

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Literature Review

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Propositions and Method

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

3.1. Proposition 1

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

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

3.2. Proposition 2

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

3.3. Proposition 3

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

3.4. Method

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

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

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

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

4. Survey Sample and Procedures

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

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

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

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

5. Measures

5.1. Demographic Variables

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

5.2. Character

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

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

5.3. Populist Attitude

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

5.4. Right-Wing Authoritarianism

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

6. Results

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Discussion

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

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

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

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

8. Strengths, Limitations, and Areas for Future Research

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

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

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