need for bonding is considered selfish, as it implies seeking group belonging and attention from socially superior individuals. Those who act out of need for intimacy offer social support to others (Veroff and Veroff, 1980).

Thus, the division between personalized (selfish) and socialized (non-selfish) needs applies to both achievement and affiliation motivation. In other words, this distinction can be viewed as the difference between claiming and giving. Table 3 presents the differentiation between selfish and non-selfish phenotypes.

An association exists between populism and personalized charismatic leadership (Pappas, 2015), which directly points to a personalized need for power. The literature on populism addresses the need for belonging among the followers of populist leaders. In turn, populist leaders are said to respond to a need for intimacy. However, this exchange is loaded with grievances and hostility toward competing groups and their leaders (Uysal et al., 2022). Thus, in the realm of populism, the need for affiliation has a surprising side effect. Feelings of relative deprivation have also been reported (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). This observation leads to the assumption that envy exists. Envy toward migrants and refugees is considered here as the factor inducing supporters of populist leaders and parties to believe in the Great Replacement theory. This conspiracy theory holds that leaders of vested political parties want to replace citizens with preferred people from abroad (Hernandez Aguilar, 2024).

*Two faces of the need for power*

Individuals with a socialized need for power show dominance within a group but are helpful to less dominant others in pursuing shared goals. By contrast, those with a personalized need for power find pleasure in their domination. When obstructed or challenged, personalized power-driven individuals become inflated with anger (McClelland, 1970). The personalized need for power can be attributed to impaired development or socialization during childhood (Veroff and Veroff, 1980; McClelland, 1970). During their careers, social and institutional power can be built, providing them with a power base for retaliation.

*Mastery and performance goals in the need for achievement*

In a study on the processes underlying children’s learning, Dweck (1986) introduces a division between mastery and performance orientation. Mastery-driven learners overcome the disappointments of slow progress and persist over time to improve their achievements. By contrast, performance-driven learners evaluate their results by comparing themselves with their peers. When evaluations are disappointing, they focus on changing the judgment instead of improving their achievements (Dweck, 1986). Goal-oriented individuals perform better in tasks because they are better at detecting false information. However, recent experiments showed that performance-driven individuals have no scruple about further spreading false information after detecting it, making them unreliable (Poortvliet, 2008).

**Table 3.** The selfish and non-selfish phenotypes of the three social needs

Selfish	Non-selfish	Non-selfish and other oriented
Personalized need for power		Socialized or institutionalized need for power
Performance goal achievement orientation	Mastery goal achievement orientation	
Bonding need for affiliation		Intimacy need for affiliation

**Source(s):** Created by the author

*The need for affiliation: between bonding and intimacy drive*

Assessment research and practice note that leadership profiles should have a low need for affiliation. However, both dispositional and situational narcissists show a strong need for affiliation with important and famous people. In interactions with superiors in status, situational narcissists demonstrate a need for bonding, whereas among peers, they demonstrate a need for intimacy. Situational narcissists either negate or reject those with an inferior status (Preston, 2017). This suggests their need for affiliation also serves other instrumental objectives. Personalized leaders also use this need instrumentally to bond with followers.

The second issue is the intriguing idea that emotional exchanges between leaders and followers can be affected by envy toward people outside the relationship. The envy hypothesis is derived from a behavioral framework. Envy is a pronounced attribute of narcissists (see Table 2). Performance-driven individuals aspire to acquire the positive judgments others receive, such as respect, recognition, and status. This drive is called mimetic desire (Garrels, 2004). According to the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), superiors in ability who try to influence opinion formation become targets of hostility and derogation. Mimetic processes enable the contagious transfer of emotions (Neumann and Strack, 2000). The observation that others gain an unjustified advantage without punishment triggers a rapid shift from altruistic cooperation to a self-serving competitive mode among a large majority of people (Fehr and Gächter, 2002). Thus, envy contagion can spread and serve unethical leaders.

This section on personalized social needs concludes with the following propositions.

- P5. Personalized power-driven leaders retaliate against those who obstruct them their will or fail to show them due respect.
- P6. Performance-driven leaders disseminate false information to gain more favorable judgments and discredit competing.
- P7. The intimacy between leaders and followers with a need for bonding creates a mimetic exchange of rancor and envy between competing leaders and their alleged followers.

**Perceptions of control**

To the best of our knowledge, the psychology of perceived control has not yet been incorporated into the literature on populism. However, some concepts from this field offer key insights for understanding unethical populist leadership.

Perceived control mediates and regulates interactions between individuals, others, and the environment. The body of literature on this phenomenon is extensive. Therefore, this discussion is limited to six relevant concepts, focusing especially on those that connect to a personalized need for power.

*Anticipation of non-enforcement of norms*

A specific control process occurs during interactions with regulators. Potential norm violators anticipate a lack of enforcement by regulators. If others in the competitive or institutional field observe that no sanctions have been imposed, norm violators will attain a higher status (Heckathorn, 1990).

*Sucker effect*

The observation of non-enforcement of norms triggers another control mechanism, termed the sucker effect. This involves the imitation of observed wrongful but unpunished acts. Those who do not imitate experience a relative loss of status. Research has demonstrated that males are more affected by this type of control (Kerr, 1983). This effect also applies to the perceptions of control

among fellow organizational leaders. It represents a general shift from responsible to opportunistic behavior triggered by the lack of punishment for norm violations (Fehr and Gächter, 2002).

- P8. Leaders who demonstrate to their followers that rule violations and law-breaking enhance status generate sucker effects among followers without direct lines of command.

### *Illusion of control*

Control refers to the power dimension. Langer (1975) introduced the concept of the illusion of control. Individuals with low self-esteem underestimate their ability to influence their environment, resulting in an attitude of helplessness. At the other end of the spectrum, the faculties to control one's environment are overestimated. This positive illusion of control is demonstrated in an experiment on irresponsible decision-making (Le Roux *et al.*, 2006). A belief in invulnerability to consequences is an extreme expression of this positive illusion of control. Leaders who decide and act based on this belief display it to their followers, who will adopt this illusion and suspend their own judgments about the correctness and justification of these decisions.

### *Relinquishment of control*

Relinquishment of control refers to the belief that transferring control to a more powerful other is desirable (Rothbaum *et al.*, 1982). Here, this concept applies both to the relationship between a political leader and their followers, and between the political leader and more powerful superiors. Relinquishment of control provides a perceived gain because individuals feel supported and believe they share in the superior's power. However, the relinquishment of control is mirrored by a loss of self-control and, consequently, a loss of responsibility.

- P9. Leaders who successfully demonstrate an illusion of control gain power by persuading followers to relinquish their own control.

### *Self-serving, short-term locus of control*

Tests show that individuals are divided into internal and external loci of control. Unlike externals, internals accept responsibility for outcomes, even if they are negative. An internal locus of control is associated with responsible behavior (Hough, 1992) and ethical leadership (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Brewin and Shapiro (1984) contend that externals limit their acceptance of responsibility to positive expectations and a phenomenon demonstrated by the experiment of Le Roux *et al.* (2006) as well. Negative expectations and outcomes are attributed to circumstances or distinct others. This self-serving, short-term locus of control is significantly more common among males (Brewin and Shapiro, 1984). Leaders with this locus of control may appear ambitious, but tend to respond weakly to problems and adversity (see Humphreys *et al.*, 2010). Leaders who set an example for their followers to behave similarly operate as benevolent but weak leaders.

### *Restriction to positive feedback-seeking*

Control can be part of feedback loops (Carver and Scheier, 2002; Ashford *et al.*, 2003). Ego concerns can interfere with feedback-seeking and acceptance. Research demonstrates how sensitivity to ego threats disrupts outcome evaluation (Smalley and Stake, 1996). Janssen and Prins (2007) contrast two types of goal orientation: learning feedback-seeking versus self-validation and self-improvement feedback-seeking. Ego-concerned leaders seek confirmation of their positive expectations (Nickerson, 1998). It is assumed that divergent information will be rejected or avoided. This unbalanced feedback-seeking and acceptance creates a dangerous mix of positive and negative feedback (Meadows, 1999). The prevalence of positive feedback over negative feedback reinforces disinhibited and excitement-seeking behaviors. Furthermore, situational

narcissists show an ego-loaded response to negative feedback. They simply do not process negative feedback and instead react defensively toward its providers (Maass *et al.*, 2018).

- P10. Leaders with a self-serving, short-term locus of control suppress negative expectations and negative feedback from followers and non-followers.

### The utilization of trust and distrust by unethical political leaders

Populism is characterized by a Manichean worldview—a belief in an absolute distinction between good and evil. At the level of personal interaction between politicians and the public, this worldview implies a distinction between blind trust in populist leaders versus profound distrust of leaders from established parties (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; Metz and Plesz, 2023). Since the Second World War, the enactment of the alleged collective will of people has been associated with the dissemination of disinformation (Hayek, 1944). According to Hayek, disinformation can foster the belief that no one is trustworthy except the leader. In recent campaigns by populist parties, disinformation has been embedded in Great Replacement conspiracy theory

about the replacement of the good people (Hernandez Aguilar, 2024). This section provides a more detailed account of the relationship between trust and distrust.

The propositions regarding unethical leadership include inconsistencies between drives, motives, acts, and presentation. Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck (2014) highlight disapproval of unethical leadership in cross-cultural research. Even populist voters rate prominent populist leaders substantially lower in terms of integrity and accountability than some of their non-populist competitors. Paradoxically, these same voters rank these behavioral attributes among the top requirements for political leaders (Seijts and Clercy, 2020). According to Metz and Plesz (2025) in a study on charisma attribution, populist voters develop affectionate attachments to their leaders, making them blind to norm violations. Considering this, researchers find it puzzling that such populist leaders gain the favor of voters. One explanation is found in the dynamics of trust and distrust in the relationship between voters and leaders.

This section provides a conceptual account of how trust and distrust mechanisms operate. The discussion is based on Luhmann's (1979) conceptual monograph and the interpersonal model elaborated by Lewicki *et al.* (2006). Trust and distrust are perceptions of control in the interactions between trustors and trustees. A trustor depends on the trustee to execute an assigned task. Trust reduces the complexity involved in overseeing these tasks (Luhmann, 1973), based on a subtle exchange of expectations and signals of trustworthy behavior.

However, the underlying mechanisms are poorly understood. The reduction of the interaction problem to a dichotomy is common: either blind trust or deep distrust. This dichotomy implies a radical simplification of complexity into the certainty provided by a division between good and bad (Lewicki *et al.*, 2006).

Lewicki *et al.* propose a more sophisticated two-dimensional model of the dynamics of trust and distrust. They hypothesize that trust and distrust reflect differing but simultaneously operating brain processes (Lewicki *et al.*, 2006). Neuroimaging research supports this assumption (Dimoka, 2010). Simulated tests involving all four combinations of low and high trust versus low and high distrust generated different processes in distinct brain systems. Distrust is related to brain regions associated with system one (the so-called "reptile brain"), whereas trust is reflected in areas of the evolutionarily newer brain.

System 1 processes are associative and intuitive, operating automatically, unconsciously, impulsively, implicitly, and quickly. By contrast, System 2 processes require considerable effort, attention, explicit thinking, and reasoning. Consequently, they run more slowly (Stanovich and West, 2000; Kahneman, 2012). Stanovic and West contend that people often address problems with the wrong system. For instance, problems requiring calculation and deliberation are erroneously processed through intuition and association (Stanovich and West,

2000). System 1 processes are highly susceptible to biases, mental shortcuts, and framing effects (Kahneman, 2012). When functioning in System 1 mode, people effortlessly transform incongruent information into congruent information (Kahneman, 2012), although verification procedures and moral reasoning might leave such matters undecided. These gaps enable impulsive stimulus-response behaviors in leaders. The simplification of reality ultimately ends with one response pattern: event → leader’s opinion → intervention.

The dissemination of distrust is a powerful strategy for leaders striving for total power (Hayek, 1944). By propagating the idea that everyone else is lying, people begin to seek certainty in the one leader who still appeals to them. This results in blind trust in a seemingly benevolent leader, in contrast to the profound distrust of all opposing leaders.

In a model of organizational trust (Mayer *et al.*, 1995), a third condition for trust is indicated: benevolence. Signals of benevolence are transmitted more quickly than evidence of competence and integrity. By elaborating on Lewicki *et al.*’s (2006) model, we can clarify why populists may have a comparative advantage (see Table 4).

When a considerable proportion of voters feel disrespected by the government and politics, leaders in quadrant B will be preferred over those in quadrant C. Due to the prominence of distrust, leaders in quadrant A will remain unfamiliar, as they address System 2 in their appeal to voters. In quadrant D, generalized distrust will rise (Lewicki *et al.*, 2006; Aupers, 2012).

- P11. In a situation of stagnation and uncertainty, unethical political leaders enhance general distrust by disseminating disinformation.
- P12. Unethical political leaders try to persuade followers to blindly trust no one except themselves above all else.
- P13. Once blind trust is achieved, unethical political leaders will abuse it by acting unbound by the conditions of benevolence, competence, and integrity. Instead of establishing high trust and low distrust among disappointed people, unethical political leaders will gradually shift the public mindset to a state of low trust and high distrust.

### How social comparison processes enable populist leaders to rise to prominence

This section applies Festinger’s (1954) theory of social comparison processes to the field of political competition. Social-psychological approaches are rare in research on populism. An exception is the development of a framework based on social identity theory (Uysal *et al.*, 2022). Social comparison theory is preferred in this study due to its applicability to all three core social needs, as well as its focus on the selection and interpretation of information sources. Populist leaders and followers are assumed to deviate from rational-legal patterns of reasoning (Pappas, 2015). Instead, associative reasoning and validation through social proof form the foundation of opinion formation via social comparison. In this study, polarization in opinion

**Table 4.** Trust and distrust in leader by followers

Dimensions and levels	Low distrust	High distrust
High trust	A. Leaders evoke positive expectations and reciprocate trust through realization	B. Leaders evoke trust but do not realize the evoked expectations
Low trust	C. Leaders do not evoke trust but are trustworthy by realization	D. Leaders evoke negative expectations and reciprocate distrust through realization

**Source(s):** Created by the author

formation is traced to social comparison processes among like-minded individuals. This interpretation aligns with recent findings by [Metz and Plesz \(2025\)](#).

Political context can be analyzed through [Festinger's \(1954\)](#) theory of social comparison. This theory is the result of a thorough reflection on social-psychological field studies comprising social network analyses ([Festinger et al., 1950](#)). However, the theory has been overlooked for several decades. It was later revisited in two studies by institutional economists and sociologists ([Rindova et al., 2005](#); [Deephouse and Carter, 2005](#)). More recently, it has been applied as a psychological explanation of competition ([Garcia et al., 2013](#)) and divergent orientations in achievement motivation ([Van Yperen and Leander, 2014](#)). Moreover, social comparison has been identified as a foundational process underlying social media dynamics (e.g. [Tang and Carter, 2018](#)).

Social comparison theory provides a foundation for the next line of argument. Individuals with shared concerns or activities tend to seek the company of their peers. They engage in exchanges of evaluations regarding abilities and opinions. It is a shared pathway to a stable response in an uncertain environment, driven by the fundamental questions: What is happening? And What should we do? Through comparison, group members aim to improve and elevate their abilities. Over time, ability growth occurs within a group. However, the improvement of abilities progresses slowly and is constrained by non-social factors such as technical limitations. Opinions are not bound by this kind of limitation. Furthermore, opinions evolve much faster than abilities. As a result, opinions about group members' abilities begin to take precedence. Consequently, a virtual increase in ability continues without limitations. The substantiality of abilities is substituted by the symbolic representations of competences. Consequently, the group dynamic shifts from a focus on personal and interpersonal improvements to influencing judgments within the group. This marks a stagnation in actual ability growth and the emergence of maladaptive responses to environmental changes. Despite this incongruence, group certainty increases considerably ([Festinger, 1954](#)).

In this state, opinions tend to converge toward uniformity. This uniformity is often monitored by members closest to the group's leader. Within a homogenizing group, interactions with those who differ in opinions or abilities are experienced as unpleasant. Those who differ encounter hostility and derogation. Not only are those perceived as inferior in ability and status mistreated, but even those with superior abilities—particularly if they attempt to influence opinion formation—face hostility ([Festinger, 1954](#)).

Due to the coercive surveillance of dominant opinions, they have become one-sided and self-evident (previous work, 2024). Verification is exercised through social proof ([Rindova et al., 2005](#)). This self-referential verification process follows two principles. First, an opinion is considered true if members of the inner circle hold it true. Second, the higher the status of a member, the more credible their opinion is perceived to be. In situations of contestation, the truth is attributed to the member with the higher status. The leader's inner circle—the clique—monopolizes information channels, thus depriving outsiders access to valuable information ([Festinger et al., 1950](#)).

Social proof operates through associative systems. When individuals rely on associative reasoning, they avert truth-seeking based on propositional reasoning ([Grawronski and Bodenhausen, 2006](#)). These two modes attempt to validate and substantiate assertions. Traditional media, scientific disciplines, judicial systems, and researchers of pressure groups and open platforms on the Internet typically apply the principle of propositional reasoning. Although this mode of reasoning does not guarantee truth, it keeps assertions open to testing and rebuttal. By contrast, social proof is closed and self-reinforcing. The dominance of associative reasoning—especially through social media—makes individuals susceptible to misinformation ([Aupers, 2012](#); [Lee et al., 2023](#)). It should be noted that informational closure, or closed-mindedness, is not limited to one political orientation, rather it is common at both ends of the political spectrum ([Acosta and Kemmelmeier, 2022](#)).

In a case study of business schools, prospective students base their willingness to pay a price premium more on the prominence of the school than on perceived quality. Among

prominence indicators, media ranking is the strongest, followed by affiliation with high-status actors. Moreover, these indicators are strongly correlated (Rindova *et al.*, 2005). Deephouse and Carter (2005) find that reputation provides a stronger advantage than legitimacy. While legitimacy comprises benevolence, competence, and integrity, reputation can be supported by legitimacy. However, when other attributes contribute more to reputation, these will be preferred (Deephouse and Carter, 2005; see previous work).

It is plausible that media rankings and affiliations with high-status actors similarly influence voter preferences more than quality signals from candidates and their parties. Additionally, traditional media demonstrates an increasing preference for personalizing politics (Kendall-Taylor and Wright, 2017). This trend shifts audience attention from the quality of policies to personality traits and interpersonal controversies. This tendency benefits political leaders with a personalized combination of character traits and psychological needs. Media outlets have also been criticized for shifting from quality reporting to speculation (Gómez Mompert, 2009), a trend that favors politicians with a short-term, external locus of control. Furthermore, evidence suggests that media salience of issues carries greater weight than party manifestos (Hebbling and Tresch, 2009). Prevalence leads to a shift from the quality of proposals to the expected impact of issues. Salience is the seizure of public attention, triggering cascades of reports and recurring news items. Political leaders with polarized or radical opinions, who are adept at generating salience, tend to outperform politicians who try to get public attention for well-founded policies.

The previously discussed publications concern traditional media. However, social media more accurately reflect the mechanisms of social comparison, particularly regarding opinions. Social media strategies differ because algorithms are designed to focus attention on specific themes, reinforcing social proof, promoting homogeneity, and excluding dissenters. In his annual letters, the inventor of the World Wide Web, Berners-Lee, expresses increasing concerns about these issues, particularly the hostility directed at women.

Social media platforms encourage connections among like-minded people. Most platforms organize contests to acquire followers. Political leaders who use impulsive stimulus-response patterns create an impression of strong leadership. These patterns are characterized by the following sequence: event→opinion→intervention.

Some media platforms support and propagate this way of forming opinions.

In summary, the following propositions are derived from the analysis of social comparison processes.

- P14. Unethical political leaders and their inner-circle members promote processes that homogenize and radicalize opinions among followers.
- P15. Political leaders who propagate and enact hostile derogation toward leaders and members of different groups act unethically.
- P16. Unethical political leaders and inner-circle members claim to have the truth on their side and monopolize information channels, silencing groups that attempt to substantiate, validate, and evaluate claims and outcomes.

## Conclusion

This article aims to develop a behavioral framework for understanding and morally assessing populist leaders. It draws on foundational literature in personality, social motivation, perceptions of control, trust–distrust dynamics, and social comparison processes. The framework is also applicable to the study of unethical leadership. In the context of populist leadership, the key question is which unethical actions originate from psychological, sociological, and social-psychological processes.

The starting point is the public perception that problems in a given field are unsolvable or that conventional solutions are not feasible. This perception creates a demand for

unconventional and unprecedented leadership, providing a window of opportunity for agents with egocentric and opportunistic *modus operandi*.

The situation attracts individuals with a specific profile—namely, those predisposed to develop narcissistic and anti-social personality traits. Leaders with this disposition feel entitled to sacrifice the well-being and lives of others for whom they feel no empathy (Proposition 1). They find pleasure in reckless behavior, frequently lie, and repeatedly violate norms and laws (Proposition 2). In response to emergent events, situational narcissists use their charisma to advance themselves as decisive leaders, yet their actual responses are marked by hostility, irrationality, and denial of problems (Proposition 3). It should be noted that leaders with narcissistic and anti-social tendencies do not suppress these traits when they come into positions of power. Traits considered normal or even preferable in leadership can, in fact, be deeply problematic. In particular, leaders high in impulsivity and extraversion are inclined to act without hesitation, doubt, or shame, and are drawn to sensation-seeking behavior (Proposition 4).

A common distinction is made between personalized and socialized needs for power. Leaders driven by a personalized power motive retaliate when confronted with opposition or a perceived lack of respect (Proposition 5). The personalized need for achievement shifts attention away from the achievement itself toward its judgment (performance drive). A performance drive implies that only ranking matters. Performance-driven leaders do not hesitate to disseminate false information that benefits themselves at the expense of their competitors (Proposition 6). The personalized self-serving phenotype of the need for affiliation is bonding, or a desire for belonging. The socialized phenotype refers to the need for intimacy. Leaders' intimacy with followers who seek belonging creates a mimetic exchange of rancor and envy directed at competing leaders and their supposed followers (Proposition 7). This exchange taps into basic human sentiment paving the way for scapegoating and violence.

Perception of control mediates the relationship between leaders and their environment. Unethical leaders anticipate that violations of norms and laws will not be enforced. Non-enforcement by regulators increases these leaders' status. They set bad examples for followers, whose misbehavior evades responsibility (Proposition 8). The perception of control is associated with this perception. Under this perception, leaders believe they are invulnerable to negative consequences—an illusion that seduces followers into surrendering all control to the leader (Proposition 9). On the path to and in the position of power, these leaders adopt a self-serving, short-term locus of control. Within this mindset, responsibility is limited to positive expectations. Negative expectations and outcomes are blamed on rival leaders and groups (Proposition 10).

The next question is: why do people prefer leaders who exhibit unethical behavior? In situations of confusion and uncertainty, unethical leaders enhance general distrust by disseminating disinformation (Proposition 11). These leaders try to persuade their followers to trust no one but them (Proposition 12). They gain blind trust, enabled by competing leaders who have low trust in their approach to people and thus become deeply distrusted. Once blind trust is secured, unethical leaders abuse it, behaving as if unbound by the expectations of benevolence, competence, and integrity (Proposition 13).

In all types of social activity, people compare their abilities and opinions with those of others. Leaders emerge, supported by an inner circle of preferred followers. In a political context, social comparison theory helps explain why leaders who take the lead in shaping opinion and presenting a symbolic image of leadership become more prominent than competing leaders who position themselves as competent. In the pursuit of dominance over competing groups, opinions tend to homogenize and radicalize (Proposition 14). These processes generate hostility and derogation toward those who differ (Proposition 15). The leader and their inner circle claim to possess the truth and monopolize channels of information, while silencing groups that attempt to substantiate, validate, and evaluate claims and outcomes (Proposition 16). As a result, radical change is achieved through illegitimate means, while urgent problems remain unresolved and new issues continue to emerge.

## Future research

The developed framework for understanding unethical populist leadership provides new insights but leaves many questions unanswered. In this section, several questions are posed.

The first concerns the nature of charisma. Charisma is the attribution of extraordinary qualities to leaders that exist in the eye of the beholder (Pappas, 2015; Metz and Plesz, 2023, 2025). Based on Weber, the process of mimesis is addressed. Since the discovery of the mirror neurons in the mid-1990s (Garrels, 2004), mimesis has been a focus of study. For example, mirror neurons support the process of learning by example (Mara, 2017). However, in the humanities, mimesis is associated with mimetic desire, scapegoating, and violence (Girard, 1979). Therefore, the question is how mimesis contributes to the bright and dark sides of charisma.

Second, males are more affected by anti-social disorders, exhibit a lack of responsibility due to a self-serving, short-term locus of control, and are susceptible to the sucker effect. These behavioral attributes play a key role in unethical expressions and the enactment of aggression. In particular, the inducement of hostile behavior by male followers of unethical populist leaders and its consequences raises important questions. It is essential to broaden the perspective beyond the culture of masculinity embodied by some populist leaders (see Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2016).

Despite the institution of safeguards, constitutional democracies remain vulnerable to the unethical strategies of populist leaders (Panizza and Miorelli, 2009). In the run-up to a persuasive illusion of power, violations of norms and laws are met with non-enforcement. It remains unclear why non-enforcement occurs or why enforcement is postponed until the situation becomes irreversible.

Social comparison enables the establishment of privileged groups led by indisputable leaders. Populist leaders mobilize people against corrupt political elites. This ideology is anti-pluralist (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; MacDonald, 2019). This poses a challenging question for populist governments and complicates assessments of elitism and corruption.

The propositions include indicators of unethical behavior applicable, for instance, in qualitative comparative analyses of recent and past examples of populist leadership. In addition to comparisons, developments over time—including path dependencies—can also be examined. Currently, the propositions remain conceptual. It is necessary to translate them into measures for content and discourse analyses. Particular attention must be paid to behavioral observations. Participants will consent to psychological testing. Expert-validated observations of behavioral expressions are necessary to avoid lay speculation about leaders' mental disorders (see Nai and Martínez i Coma, 2019).

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