

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

2. The Legitimacy of EU Leadership

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.1. Five Vectors of the Legitimacy of EU Leadership

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Findings

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

4.1. *The Legitimacy of EU Leadership*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 5. Stepwise regression including Draghi.

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

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

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