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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Who likes dark politicians? This article investigates whether voters showcasing populist attitudes are more likely to appreciate candidates that score high on dark personality traits (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) and low on agreeableness. This intuition is tested on a large-scale, assessing how voters perceive the likeability of top candidates having competed in elections worldwide. The investigation leverages evidence from an international survey that includes expert-ratings for personality profile of 49 top candidates having competed in 22 national elections, matched with standardized survey data gathered in the aftermath of those same elections that include self-ratings of populist attitudes and candidate likeability (CSES data, $N = 70,690$). Even controlling for important covariates that drive candidate likeability (e.g., the ideological distance between the voter and the candidate), the results strongly confirm the expectations: populist voters are significantly more likely to appreciate candidates high on the Dark triad and low on agreeableness. The effects, especially for (low) agreeableness, are quite substantial.

1. Introduction

The personality of leaders and candidates is increasingly seen as a central component in models aiming to understand their electoral success or performance once in office (Bittner, 2011; Nai, 2019a). Within this framework, in recent years the focus has shifted towards the "darker" components of the personality of political figures (e.g., Nai & Maier, 2018, 2019, 2020; Visser et al., 2017; Schumacher & Zettler, 2019). For instance, Joly et al. (2018) show that Belgian politicians achieve greater longevity in Parliament and more prestigious positions when they score lower in agreeableness. Ramey et al. (2017) find that less "agreeable" members of the US congress are more effective in passing legislation. Similarly, Lilienfeld et al. (2012) argue that individuals high in psychopathy are likely to have more successful trajectories in politics, in much the same way as psychopathy can be a fruitful trait in the business sphere (Babiak & Hare, 2006). Dark traits are, of course, not exclusively beneficial. Presidents scoring lower on curtesy, patience, and willingness to compromise are more likely to veto major bills, to see their vetoes overturned, and to have their Cabinet or Supreme Court nominees rejected (Simonton, 1988). Similarly, narcissism in US presidents increases the likelihood of tolerating unethical behaviors in subordinates, "placing political success over effective policy" (Watts et al., 2013, p. 2383) and even facing impeachment. All in all, what this strand of research suggests is that the dark personality of political leaders matters.

When it comes to electoral dynamics, evidence is much more scattered (Nai, 2019a). Even more importantly, it is unlikely that dark personality in candidates exerts the same effect across the board, for all voters. If in general voters could be expected to shy away from candidates that showcase a dark personality profile - because at odds with the "ideal politician" (Roets & Van Hiel, 2009) - it is undeniable that *some* voters appreciate dark politicians. Who are they? This article investigates the moderating role of *populist attitudes* - that is, holding attitudes that reflect support for "sovereignty of the people, opposition to the elite, and the Manichean division between 'good' and 'evil'" (Akkerman et al., 2014, p. 1331) - in driving candidate perceptions. Populist voters, we argue, are likely to have positive perceptions of dark candidates - even in a context in which dark candidates have a tarnished image overall.

Populism and dark personality are likely to go hand in hand. Looking at political elites, populists tend to display "bad manners" (Moffitt, 2016) and to introduce "a more negative, hardened tone to the debate" (Immerzeel & Pickup, 2015, p. 350). More importantly, populists have been shown to have a darker and personality profile, characterized by low agreeableness and high scores on the Dark Triad (Nai & Martinez i Coma, 2019). This association is also supported at the voters' level; support for populist parties is stronger among voters with "darker" personality profiles (low agreeableness; Bakker et al., 2016). Yet no evidence exists of the reverse, that is, that populism in voters is positively associated with support for candidates with dark personality

traits. In light of evidence from the public and political elites, we expect this to be the case. If dark voters are likely to support populist, we believe that a good case can be made that populist voters are more likely to support dark candidates. This article presents the first, large-scale comparative analysis that investigates the role of populist attitudes in voters to moderate the effects of candidate dark personality - high Dark Triad, and low agreeableness - on candidate likeability.

2. Data and measures

To test this expectation, the article triangulates two datasets. At the individual level (voters), we leverage evidence in the large-scale comparative electoral studies collated by module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES).[1] The data includes variables to measure the respondents' profile, attitudes, and perception of the most important candidates in the election. Among the elections covered in the CSES dataset, 22[2] are also covered by a large-scale expert survey that includes the full personality profile - Big Five and Dark Triad - of the top candidates that have competed in the election (Nai, 2019b; Nai & Maier, 2018). Fig. 1 presents the geographical coverage of the investigation. For these 22 elections we can thus match data at the voter level (i.e., who the voters are and what they think of the different candidates) with the full personality profile of those same candidates coming from the expert survey. The overlap of the two datasets yields 49 "top" candidates (leading presidential candidates and party leaders). The list includes world key-players the likes of Jair Bolsonaro, Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen, Angela Merkel, Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini, Silvio Berlusconi, Recep Erdoğan, Theresa May, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump (full list in Table A1, Appendix A).

2.1. Candidate personality

2.1.1. Data

Data about the personality of candidates comes from a large-scale expert survey conducted since 2016 in the aftermath of national elections worldwide (Nai, 2019b; Nai & Maier, 2018). After each election a sample of scholars in politics and electoral behavior[3] were surveyed and asked to rate, among other things, the personality of top candidates having competed in the election (see below). Since its inception in 2016, more than 2000 scholars have participated in the comparative survey. The coverage of the NEGex dataset overlaps with the coverage of the CSES dataset, used to measure voters' perceptions of candidates (see below) for 22 elections, which yields information for 49 "top" candidates - that is, leading presidential candidates or party leaders. Information comes from the aggregation of ratings from a total of 581 experts. 80% of these experts is domestic (that is, works in the country in which the election took place), 29% are female, and 86% have a PhD at the time of the survey (the remaining 14% are PhD candidates). On average, experts declared themselves very familiar with the election ($M = 8.3/10$, $SD = 1.6$), and reported that answering the survey was rather easy ($M = 6.4/10$, $SD = 2.3$). Experts range somewhat on the left on a 1–10 left-right self-positioning scale ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.6$).

2.1.2. Personality measures

The expert questionnaire included batteries to measure the personality traits of selected top candidates having competed in the election. As described elsewhere (Nai, 2019b; Nai & Maier, 2018; Nai & Martinez i Coma, 2019), Ten Items Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003) is used to measure the Big Five, which asks experts to evaluate two statements about the personality of the candidates for each trait (e. g., the candidate is "critical, quarrelsome"). For the Dark Triad the survey includes a battery of six items that represents a simplified version of the "Dirty Dozen" (D12) inventory introduced in Jonason and Webster (2010). For parsimony reasons, it was not possible to include the 12-item original scale in the expert questionnaire. Instead, the simplified battery retains the two items that score the highest on each of the three dark traits in the principal component analyses described in the original article by Jonason and Webster (2010, p. 422). Items reflect facets of the dark personality traits (e.g., the candidate "tends to be callous or insensitive"). For both batteries, experts had to evaluate each statement on a scale from 0 "very low" and 4 "very high". The average score on the three dark traits reflects a unitary measure of "dark core." All pairs of statements, for the Big Five and Dark Triad traits, are summarized in Table A4 (Appendix A).

Experts were asked to rate the Big Five for one randomly selected candidate (e.g., Trump) and the Dark Triad for another randomly selected candidate in that same election (e.g., Clinton).[4] On average, each candidate received 6.9 separate expert ratings for the Big Five ($SD = 5.2$) and 7.1 for the Dark Triad ($SD = 5.4$). Candidates who received fewer than 3 ratings for either the Big Five or the Dark Triad were excluded. The number of expert ratings for all remaining 49 candidates is reported in Table A1 (Appendix A). The average standard deviation for each of the eight traits across all candidates - that is, how much experts on average "diverge" on the ratings they provided - is around 0.95 (original variables range between 0 and 4), which is not particularly high - confirming that external observers tend to agree with each other when assessing the personality of other people (Vazire, 2006). All standard deviations are reported in Table A3 (Appendix A).

The two "short" personality scales in the NEGex dataset are not perfect. If they are rather efficient to administer, they cannot provide the nuances of longer scales (Bakker & Lelkes, 2018). This being said, strong evidence suggests high construct validity for our measures. Descriptively, first, the profile of top candidates is often in line with the description of these candidates in media products (e.g., newspaper articles; Nai & Martinez i Coma, 2019). Empirically, second, our personality measures for Trump and Clinton are extremely similar to the profiles of these two candidates reported in Visser et al. (2017); Visser and colleagues present ratings from a sample of psychologists, whereas our data comes from experts in politics (see the detailed comparison in Nai & Maier, 2018). Third, experts and undergraduate students evaluated very consistently the profile of selected political figures (Trump, Angela Merkel, Dutch PM Mark Rutte, and Dutch "rabble rouser" Geert Wilders; Nai & Maier, 2019). Finally, our measures of personality for candidate having competed in the 2018 US Senate Midterms (collected using the same protocol and measures as the ones described here for candidates worldwide) are positively, strongly and often significantly associated with personality ratings provided by Senate insiders in Rice et al. (2021), as discussed in Nai & Maier (2020). Fig. 2 presents the distribution of personality traits across the 49 candidates under investigation.

2.1.3. Adjusted personality measures

Questions have been raised as to whether experts are able to rate political phenomena independently from their ideological preferences

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[1] https://cses.org.

[2] Australia (2019), Austria (2017), Brazil (2018), Canada (2019), Chile (2017), Costa Rica (2018), Finland (2019), France (2017), Germany (2017), Great Britain (2017), Hungary (2018), Iceland (2016 and 2017), Italy (2018), Lithuania (2016), Montenegro (2016), New Zealand (2017), Norway (2017), Portugal (2019), Sweden (2018), Turkey (2018), United States (2016).

[3] Experts are scholars with expertise in politics, elections, political communication, and/or electoral behavior for the country holding the election. We established expertise by looking at relevant publications and the content of professional webpages of the experts (e.g., biographical statement in university webpage).

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[4] As the two candidates were selected randomly from a pool of top candidates in the election, some experts were sometimes asked to rate the same candidate across the two scales.
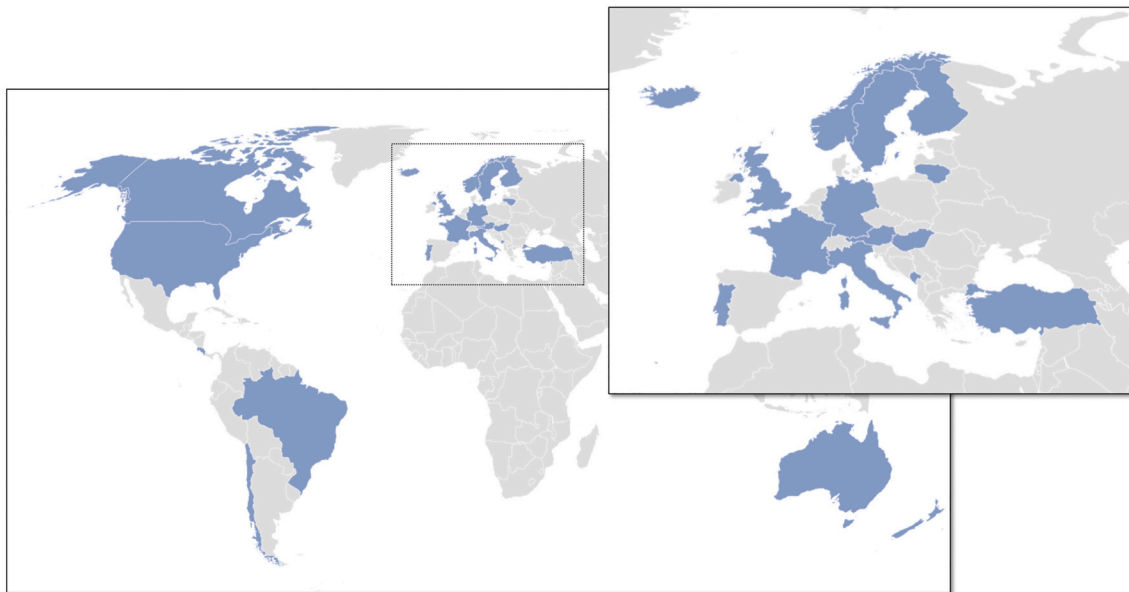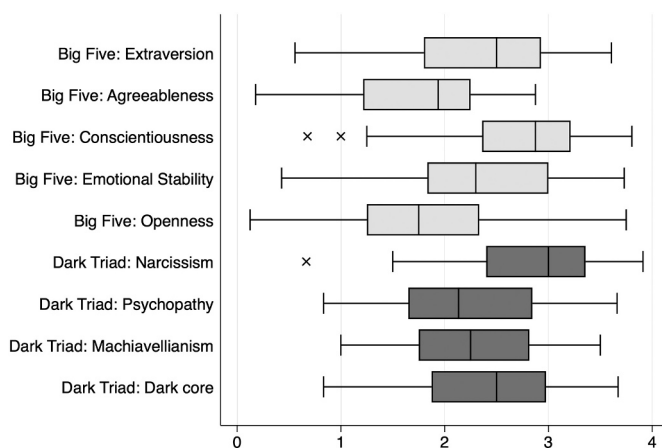
Fig. 1. Geographical coverage.

Fig. 2. Candidate personality traits.
N(candidates) = 49.

(e.g., Wright & Tomlinson, 2018), an issue that is particularly relevant in light of the skew towards the liberal left of academia (Maranto & Woessner, 2012). With this in mind, and in line with what discussed in Walter and Van der Eijk (2019) for campaign negativity, we computed adjusted measures of the candidates' personality by regressing the value of each personality trait on the difference between the candidate ideology and the average expert left-right position, and keeping the regression residuals. These latter are adjusted measures of personality that are independent of the effect of the (average) expert left-right position. These adjusted variables are strongly and positively associated with the original ones, with correlations of at least $r(47) = 0.91$, $p < .001$. We will use these variables in robustness checks.

2.2. Voter profile and ratings

2.2.1. Data

Data for voters' perception of candidates comes from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The third advanced release of the 5th module of the CSES (released July 2021) collates a series of surveys on representative samples of voters conducted after 31 national elections between 2016 and 2020 in 28 countries. On average,

approximately 1800 respondents are included in each sample. We focus here on 22 of these elections, for which our exert dataset includes information about the personality of top competing candidates (see above). We have stacked the original dataset at the candidate level so that respondent evaluations of each candidate are matched with the personality profile of that same candidate at the upper level (see Fig. A1, Appendix A). This procedure yields a large dataset, with almost 90,000 individual observations (voters, nested within candidates).

2.2.2. Candidate likeability

In the CSES data respondents are asked to evaluate candidate likeability via a 0–10 scale (0 'Strongly dislike', 10 'Strongly like'). On average the 49 candidates score rather averagely on likeability ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 1.2$). Average candidate likeability is positively and significantly associated with the percentage of votes that candidate received in the election, $r(47) = 0.41$, $p = .003$.

2.2.3. Populist attitudes

In the CSES data populist attitudes are measured via a battery of seven statements that capture respondent's attitudes towards political elites and governance (e.g., "Most politicians do not care about the people," "What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one's principles," and "The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions"). Respondents had to rate their agreement with these seven statements on a 1–5 scale (reversed so that higher scores indicate higher agreement). The additive scale has high reliability ($\alpha = 0.76$), and an exploratory PCA analysis reveals the existence of one principal underlying dimension, explaining 43% of the variance.[5] See Castanho Silva et al. (2020) for a discussion about the CSES scale and other competing measures of populist attitudes. Respondents in the stacked dataset have a slightly higher-than-average level of populist attitudes ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.8$).

2.2.4. Covariates

All models are controlled by a series of covariates at the voter level

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[5] The PCA indicates the existence of a second underlying dimension, which however just crosses the threshold of relevance (*Eigenvalue* = 1.008). By and large, the main underlying structure underneath the seven items reflects a unitary scale of populist attitudes.

that are likely to affect their populist attitudes and how they perceive political candidates in general. Satisfaction with democracy is measured via a direct question asking respondents whether they are satisfied "with the way democracy works in [country]" (1–5 scale). Interest in politics is measured on a 4-point scale (reversed to assign higher scores to higher interest). Importantly, all models are controlled by the ideological distance between the voter and the candidate, computed by taking the absolute value of the distance between the voter left-right scale and the candidate ideological position (both forced into a 0–1 continuous variable for comparability); the resulting variable ranges between 0.0 (lower ideological distance) and 1.0 (greater ideological distance; $M = 0.3$, $SD = 0.2$). All models are also controlled by the gender and age of the respondent, by the gender, age, and incumbency status of the candidate, and by a dummy variable identifying elections in Western (vs. Non-Western) countries.

3. Results

Candidate likeability (0–10) was regressed on voters profile plus the profile and personality of the candidates. Models are multilevel linear regressions, with voters nested into candidates (Table B1, Appendix B). M1 is the baseline model, which includes the direct effects of voters' and candidates' profile. M2 and M3 include the key interaction terms between voters' populist attitudes and the personality of the candidate. Results of the three models are illustrated in the coefficient plot in Fig. 3; the coefficient plot uses standardized variables throughout, which allows for a direct comparison of the magnitude of the effects across variables (including for the interaction terms).[6]

Unsurprisingly, satisfaction with democracy is positively associated with candidate likeability, whereas interest in politics, gender, and age of respondents are only very marginally associated with it, and so are populist attitudes. This is however not the case for the ideological distance with the candidate; respondents that are the most distanced ideologically with the candidate they are evaluating rate them with almost 6 points less on the likeability scale (itself ranging from 0 to 10). Incumbents tend to be more liked, but no other characteristics of candidates directly affect their likeability in the eye of the voter - except for one: candidates scoring higher on the dark core (average score on the Dark Triad) are significantly and rather substantially more *disliked* than their peers.

Models M2 and M3 introduce each an interaction effect between respondents' populist attitudes and one facet of candidates' dark personality: the dark core in M2, and (low) agreeableness in model M3. The coefficient plot in Fig. 3 allows to investigate the relative magnitude of these two interaction terms with regards to the standardized effects of all other covariates. As the figure shows, the interaction between populist attitudes and the candidate dark core is positive but only averagely strong, whereas the interaction between populist attitudes and the candidate agreeableness is more strongly negative - it is the second stronger effect in model M3 in relative magnitude, behind the direct effect of the voter's ideological distance with the candidate.

The absolute magnitude of the two interaction terms is substantiated with marginal effects in Fig. 3. Results by and large confirm the expectations. The figure presents estimated candidate likeability (y-axis) as a function of candidate personality traits (dark core for the left-hand panel, and agreeableness for the right-hand panel), on the x-axis. The effects of personality of likeability are estimated for increasing levels of respondents' populist attitudes, represented as the intersecting lines in the graphs; the thinner and dotted line reflects the lower level of populist attitudes (two standard deviations below the sample average), whereas the plain black line reflects the higher level (two standard deviations above the sample average).

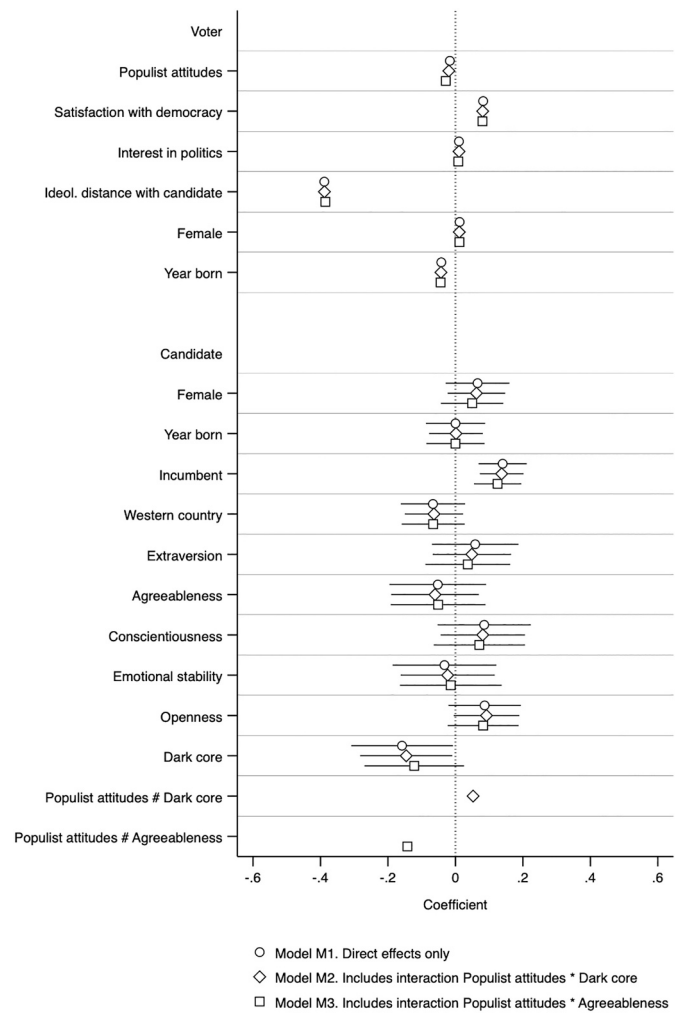The left-hand panel in Fig. 4 shows that it is particularly for

Fig. 3. Multilevel drivers of candidate likeability; coefficient plot.
Note: Coefficients with 95% confidence intervals, computed on standardized variables. Full results with original variables (non-standardized) are in Table B1 (Appendix B).
N(voters) = 70,690, N(candidates) = 49.

respondents low in populist attitudes that candidate likeability drops with increasing scores on the dark core. Respondents scoring higher on populist attitudes do not penalize at all dark candidates; for them, candidate likeability is not substantively a function of the candidate dark personality. Yet, comparatively, candidates scoring very high on the dark core are evaluated more positively by populist voters, whereas the opposite is true for candidates low on the dark core. This trend is even more flagrant when looking at agreeableness in the right-hand panel. Respondents high on populist attitudes are substantially more likely to appreciate the candidate as the candidate score on agreeableness drops. The effect is exactly reversed for respondents low on populist attitudes. Even without looking at candidates with more extreme personality profiles, the trends are rather clear, especially for agreeableness.

Appendix B also includes results for a series of additional models and robustness checks. First, Table B2 replicates the models discussed above but tests for the effect of the three traits in the Dark Triad separately. The interaction term is particularly strong for psychopathy - which makes sense, in light of the fact that populism "is inherently adversarial" (Rico et al., 2017, p. 449), and thus likely to find an echo in the more aggressive of the dark traits (Jones & Neria, 2015). Second, Table B3 replicates the main models but uses instead the "adjusted" measures using regression residuals; results, are by and large in line with the main

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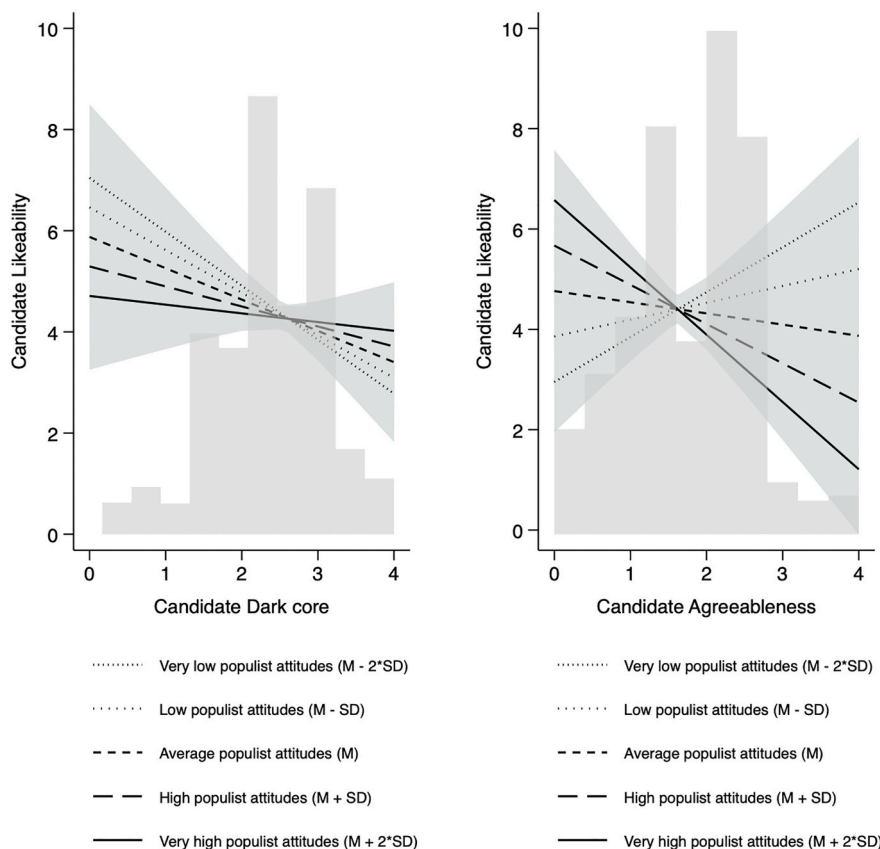[6] Analyses conducted with Stata/MP 16.0.

Fig. 4. Candidate likeability, candidate personality, and voter populist attitudes. Marginal effects.
Marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals based on coefficients in Table B1 (M2 and M3). All other variables fixed at their mean value.

ones, if decidedly weaker for the dark core - but perhaps even stronger for agreeableness (see Fig. B1). Table B4 replicates the main models but controls for the average profile of experts (average left-right, percent female, percent domestic experts, percent with a PhD, average simplicity, and average familiarity) and for the total number of expert ratings on which the personality measures are built. Results are robust. Table B5 replicates the main models but only for respondents that declare following political news closely[7]; a case could be made that respondents that do not follow politics closely are more likely to have more uncompromising opinions about candidates, perhaps driven by a lack of more nuanced knowledge. Results show that, quite the opposite, the same trends exist (and are even slightly stronger) when focused on respondents that follow politics closely - who can be expected to know candidates quite well. Finally, Table B6 controls for whether the *candidate* is a populist or not.[8] Model M1 shows that, unsurprisingly, populists are significantly more liked by respondents high in populist attitudes (Fig. B2). Yet, even controlling for this important covariate, the effect of the dark core and agreeableness on candidate likeability, as a function of respondent's populist attitudes, remains stable (models M2 and M3).

4. Discussion

Several countries have seen in recent years the rise of political leaders and strongmen with dark personality traits - from Donald Trump to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, and more (Nai & Toros, 2020). Against this backdrop, research increasingly highlights that dark traits in political leaders and candidates are likely to matter (Lilienfeld et al., 2012; Watts et al., 2013). Yet, the question whether dark traits are ultimately electorally successful has still received little attention (Nai, 2019a). Beyond the lack of systematic comparative evidence, little attention has been granted to the fact that dark personality in leaders is unlikely to have a stable effect across the board. Quite simply, some voters are apt to find it distasteful, whereas other are likely to appreciate it. In line of research showing the existence of homophily effects - that is, the fact that voters tend to appreciate candidates that showcase a personality profile that matches their own (Caprara & Vecchione, 2017) - this article investigated the moderating role of individual differences to understand the effects of candidates dark traits on their perceived likeability in the eye of the voter. More specifically, it investigated whether voters scoring high on *populist attitudes* are more likely to appreciate dark candidates. Via triangulation between post-election survey data and expert ratings of candidates having competed in 22 elections across the world, results show that, indeed, voters scoring high on populist attitudes are more likely to find dark candidates - high Dark Triad, and (especially) low agreeableness - more likeable. The fact that these effects are rather substantial - especially for (low) agreeableness - and exists above and beyond the effect of important covariates such as the ideological distance between the voter and the candidate, is remarkable. This trend resisted several alternative model specifications, most notably using "adjusted" measures of personality that removed the effect of average expert ideology, controlling

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[7] "How closely do you follow politics on TV, radio, newspapers, or the Internet?" (reversed, from 1 "not at all" to 4 "very closely"). We use here a binary variable that merges categories 0 and 1 (not closely) and 3 and 4 (closely).

[8] 16 candidates out of the 49 can be considered as "populists:" Hanson, Strache, Bolsonaro, Le Pen, Mélenchon, Gauland, Orbán, Berlusconi, Di Maio, Salvini, Đukanović, Martins, Åkesson, Erdoğan, Nuttall, and Trump. See Nai and Martinez i Coma (2019) for details about classification.

for the profile of experts that have assessed the personality of candidates, and controlling for whether the candidates themselves can be classified as "populists." Additional analyses showed that the main effects exist even when replicating the models only for respondents that follow politics closely in the media, suggesting that the trends discussed in this article are not driven by voters that assess candidates without a clear image of who they are.

These results come with some limitations. The geographical scope of the investigation is large, covering 22 elections and 49 unique top candidates worldwide - yet, this coverage is not representative of elections in general. The countries investigated stem from the availability of data in the CSES post-election survey, which is extensive but naturally not complete. The countries investigated are spread across the globe, but are particularly concentrated in Western Europe. The candidates included in the NEGex dataset mostly represent "top" candidates and party leaders, suggesting that the results discussed here might not hold for candidates in general but only exist for politicians "in the spotlight" - for which, naturally, the public is more likely to have an opinion anyway. In this sense, excessive generalizations of the trends discussed in this article - across space, and for all types of political candidates - should be avoided. From a methodological standpoint, the use of expert ratings to evaluate the personality of political leaders can be questioned (Wright & Tomlinson, 2018), even if validity tests seem to suggest that experts are much less "off the mark" that some might fear. The robustness checks discussed above will hopefully dispel these doubts even further.

These limitations notwithstanding, trends discussed in this article pave the way for a more nuanced understanding of the role of (perceived) personality of political elites. From a theoretical standpoint, our results re-affirm the importance of personality traits for candidate likeability (Bittner, 2011), and the fact that normative judgments about the personality of political elites are, ultimately, in the eye of the beholder. If, in general, candidates with a darker personality profile tend to be disliked by the public at large, this is not the case across the board. Quite the opposite, our results indicate that some voters tend to *like* darker candidates - *populists*. The fact that these results exist in large-scale comparative analyses covering countries as diverse as, e.g., Australia, Brazil, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Turkey or the United States, suggests that the cultural and political idiosyncrasies of the context do not play a major role - perhaps suggesting the existence of a universal mechanism linking anti-elite attitudes in the public with the success of political candidates with harsher and more uncompromising personalities. Previous research has shown that voters with dark personality traits tend to like populist candidates (Bakker et al., 2016); this article shows that the reverse is also likely to be true: populist voters prefer dark candidates.

Replication materials

All data and materials are available for replication at the following OSF repository, which also includes the full Appendix: https://osf.io/27ud4/.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111412.

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