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Alessandro Nai & Ferran Martínez i Coma

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The personality of populists: provocateurs, charismatic leaders, or drunken dinner guests?

Alessandro Nai[a] and Ferran Martínez i Coma[b]

[a]Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; [b]Centre for Governance and Public Policy, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

The 'populist phenomenon' has received a lot of attention in recent years. Yet little is known about the populists themselves: who are they? They are often described as bad-mannered provocateurs disrupting the political game, but also as charismatic leaders able to persuade and motivate. Can a populist 'style' or 'personality' be identified? This article assesses to what extent populists score differently from 'mainstream' politicians on established personality inventories. Using a new dataset based on expert ratings for 152 candidates (including 33 populists) having competed in 73 elections worldwide, it is found that populists score lower on agreeableness, emotional stability and conscientiousness. At the same time, populists score higher on extraversion, narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism. These results have important implications for the study of the success of populists in contemporary democracies and beyond.

KEYWORDS Populism; political leaders; personality; Big Five; Dark Triad

It is not uncommon to describe populists as adopting a 'transgressive political style' (Oliver and Rahn 2016: 191) that 'emphasises agitation, spectacular acts, exaggeration, calculated provocations, and the intended breech of political and socio-cultural taboos' (Heinisch 2003: 94). Acting at odds with social norms, taking pleasure in displaying 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016) and behaving as 'drunken dinner guest[s]' (Arditi 2007: 78), populists rely on provocation and a more aggressive rhetoric that sets them apart from other 'mainstream' candidates. Examples abound that support this image of populist candidates as 'bad-mannered provocateurs', from The Netherlands' Geert Wilders being accused of having 'a

CONTACT Alessandro Nai a.nai@uva.nl

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controversial attitude and aberrant political style' (De Landsheer and Kalkhoven 2014: 27) and 'not trying at all to be agreeable' (McBride 2017) to Russia's Vladimir Zhirinovsky described in turn as 'the insane clown prince of Russian politics' (Bruk 2013), 'Russia's Trump' (Nemtsova 2016) and one of 'the usual nut-jobs' (Simpson 2012). At the same time, it is also not uncommon to associate populists with qualities of leadership and charisma. 'Charismatic leadership', a political style that 'helps instill confidence in the leader's capacity to perform' (Barr 2009: 45), seems to be a common characteristic of Latin American left-wing populists, from Chavez in Venezuela to Haya de la Torre in Peru (Roberts 2007), though it is not limited to that region or ideology (Mudde 2004). According to this narrative, populists are able to establish a direct and effective connection with their followers, allowing them to mobilise and persuade them through their energetic, emotional and bold political style (Canovan 1999; Weyland 2001). Charisma is particularly useful in demagogic communication, as it helps politicians 'overcome gaps between their messages and reality' (Barr 2009: 32). Not all scholars agree that charisma is an intrinsic quality of populist leaders – rather, going back to Weberian foundations, some argue that charisma exists in the relationship between the leader and their followers and the way the former is perceived by the latter (e.g. McDonnell 2016). In this case as well, and perhaps even more strongly, the reputation and image of the leader matters.

Much attention has been given to the 'populist phenomenon' in recent years, and yet little is known about the populists themselves: who are they? Is there anything like a populist 'style' or 'personality' that can be identified? Two reasons justify such an exercise. First, candidates' personality and public personas are likely to matter with respect to their chances of electoral success and realisation when holding an office (Bartels 2002; Bittner 2011). Evidence exists for instance that narcissism is associated in US presidents with public persuasiveness and 'presidential greatness', but also with unethical behaviour (Watts *et al.* 2013), or that candidates scoring low in agreeableness tend to be more electorally successful (Joly *et al.* 2018). At the individual level, several studies suggest that voters assess the personality of candidates and take it into account in their voting decisions (e.g. Caprara and Zimbardo 2004). Thus, showing that populists with a specific personality might contribute to explaining their momentum (or absence thereof) in elections worldwide. In addition, there is virtually no description of a populist today which does not refer directly or indirectly to their 'unusual' character or peculiar political style and, perhaps even more fundamentally, the term 'populism' is often used in news

media in a pejorative yet imprecise and inconsistent way (Bale *et al.* 2011); hence, providing systematic evidence, able to substantiate the perceived character or personality of populists, could help make clear which are warranted characterisations and which rhetoric embellishments.

This article provides a systematic comparison of the personality of populists and non-populists worldwide, as assessed by selected samples of experts (Lilienfeld *et al.* 2012; Parry *et al.* 2014; Rubenzer *et al.* 2000; Visser *et al.* 2017). We describe the candidates' personality in terms of both the 'Big Five' (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness: Gerber *et al.* 2011; Mondak 2010; Vecchione *et al.* 2011) and the 'Dark Triad' (narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism: Jonason and Webster 2010; Paulhus and Williams 2002). Our analyses rely on a novel dataset (Nai 2018a) that includes information about the personality of 152 candidates (including 33 populists) who have competed in 73 national elections between June 2016 and December 2018. The dataset covers recent national elections in countries across the globe, from Albania to Zimbabwe. It includes recent elections in 'Western' democracies from the USA to France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Sweden, The Netherlands, Iceland, Spain, Austria, Australia and beyond. Furthermore, it includes data about regions of the globe that are less often studied in the literature, such as the African continent (e.g. Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, Kenya, Rwanda, Madagascar, Cameroon, Zimbabwe), Eastern Europe (e.g. Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Czech Republic, Hungary, Turkey), the Balkans (e.g. Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Macedonia, Kosovo), Eastern Asia (Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia), and Latin America (e.g. Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica). Most importantly, the dataset contains information about the campaigning style of a wide palette of candidates – including many *populist* candidates, such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen, Norbert Hofer, Andrej Babiš, Matteo Salvini. The full list of elections and candidates is in Online Appendix A. Largely confirming our expectations, our analyses show that populists score significantly lower on agreeableness, emotional stability and conscientiousness; right-wing populists score particularly low on this last trait. At the same time, populists score significantly and substantially higher on the 'dark' traits of narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism, but also on extraversion.

The personality of populists

The personality of political figures

The systematic study of psychological personality traits follows a rich tradition. Within the wealth of approaches to classify the human

personality according to a fixed set of traits, the Big Five inventory (Goldberg 1990) is undoubtedly one of the most important. The model identifies five personality traits: *extraversion* (sociability, energy, charisma), *agreeableness* (cooperative and pro-social behaviours, conflict avoidance and tolerance), *conscientiousness* (discipline, responsibility and a sense that life should be organised), *emotional stability* (calm, detachment, low emotional distress and anxiety) and *openness* (curiosity, a tendency to create new experiences). Research in political science has fully embraced the Big Five model, which has been shown to affect a wide range of phenomena, such as political attentiveness (e.g. Mondak 2010), attitudes towards political issues (e.g. Gerber *et al.* 2010), party preferences (e.g. Vecchione *et al.* 2011) or voting behaviour (e.g. Caprara *et al.* 1999).

This approach is, however, incomplete as 'it does not easily discriminate between various antisocial tendencies, such as a propensity for lying or for being vengeful' (Visser *et al.* 2017: 282). Indeed, the literature points to an alternative set of personality traits, either as independent constructs (Dark Triad: Jones and Paulhus 2014; Paulhus and Williams 2002) or in conjunction with the other traits (e.g. the HEXACO model: Jonason and McCain 2012). Three main traits usually comprise the 'dark' side of personality: *narcissism* (ego-reinforcement behaviours, tendency to seek attention and admiration), *psychopathy* (lack of affect, lack of remorse, insensitivity), and *Machiavellianism* (tendency to use manipulation and strategic behaviours). These three traits can be qualified as 'malevolent' or 'aversive' but are still 'within the normal range of functioning' (Furnham *et al.* 2013), in that they do not represent clinical manifestations of disorders (but can be associated with them). Most importantly, these three 'darker' tendencies are separate constructs from the Big Five, and do not simply represent their absence – for instance, narcissism cannot be captured conceptually as the absence of conscientiousness or emotional stability.

In recent years, several studies have assessed the personality traits of political figures – a relatively complex endeavour, as we discuss in the methodological section below. Some work assessed the personality of specific candidates (e.g. Donald Trump: Nai and Maier 2018; Visser *et al.* 2017), whereas other studies presented an assessment of the personality of political figures in general. Thus, for instance, Caprara *et al.* (2003) assessed the personality of 103 Italian politicians and revealed significantly higher levels of extraversion and agreeableness in politicians when compared with the general public; a similar study of women MPs in Italy found that they scored higher than women voters with respect to extraversion, emotional stability and openness (Caprara *et al.* 2010). Joly *et al.*

(2018) found that Belgian MPs score particularly high in conscientiousness and emotional stability, and Nørgaard and Klemmensen (2018) found that Danish MPs were more extravert, conscientious and open than the average Danish voter.

The 'populist personality': three narratives

Does anything like a 'populist personality' exist? The considerable (and rapidly expanding) literature on populism does not, to the best of our knowledge, pay particular attention to this question. The maelstrom of research on populism sees it in turn as 'a pathology, a style, a syndrome and a doctrine' (Stanley 2008: 95). Facing the risk of providing an oversimplified picture, we might classify the existing studies on populism in three categories; they see populism, in turn, as an *ideology* (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2004), a *communication frame* (Aalberg *et al.* 2017; Jagers and Walgrave 2007) or a *performative style* (Moffitt 2016; Moffitt and Tormey 2014). The first strand sees populism as an ideological feature of parties and candidates. Within this approach, most research adopts Cas Mudde's definition of populism as a 'thin-centered' ideology 'that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004: 543). The second strand of research moves beyond the ideological nature of parties and candidates and focuses on the features of their discourse (Aalberg *et al.* 2017; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). In this case, populism becomes 'a communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people, and pretends to speak in their name … [,] a conspicuous exhibition of closeness to (ordinary) citizens' (Jagers and Walgrave 2007: 322). Research in this tradition focuses on different communication features of the 'populist' language, from the use of appeals to the people to anti-establishment rhetoric, or the use of a simpler language defining communication as a colloquial and informal exercise (Ernst *et al.* 2019). A third strand of research looks at the *performative act* of populism and assumes that populists are characterised by a particular political style. Populists refer to 'the people', because they are both their 'central audience … as well as the subject that populists attempt to render present' (Moffitt and Tormey 2014: 391). Acting at odds with social norms and taking pleasure in displaying 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016), populists tend to adopt a political style that demarcates them from other 'mainstream' candidates, often exhibiting more bombastic, exaggerated,

spectacular and ostensibly provocative behaviour intended to breach all 'political and socio-cultural taboos' (Heinisch 2003: 94).

Our article echoes this third line of work. In assessing the existence of a 'populist personality' – or, more precisely, to what extent some personality traits are more likely to appear in populists than in other 'mainstream' political figures – we focus not on populism as a feature of the candidates' ideology, or on their discursive production or campaigning prowess, but rather on *who* the populists intrinsically *are*. We are not aware of studies systematically assessing the personality of populist candidates, and we thus enter uncharted territory. We believe that three intuitive narratives help define the boundaries of what a populist personality might entail.

First, according to what we might call the '*drunken dinner guest*' narrative (Arditi 2007), populists take pleasure in displaying 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016) by introducing 'a more negative, hardened tone to the debate' (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015: 350) and displaying overall a 'low' style of politics (Ostiguy 2009). This narrative highlights a certain aggressiveness in populist candidates, for instance using 'offensive' discourse 'filled with invectives, ironies, sarcasm, and even personal attacks' (Corbu *et al.* 2017: 328). In terms of personality traits, this narrative reflects low scores of agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability. The principal dimension of agreeableness is a desire to promote pro-social and communal interactions through conflict avoidance (John *et al.* 2008), and it thus comes as no surprise that agreeable individuals are usually associated with lower levels of physical and verbal aggression (Tremblay and Ewart 2005). The fact, according to recent comparative evidence (Bakker *et al.* 2016), that voters low in agreeableness seem to prefer populist parties, provides additional support for this rationale. Simultaneously, conscientious individuals usually show constraint in social interactions, characterised by high self-control (Roberts *et al.* 2005) and low anger (Jensen-Campbell *et al.* 2007). The 'drunken' and 'aggressive' display of bad manners thus seems at odds with both agreeableness and conscientiousness. Similarly, individuals low in emotional stability are often described as on edge, anxious and nervous (Mondak 2010), which could explain why they tend to score higher on anger and hostility scales (Tremblay and Ewart 2005). According to this narrative, populists should be perceived as having low scores for those three traits.

A second, somewhat similar narrative, which we label the '*agent provocateur*' narrative, portrays populists as having a political style that 'emphasises agitation, spectacular acts, exaggeration, calculated provocations, and the intended breech of political and socio-cultural taboos' (Heinisch 2003: 94). The 'carnivalesque' style (MacMillan 2017) of the

left-wing populists of Podemos in Spain or the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) in Italy illustrates this narrative well. Trump's 'outrageous threats' (Ahmadian *et al.* 2017) in his 2016 presidential bid – to close off the southern US border, or to throw his opponents in jail – as well as his frequent twitter tantrums are also a good example. The personality components in this narrative are high extraversion, naturally associated with colourful and outrageous rhetoric intended to capture the attention of the audience (Ashton *et al.* 2007), and low emotional stability. Also central in this narrative is the fact that populists are often accused of playing their outrageous role *knowingly*, in a conscious attempt to disrupt politics as usual (Oliver and Rahn 2016). For instance, Schmuck *et al.* (2017: 88) discuss how Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) candidates are known for 'intentionally provoking scandals' for political advantage. Such strategic behaviour is reflected in the 'dark' trait of Machiavellianism: individuals high in this trait are 'cynical, unprincipled, believe in interpersonal manipulation as the key for life success, and behave accordingly' (Furnham *et al.* 2013: 201). Individuals high in this trait have no qualms in adopting emotionally manipulative behaviours (Austin *et al.* 2007), and consistent evidence also exists outside the realm of politics that those high in Machiavellianism are willing to provoke scandals and adopt unethical behaviour for the greater good of their organisation or association (Castille *et al.* 2016). Finally, research on aggressive behaviour shows that individuals scoring high on psychopathy and emotional detachment tend to engage in unprovoked aggression (Reidy *et al.* 2011) – that is, individuals high in psychopathy are more likely to be the instigators of physical and verbal aggression.

Third, the '*charismatic leaders*' narrative portrays populists as being particularly skilled in establishing a direct and effective connection with their followers, mobilising and persuading them through their energetic, emotional and bold political style (Barr 2009). Some have argued that this charismatic component is a characteristic of the populist leaders themselves (Canovan 1999; Weyland 2001), whereas others suggest that it rather determines the relationship between the leaders and their followers (McDonnell 2016). In this article, in agreement with Mudde (2004), we do not argue that charisma is a *defining* component of populism; rather, our point is that populists are more likely than other candidates to exhibit traits that are associated with charismatic leadership. In this sense, two personality traits seem relevant: extraversion and narcissism. Extraversion has been shown as a strong and consistent factor determining charismatic leadership (Bono and Judge 2004), especially during turbulent times or in highly competitive situations (De Hoogh *et al.* 2005), due to the importance of social dominance and bold social interactions for mobilisation

Table 1. Narratives and expectations.

		Big Five					Dark Triad		
Narrative	Logic	E	A	C	Es	O	N	P	M
'Drunken dinner guests'	Taking pleasure in displaying bad manners, 'low' style of politics, low self-control		−	−	−				
'Agents provocateurs'	Agitation, spectacular acts, exaggeration, provocations, and breaching of social taboos	+			−			+	+
'Charismatic leaders'	Energetic and bold style, charisma, self-assurance, self-promotion, fearless dominance	+					+	+	
Expected profile of populists		**+**	**−**	**−**	**−**	**x**	**+**	**+**	**+**

+'Increased prevalence of trait'; − 'Decreased prevalence of trait'; x 'No different prevalence of trait'. E 'Extraversion'; A 'Agreeableness'; C 'Conscientiousness'; Es 'Emotional Stability'; O 'Openness'; N 'Narcissism'; P 'Psychopathy'; M 'Machiavellianism'.

and persuasion of followers. Similarly, political charisma is often associated with narcissistic tendencies (Post 1993; Rosenthal and Pittinsky 2006), due to the dimensions of self-assurance and self-promotion common to both traits. Watts *et al.* (2013), for instance, show that grandiose narcissism is associated, in US presidents, with public persuasiveness and 'presidential greatness'. Beyond charisma, the 'leadership' component of this narrative might be associated with a reputation of boldness and (subclinical) psychopathy. At the individual level, high scores in subclinical psychopathy have been shown to lead to more successful trajectories in socially competitive 'niches' like business (Babiak and Hare 2006) and politics (Lilienfeld *et al.* 2012). Those niches reward people who show high levels of individualism and adaptive behaviour, as well as social boldness (or 'fearless dominance'; Lilienfeld *et al.* 2012) – defined as the 'capacity to remain calm and focused in situations involving pressure or threat' (Patrick *et al.* 2009: 926), a key component of psychopathic personality (Lilienfeld *et al.* 2015). In this sense, a charismatic and bold personality shows signs of psychopathic traits.

It is not our aim to compare and evaluate the heuristic power of these different narratives, and or to suggest that they are individually (or equally) meaningful in making sense of the populist personality and profile. Rather, we use these narratives broadly to support our intuition that populists behave differently to 'mainstream' candidates, and as guiding lines to sketch the frontiers of a new research agenda on 'populist personality'. Taken together, these three narratives set up a framework for the expected differences in personality traits between populists and non-populists, as illustrated in Table 1.

As seen in the bottom row, populists are expected to score higher than mainstream candidates on extroversion and on the Dark Triad, and to score lower on agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability. Only with respect to openness do we not expect to see significant differences between populists and mainstream candidates.

Data and methods

Measuring candidates' personality via expert ratings

Most studies on human personality rely on self-assessments or clinical examinations by psychologists. In the case of political elites, the lack of direct contact between the researchers and the subjects makes these two approaches unpractical. Some studies were able to collect survey data directly from the elites themselves (Dietrich *et al.* 2012; Joly *et al.* 2018; Nørgaard and Klemmensen 2018), but these studies are isolated and concern very specific populations. A second approach for the study of the personality of political elites consists of relying on psychohistoric analyses of secondary data, such as content analysis of political speeches, for instance via machine learning techniques (Ramey *et al.* 2016, 2017). This approach has recently shown promising results, and advances in computational power and sophistication of algorithms will enhance even further the possibilities offered.

In this article, as others before us (Lilienfeld *et al* 2012; Nai and Maier 2018; Rubenzer *et al.* 2000; Visser *et al.* 2017; Watts *et al.* 2013), we rely on *expert assessments* to measure the perceived personality of political figures. Although often limited to selected traits such as narcissism (Glad 2002; Watts *et al.* 2013), psychopathy (Lilienfeld *et al.* 2012) or intellectual brilliance (Simonton 2006), all these studies share the idea that external observers ('experts', 'judges') can provide systematic opinions that can be transformed into quantified and comparable measures of perceived character and personality (Parry *et al.* 2014).

An outstanding debate in the discipline is whether external observers are able adequately to assess the psychological profile of individuals without directly interacting with them in diagnostic practices – a debate that reignited in recent times due to the attention given to the current US president's state of mind.[1] Historically, the so-called 'Goldwater rule' proscribed the establishment of psychological assessments without direct examination, but many voices have emerged in recent months for its relaxation (e.g. Lilienfeld *et al.* 2018), based on a misconceived idea that only direct examination can provide systematic information about a psychological profile. Instead, many argue now that observing the behaviour of public figures can provide unbiased and systematic information about

their psychological profile (Visser *et al.* 2017). We agree, and this article follows that line of enquiry. As far as external observers go, we rely on the ratings provided by experts in politics and elections, instead of ratings provided by the public at large; beyond the fact that mass data for as many candidates as in our dataset is unlikely to exist, there is evidence that voters tend to evaluate the personality of public figures in a relatively simplified way (Caprara *et al.* 2007: 394); for instance, research on 'thin-sliced' decisions suggests that the 'image' of candidates is perceived by voters along the two main heuristics of threat/dominance and competence (Spezio *et al.* 2012). We expect experts, because they are more informed and 'neutral', to be less likely to provide excessively simplified assessments.

Dataset

We use a new comparative dataset about the campaigning strategies of candidates competing in elections worldwide (NEG^{ex}; Nai 2018a; Nai and Maier 2018).[2] It covers all national elections held across the world between June 2016 and December 2018. Data is gathered through a systematic survey distributed to election-specific samples of national and international election experts in the weeks following each election. The experts evaluated several aspects of the election, including the personality of a subsample of the 2–3 leading candidates through separate batteries for the Big Five and the Dark Triad (see below). Evaluations were then aggregated at the candidate level. After excluding missing values on all relevant variables and considering only candidates for which at least two[3] experts provided evaluations, our models are run on 152 candidates having competed in 73 elections worldwide. Information is based on answers provided by 1280 experts, aggregated at the candidate level. Online Appendix A lists all elections and candidates in our dataset and specifies the number of expert opinions gathered for each candidate. The geographical coverage of the dataset is illustrated in Figure 1.

In the absence of a large comparative survey, expert judgements are the most efficient and reliable approach to provide systematic information about perceptions of candidates' reputations. Data gathering is cost-effective, and questioning scholars with proven expertise increases the chances that the main concepts tapped are understood in a similar fashion – thus reducing the risk of cross-cultural biases in comparison. Furthermore, relying on scholars allows expansion of the coverage of the data, as issues such as linguistic expertise or knowledge of cultural dynamics are 'outsourced' to the experts themselves – virtually all contexts can be studied, providing that relevant experts are identified. Finally, expert

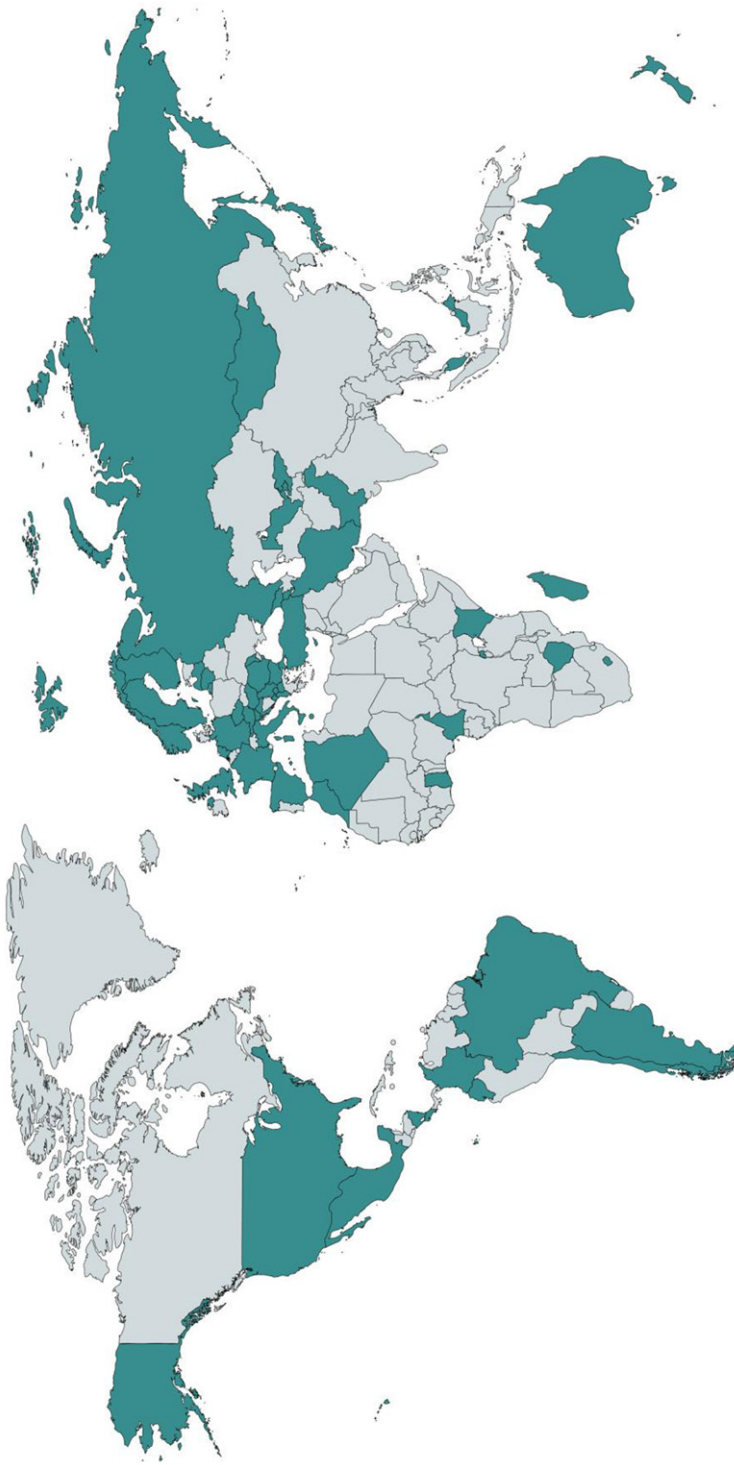

Figure 1. Geographical coverage of the dataset.

ratings can be controlled by each expert's familiarity with the topic studied, which increases the reliability of the aggregated scores.

Experts

As discussed in Nai (2018a), in our case an 'expert' is a national or international scholar with expertise in electoral politics, political communication and/or electoral behaviour for the country where the election was held. We established expertise via the presence of at least one of the following criteria: (1) relevant publications; (2) position held (e.g., professor of electoral behavior) and classes taught; (3) membership of a relevant research group, professional network or organised section of such a group; (4) explicit self-assessed expertise on a professional webpage (e.g. bio on university webpage). Experts were contacted during the week following the election and invited to complete an online questionnaire, in English; they were sent two reminders, respectively one and two weeks afterwards.

On average the 1280 experts that rated the candidates presented in this article lean slightly to the left on a 0–10 left-right scale (M = 4.33, SD = 1.78), 76% are domestic (that is, work in the country for which they were asked to evaluate the election) and 33% are female. Experts declared themselves very familiar with the elections (M = 8.06, SD = 1.75), and estimated that the questions in the survey were relatively easy to answer (M = 6.56, SD = 2.36); both variables range between 0 'very low' and 10 'very high'. Table D1 (Online Appendix D) presents the average profile of experts, according to these five dimensions, for each election surveyed.

The profile of experts can, potentially, alter their assessments (Martínez i Coma and Van Ham 2015; Steenbergen and Marks 2007; Wright and Tomlinson 2018). To assess the extent of these profile effects, we ran a series of models where the experts' evaluations (that is, how they evaluated the personality profile of the candidates) were regressed on their profile. The results, in Online Appendix D (Tables D2 and D3), show that the experts' profile affects their evaluations only very marginally. We also tested whether the composition of the experts' sample for each candidate (that is, the average profile of experts evaluating each candidate) affected how candidates were perceived. Results, discussed in the robustness checks section (Tables B6 and B7 in the online appendix), show again that this is not the case.

Personality measures

The Big Five are measured through the Ten Items Personality Inventory (TIPI: Gosling *et al.* 2003). For each trait experts had to evaluate two statements (e.g. the candidate might be someone that is 'critical,

quarrelsome'), and the underlying personality trait exists as the average value for those statements. Compared to other measures the TIPI is relatively short, and thus less nuanced; however, it has been shown to provide satisfactory results in terms of convergent validity (Ehrhart *et al.* 2009). The battery of questions yields five variables ranging between 0 'very low' and 4 'very high'. The measure of the three 'dark' personality traits is usually done through lengthy batteries of question such as the 40-item NPI for narcissism, the 20-item Mach-IV for Machiavellianism or the 31-item SRP III for psychopathy (Paulhus and Williams 2002). We designed a shorter version of the 'Dirty Dozen' battery by Jonason and Webster (2010), based on the principal component analyses described in their study (Jonason and Webster 2010: 422); we selected the two items that correlated the highest with each trait and used them as a battery (see supplementary material and Table 1). As for the Big Five, the Dark Triad variables range from 0 'very low' to 4 'very high'.

Online Appendix E provides more details about the measures of personality used here. Reliability of the eight traits is relatively high overall,[4] even if, in the case of very short inventories using two statements per trait, like the TIPI, priority is often given to theoretical validity over reliability (Gosling *et al.* 2003) because statements are chosen to reflect different facets of each trait, which improves validity but potentially reduces reliability. Construct consistency is also high (Tables E1 and E2). The relationship between the Big Five and Dark Triad traits has been shown to be sometimes erratic (e.g. Lee and Ashton 2005), but several similar patterns are often reported – for instance, agreeableness has been shown to correlate negatively with all the three 'dark' traits, conscientiousness is negatively associated with psychopathy and Machiavellianism, and narcissism is positively associated with extraversion (Paulhus and Williams 2002). We find all those patterns in our data as well (Table E3). The external validity of our measures is harder to assess, due to the absence of comparable data about the personality, character or public personas of candidates competing in elections worldwide. We were, however, able to collect information about the public personas, character and personality for 68 candidates as described independently in news media, reports and scientific publications (see Table E5 in the online appendix). As appears quite clearly from the online appendix, very often the image of those candidates converges closely with the measure of personality in our dataset.

Identifying populist candidates

No comprehensive 'repertoire of populism' exists that covers all candidates in our database. To create such a repertoire, we assessed whether or

not each candidate in our dataset was referred to as 'populist' in relevant published research. We relied on the few existing comparative works (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Mudde 2007), systematic collections of case studies (Aalberg *et al.* 2017; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008) and additional single case studies for selected countries (e.g. Bos and Brants 2014; Gurov and Zankina 2013), all based on similar definitions of 'populism' as an ideology that advocates people-centrism and anti-elitism (Mudde 2004) or more generally an opposition between the 'common people' and the (corrupt, wicked) elites. Some of the work collected refers to populism in general (Aalberg *et al.* 2017; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011), whereas some focuses on particular types such as right-wing populism (Ennser 2012; Mudde 2007). We thus identified 33 candidates (out of 152)[5] who can be qualified as 'populists'. In the majority of cases multiple independent scientific references per candidate were identified,[6] which we use as an indicator of converging consensus over the populist nature of any given candidate in the list. The list of all populist candidates, including the references used to establish the classification, is presented in Online Appendix C.

Covariates

Our models control for a series of covariates. At the candidate level, we control for the incumbency status and ideology of candidates through a scale ranging from 1 'far left' to 7 'far right'; this control is important, as some traits are sometimes associated with political ideology (e.g. conscientiousness with conservative/right-wing ideology and openness with liberal/left-wing ideology; Gerber *et al.* 2011). We then control for the gender of candidates, their age and their electoral success (percentage of votes received during the election). At the contextual level, we use a binary variable that separates countries with a PR electoral system (including mixed member proportional) from countries with a plurality/majority system (including mixed member majoritarian; Gallagher 2014); we adapt the formula proposed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) for the effective number of parties (ENPP) to measure the total (effective) number of candidates. Finally, a binary variable sorts presidential (2) from legislative (1) elections. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

Results

Populists

Table 3 illustrates the personality scores of the 33 populist candidates in our dataset, obtained by aggregating the expert ratings on the two batteries for the Big Five and Dark Triad. At a glance, it appears that

Table 2. Descriptive statistics (missing values excluded).

Level	Variable	Measure	*N*	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Candidate	Extraversion	0 'Very low' to 4 'Very high'	152	2.30	0.77	0.13	3.75
	Agreeableness	0 'Very low' to 4 'Very high'	152	1.80	0.72	0.18	4.00
	Conscientiousness	0 'Very low' to 4 'Very high'	152	2.67	0.67	0.68	3.80
	Emotional stability	0 'Very low' to 4 'Very high'	152	2.27	0.81	0.43	4.00
	Openness	0 'Very low' to 4 'Very high'	152	1.98	0.72	0.13	3.83
	Narcissism	0 'Very low' to 4 'Very high'	152	2.77	0.70	0.63	4.00
	Psychopathy	0 'Very low' to 4 'Very high'	152	2.19	0.84	0.17	3.85
	Machiavellianism	0 'Very low' to 4 'Very high'	152	2.19	0.77	0.33	3.75
	Populist	0 'Not populist', 1 'Populist'	152	0.22	0.41	0.00	1.00
	Incumbent	0 'Challenger', 1 'Incumbent'	152	0.32	0.47	0.00	1.00
	Success	Percentage of votes received (0–100%)	152	30.25	16.47	0.48	88.61
	Left-right	1 'Far left' to 7 'Far right'	152	4.24	1.57	1.00	7.00
	Female	0 'Male', 1 'Female'	152	0.14	0.35	0.00	1.00
	Year born	Year of birth	152	1961.13	12.00	1925	1990
Election	Electoral system: PR	0 'Plurality/majority', 1 'PR'	73	0.66	0.48	0.00	1.00
	Effective *N* of candidates	Continuous score (Laakso and Taagepera 1979)	73	3.96	1.80	1.02	8.55
	Presidential election	1 'Legislative', 2 'Presidential'	73	1.42	0.50	1.00	2.00

Table 3. Personality of populists in our sample; average scores.

		Big Five					Dark Triad		
		E	A	C	Es	O	N	P	M
Jimmie Åkesson	Sweden	2.50	0.71	2.50	1.64	1.14	2.07	2.64	1.93
Andrej Babiš	Czech Republic	2.86	1.14	2.86	1.82	2.50	3.44	2.83	2.91
Jair Bolsonaro	Brazil	2.75	1.15	1.83	1.03	1.60	3.50	3.17	3.33
Boyko Borisov	Bulgaria	3.00	1.33	1.83	1.17	2.02	3.50	2.60	3.10
Luigi Di Maio	Italy	2.48	1.21	2.60	1.83	1.64	2.83	1.83	2.28
Milo Đukanović	Montenegro	2.40	1.60	3.40	2.20	1.60	2.98	2.83	2.75
Iván Duque Márquez	Colombia	2.22	1.95	3.19	3.02	1.26	2.58	1.83	1.75
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Turkey	3.16	0.63	2.69	0.75	2.06	3.63	3.50	2.92
Arlene Foster	Northern Ireland	1.73	0.85	2.17	1.71	1.29	2.54	3.69	2.66
Alexander Gauland	Germany	2.21	0.34	2.39	1.99	1.27	3.10	3.58	2.62
Nikola Gruevski	Macedonia	2.13	1.07	2.01	1.23	1.22	3.83	3.85	3.29
Norbert Hofer	Austria	2.33	1.45	3.16	2.20	1.31	3.06	2.84	3.28
Siv Jensen	Norway	2.67	1.00	3.00	2.00	2.08	2.39	2.57	1.68
Imran Khan	Pakistan	2.88	1.75	2.38	1.88	2.75	2.95	2.19	1.96
Cr. Fernández de Kirchner	Argentina	3.00	0.33	2.97	0.50	2.30	3.13	2.28	2.50
Albin Kurti	Kosovo	3.08	2.13	3.58	2.92	2.88	2.83	1.33	0.67
Marine Le Pen	France	2.93	1.07	2.43	2.14	2.01	3.00	3.26	3.28
Andrés M. López Obrador	Mexico	2.54	1.43	2.14	1.75	1.96	3.29	2.16	2.08
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	France	3.42	1.50	2.33	0.73	3.05	3.25	1.96	2.67
Paul Nuttall	UK	2.33	1.08	1.00	1.50	1.17	3.25	3.00	2.13
Michelle O'Neill	Northern Ireland	2.92	2.35	3.06	3.10	2.17	2.61	1.90	2.17
Tomio Okamura	Czech Republic	2.90	0.60	2.28	0.98	1.63	3.73	3.20	2.92
Viktor Orbán	Hungary	3.10	0.80	3.33	2.00	2.10	3.50	3.25	2.88
Daniel Ortega	Nicaragua	0.83	0.33	2.17	0.67	0.67	3.33	3.50	2.50
Vladimir Putin	Russia	2.24	2.00	2.92	2.92	1.93	3.67	3.25	2.67
Matteo Salvini	Italy	3.03	1.40	1.98	1.10	2.43	2.83	2.42	2.33
Ivan Vilibor Sinčić	Croatia	2.40	0.80	2.10	1.30	2.80	2.83	1.50	2.17
Heinz-Christian Strache	Austria	3.33	1.17	3.33	2.33	1.00	3.31	2.38	2.11
Donald Trump	USA	3.61	0.18	0.68	0.43	1.88	3.91	3.66	3.44
Aleksandar Vučić	Serbia	2.30	1.20	2.10	0.90	1.60	3.67	2.67	2.50
Geert Wilders	The Netherlands	2.50	0.41	2.73	1.63	1.50	3.11	3.58	1.86
Vladimir Zhirinovsky	Russia	3.55	0.75	0.89	0.72	1.50	3.31	2.86	3.38
Gennady Zyuganov	Russia	1.63	1.00	2.57	2.53	0.94	2.25	2.63	2.50

Note: all variables range between 0 'very low' and 4 'very high'.
E 'Extraversion'; A 'Agreeableness'; C 'Conscientiousness'; Es 'Emotional Stability'; O 'Openness'; N 'Narcissism'; P 'Psychopathy'; M 'Machiavellianism'.

populists tend to score high on perceived extraversion (an exception being Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, who a former colleague described as having 'a prison personality: Lonely, solitary, mistrustful, hard'[7]) but lower on all four remaining socially 'desirable' traits, and especially on agreeableness. Their scores on the three 'dark' traits are also relatively high overall. As perhaps the best symptomatic example, our data reveal that Trump's personality is characterised by extreme extraversion, off-the-charts narcissism, high psychopathy and Machiavellianism, very low agreeableness and low emotional stability – all of which is in line with several accounts published elsewhere (e.g. Hamblin 2016; McAdams 2016, 2016; Nai and Maier 2018; Nai *et al.* 2019; Olbermann 2016; Visser *et al.* 2017).

A series of t-tests reveal that the personality of these 33 populists is relatively homogeneous in terms of left-right ideology and gender. Even

though the sample is not big enough to detect small but meaningful differences due to low statistical power, t-tests highlight only a handful of significant differences for these two characteristics. Right-wing populists[8] score significantly higher on *psychopathy* (M = 2.99, SD = 0.11) than left-wing populists (M = 2.32, SD = 0.23); the difference between the two is quite substantial,[9] $t(29) = -2.88$, $p < 0.007$, $d = 1.07$, and in line with studies finding a positive association between right-wing ideology and social dominance orientation (e.g. Perry and Sibley 2012). Female populists ($N = 5$) score significantly lower on *narcissism* (M = 2.73, SD = 0.14) than male populists (M = 3.20, SD = 0.08), $t(31) = 2.22$, $p < 0.034$, $d = 0.80$, which is in line with results found for leaders in general (e.g. Jørstad 1996). Incumbency status does play a bigger role, with four traits out of eight showing significantly different scores across challengers ($N = 26$) and incumbents ($N = 7$); incumbent populists score higher than challengers on *narcissism* (incumbents: M = 3.43, SD = 0.16; challengers: M = 3.04, SD = 0.09, $t(31) = -2.03$, $p < 0.050$, $d = 0.73$), *psychopathy* (incumbents: M = 3.38, SD = 0.15; challengers: M = 2.58, SD = 0.12, $t(31) = -3.14$, $p < 0.004$, $d = 1.13$), and Machiavellianism – this last only at $p < 0.1$ (incumbents: M = 2.86, SD = 0.10; challengers: M = 2.43, SD = 0.13, $t(31) = -1.70$, $p < 0.099$, $d = 0.61$). However, incumbents score lower than challengers on *extraversion* at $p < 0.1$ (incumbents: M = 2.31, SD = 0.32; challengers: M = 2.72, SD = 0.09, $t(31) = 1.71$, $p < 0.097$, $d = 0.61$). These results suggest that some personality traits are more likely to drive electoral success for populist candidates, much in the same way as they are important predictors of electoral success for all candidates in general (Joly *et al.* 2018; Nai 2018a, 2018b).

Populists vs. mainstream candidates

Moving towards our main research question, Figure 2 illustrates the average differences in personality traits between populists and 'mainstream' candidates. A series of t-tests suggest that all these differences are statistically significant, even if only at $p < 0.1$ in one case (openness). Thus, populists score *significantly higher* than mainstream candidates on *extraversion* ($t(150) = -2.85$, $p < 0.005$, $d = 0.47$), *narcissism* ($t(150) = -3.47$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.57$), *psychopathy* ($t(150) = -4.62$, $p < 0.000$, $d = 0.75$) and *Machiavellianism* ($t(150) = -2.85$, $p < 0.005$, $d = 0.47$). At the same time, populists score *significantly lower* than mainstream candidates on *agreeableness* ($t(150) = 7.15$, $p < 0.000$, $d = 1.17$), *conscientiousness* ($t(150) = 2.18$, $p < 0.031$, $d = 0.36$), *emotional stability* ($t(150) = 5.30$, $p < 0.000$, $d = 0.87$), and *openness* – but only at $p < 0.1$ ($t(150) = 1.67$, $p < 0.097$, $d = 0.27$).

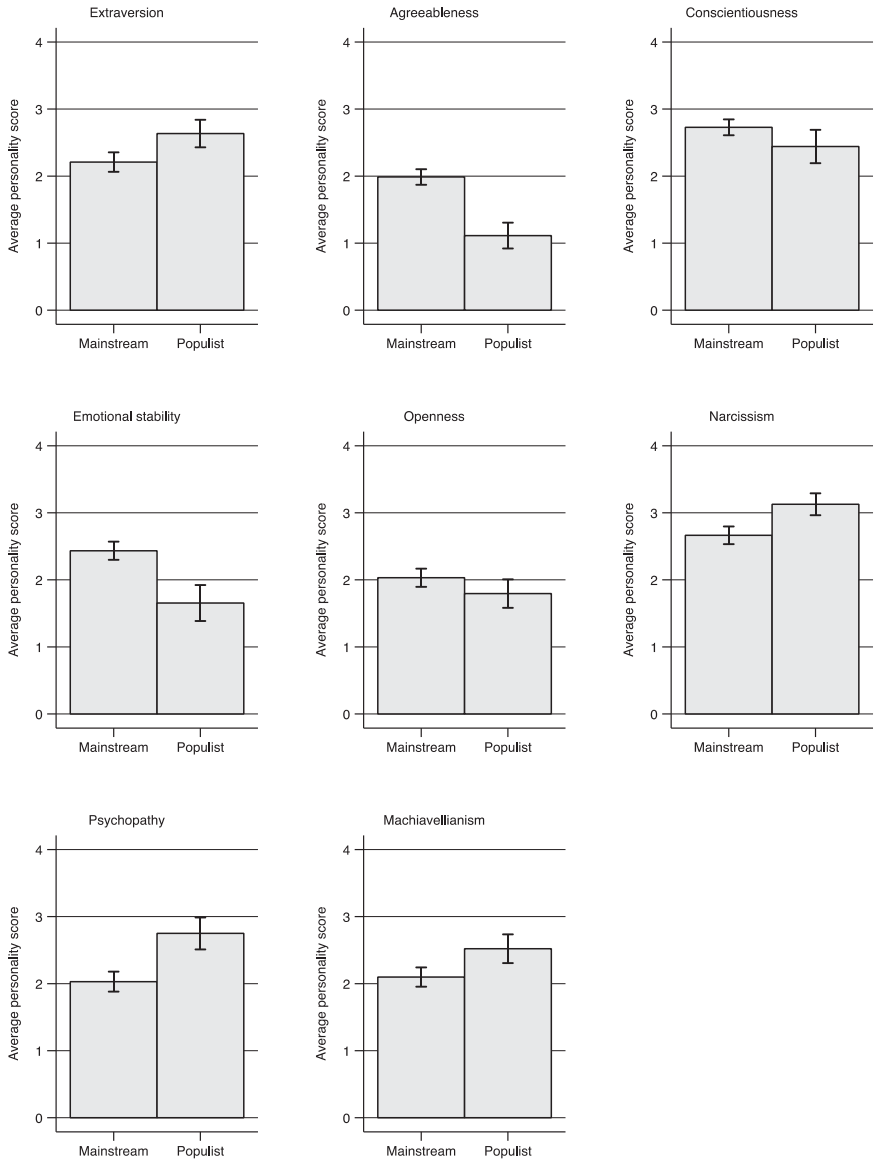

Figure 2. Average personality scores of populists and mainstream candidates.
N (mainstream candidates) = 119
N (populists) = 33

These trends are all in line with the expectations presented earlier (Table 1). To reduce the risk of spurious results, we next test for the effect of populism on the personality of candidates, controlling for several covariates at the candidate and context levels. Table 4 reports models for the five 'socially desirable' traits (Big Five), whereas Table 5 reports the same models but for the 'socially malevolent' traits (Dark Triad).

Table 4. Perceived Big Five traits by candidate profile and context.

	Extraversion			Agreeableness			Conscientiousness			Emotional stability			Openness		
	Coef	Se	Sig	Coef	Se	Sig	Coef	Se	Sig	Coef	Se	Sig	Coef	Se	Sig
Populist	0.41	(0.17)	*	−0.83	(0.13)	***	−0.41	(0.14)	**	−0.86	(0.16)	***	−0.17	(0.15)	
Incumbent	−0.21	(0.16)		−0.22	(0.13)	†	−0.28	(0.13)	*	−0.12	(0.15)		−0.53	(0.15)	***
Success	−0.00	(0.00)		0.00	(0.00)		0.01	(0.00)	**	0.01	(0.00)		0.01	(0.00)	
Left-right	0.04	(0.04)		−0.09	(0.03)	**	0.01	(0.03)		−0.04	(0.04)		−0.08	(0.04)	*
Female	0.21	(0.19)		−0.05	(0.15)		0.03	(0.15)		0.01	(0.18)		0.25	(0.17)	
Year born	0.00	(0.00)		−0.00	(0.00)		−0.00	(0.00)		−0.00	(0.00)	*	0.00	(0.00)	
Proportional rep.	0.21	(0.16)		0.03	(0.12)		0.31	(0.12)	*	0.08	(0.14)		0.05	(0.14)	
EN candidates	−0.01	(0.05)		−0.01	(0.04)		0.04	(0.04)		−0.00	(0.04)		0.01	(0.04)	
Presidential elect	−0.12	(0.18)		−0.21	(0.14)		−0.13	(0.14)		−0.07	(0.16)		−0.20	(0.16)	
MENA[a]	0.08	(0.27)		−0.12	(0.21)		−0.21	(0.22)		−0.44	(0.25)	†	0.19	(0.24)	
Sub-Sah Africa	0.68	(0.32)	*	−0.03	(0.25)		−0.53	(0.25)	*	−0.89	(0.29)	**	0.18	(0.28)	
Lat Am & Car	0.08	(0.25)		−0.20	(0.19)		−0.54	(0.19)	**	−0.72	(0.22)	**	−0.21	(0.21)	
Ctr & S Asia	0.61	(0.37)	†	−0.03	(0.28)		−0.04	(0.29)		−0.75	(0.33)	*	0.12	(0.32)	
E & SE Asia	0.17	(0.28)		−0.58	(0.21)	**	−0.52	(0.21)	*	−0.63	(0.25)	*	0.00	(0.24)	
Eastern Europe	0.18	(0.22)		−0.38	(0.16)	*	−0.41	(0.17)	*	−0.59	(0.20)	**	−0.19	(0.19)	
Southern Europe	−0.03	(0.23)		−0.29	(0.17)	†	−0.51	(0.18)	**	−0.54	(0.20)	**	0.00	(0.20)	
Intercept	0.91	(1.69)		4.43	(1.32)	***	4.04	(1.36)	**	6.03	(1.57)	***	1.38	(1.52)	
N (candidates)	152			152			152			152			152		
N (elections)	73			73			73			73			73		
R2	0.136			0.379			0.249			0.316			0.185		
Model Chi2	21.07			82.40			44.72			62.42			30.71		

Note: All models are random-effect hierarchical linear regressions (HLM) where candidates are nested within elections. All dependent variables vary between 0 'very low' and 4 'very high'.

[a]For all regions, the reference category is 'Western and Northern Europe' (includes the USA, Australia and New Zealand). East & SE Asia includes Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{\dagger}p < 0.1$.

Table 5. Perceived Dark Triad traits by candidate profile and context.

	Narcissism			Psychopathy			Machiavellianism		
	Coef	Se	Sig	Coef	Se	Sig	Coef	Se	Sig
Populist	0.37	(0.14)	**	0.60	(0.16)	***	0.35	(0.15)	*
Incumbent	0.21	(0.13)	†	0.41	(0.16)	**	0.46	(0.15)	**
Success	−0.00	(0.00)		0.00	(0.00)		0.00	(0.00)	
Left–right	0.12	(0.03)	***	0.16	(0.04)	***	0.13	(0.04)	**
Female	−0.42	(0.16)	**	0.01	(0.18)		−0.09	(0.18)	
Year born	0.00	(0.00)	†	0.00	(0.00)		0.00	(0.00)	
Proportional rep.	−0.06	(0.16)		−0.12	(0.15)		−0.30	(0.15)	*
EN candidates	0.02	(0.05)		0.06	(0.05)		0.08	(0.05)	
Presidential elect	0.25	(0.17)		0.21	(0.17)		0.33	(0.17)	†
MENA[a]	−0.28	(0.26)		−0.12	(0.26)		−0.17	(0.26)	
Sub-Sah Africa	0.24	(0.30)		0.11	(0.30)		0.22	(0.30)	
Lat Am & Car	0.27	(0.24)		0.22	(0.23)		0.44	(0.23)	†
Ctr & S Asia	0.01	(0.35)		0.26	(0.34)		−0.10	(0.35)	
E & SE Asia	0.10	(0.27)		0.19	(0.26)		−0.04	(0.26)	
Eastern Europe	0.19	(0.22)		0.36	(0.20)	†	0.40	(0.21)	†
Southern Europe	0.13	(0.22)		0.20	(0.21)		0.31	(0.22)	
Intercept	−0.61	(1.44)		−1.43	(1.62)		−1.67	(1.56)	
N (candidates)	152			152			152		
N (elections)	73			73			73		
R2	0.255			0.319			0.264		
Model Chi2	47.47			63.13			48.90		

Note: All models are random-effect hierarchical linear regressions (HLM) where candidates are nested within elections. All dependent variables vary between 0 'very low' and 4 'very high'.
[a]For all regions, the reference category is 'Western and Northern Europe' (includes the USA, Australia and New Zealand). East & SE Asia includes Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.
$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{\dagger}p < 0.1$.

Looking first at the Big Five (Table 4), the image of populists as 'drunken dinner guests' with bad manners seems to find confirmation across the candidates in our database. Keeping constant characteristics of candidates such as their incumbency status, electoral success, ideological position and socio-demographic profile, as well as characteristics of the context in which the election took place, our models show that populists score significantly lower on agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability. The difference between populists and 'mainstream' candidates is particularly strong for agreeableness and emotional stability, suggesting that populists suffer from a disadvantage in terms of image – at least in terms of socially desirable reputation traits. Table 4 shows, furthermore, the higher score on agreeableness for populists, shown in a bivariate way, resisting the inclusion of controls at the candidate and context levels. We did not expect any particular effect for openness – and, indeed, this is the only trait that does not differ significantly between populists and mainstream candidates. All these trends confirm our expectations of the 'socially desirable' Big Five. Our expectations also find support when it comes to the three 'dark' traits (Table 5). Populists score significantly higher on narcissism, Machiavellianism and especially

psychopathy. Coupled with the higher scores shown for extraversion, high scores on the three 'dark' traits go in the direction of both the 'agent provocateur' and 'charismatic leader' narratives described earlier.

Robustness checks

Online Appendix B presents several robustness tests. First, we reversed the logic and tested to what extent personality traits determine whether candidates are populists or not. Table B1 presents four logistic regressions for the Big Five (M1 and M2) and Dark Triad (M3 and M4), respectively without and with controls at the candidate and context levels. These models test for the joint effect of all personality traits within each inventory, to ensure for mutual control. Results show that candidates scoring high in extraversion and low on agreeableness are more likely to be classified as populists, and so are candidates scoring high in narcissism and psychopathy. Indeed, with the data at hand, we are of course not able to assess to what extent people with (latent) populist traits do not self-select into populist movements – that is, we are not able to test for the fully reversed causal story that personality drives the populist status. In this sense, results in Table B1 simply suggest that reversing the independent and dependent variables in our models does not lead, overall, to a radically different conclusion on the association between personality traits and populism. Further research should disentangle the direction of causality in a more detailed fashion, for instance via longitudinal data. Second, we showed elsewhere that populist candidates are more likely to campaign in a harsh and negative way (Nai 2018a, 2018b); to ensure that it is not the populists' campaign that drives their personality perception, we added to the general models an interaction effect between the tone of the candidates' campaign (positive vs. negative) and the variable that sorts populists from mainstream candidates; results (Tables B2 and B3) show that this should not be the case, as no significant interaction is found across the board. Third, we assessed to what extent the dynamics at play are influenced by differences between a left-wing versus a right-wing ideology of candidates. We replicated the main models adding an interaction effect between the ideology of the candidate and the variable that sorts populists from mainstream candidates (Tables B4 and B5) and found no effects except for conscientiousness: right-wing populists score lower on conscientiousness than right-wing non-populists, whereas the difference between the two is not significant for left-wing candidates; the effect is substantiated in Figure 3, via marginal effects.

Fourth, we replicated the models controlling for the average experts' profile – that is, the composition of each country sample of experts along

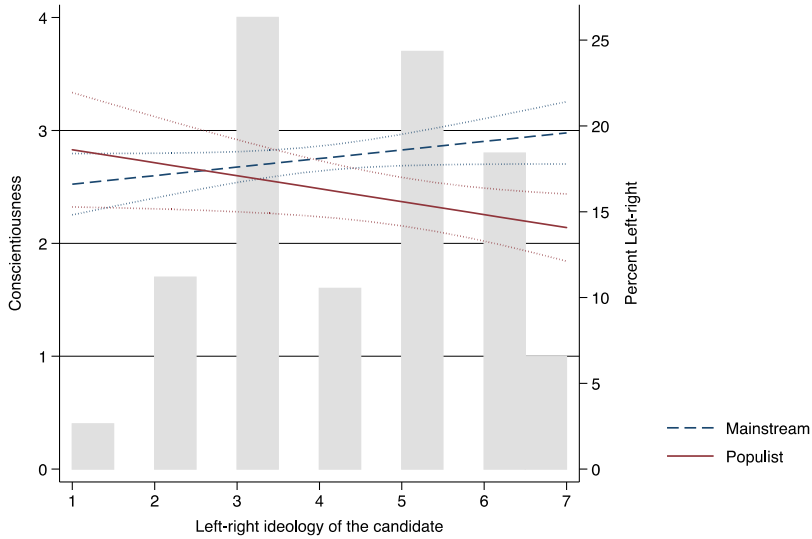

Figure 3. Conscientiousness by populism * left–right.
Note: marginal effects with 95% CI, based on coefficients in Table B4.
Left–right varies between 1 'Far left' and 7 'Far right'.

some major characteristics (average familiarity with the election, average difficulties in answering the questionnaire, percentage of female experts, average left-right position and percentage of domestic experts); results are presented in Tables B6 and B7. We find some scattered effects (e.g. candidates are evaluated as more extrovert when on average more female experts are in the sample), but most importantly all results discussed above resist and are thus not affected by the composition of the expert samples. Finally, Tables B8 and B9 replicate the models but only for candidates for which at least five independent experts provided measures of candidates' reputation. Results, although based on a smaller subsample of candidates, are robust.

Discussion and conclusion

As we write these lines, populism is increasing in momentum. Although the electoral success of populist candidates and parties in some countries might be weaker than some observers predicted, it is undisputable that the topic is a regular 'guest' in the news media headlines and at scientific conferences. Beyond its ubiquity, this attention seems to be accompanied by a specific set of narratives that describe populists as particular political animals with distinct character traits – unpleasantness, proclivity for provocation, charisma, aggressiveness and a political style ostensibly at odds with social norms (Arditi 2007; Heinisch 2003; Moffitt 2016). Yet, to

the best of our knowledge, very little comparative evidence exists that the public persona of populist candidates indeed differs from the one of their 'establishment' counterparts. In this article, we have provided systematic evidence of this, by comparing the personality of populist and non-populist candidates competing in elections worldwide over the course of a year, via ratings provided by independent scholars. Based on the reputation of 152 candidates (including 33 populists) having competed in 73 elections across the globe, our results suggest that populists score significantly lower than non-populists in perceived agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability but score significantly higher in perceived extraversion, narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism. All in all, from our analyses emerges a pattern of 'populist reputation' which portrays them as disagreeable, narcissistic and potentially unhinged, yet extrovert and socially bold – in short, bad-tempered and provocative, but charismatic.

These results matter for a deeper understanding of the populist phenomenon in four ways. First, the large-scale scope of the data illustrates dynamics that are not (or less) bound to specific geographical and political contexts. In this sense, we contribute to research on populism beyond some well-known cases, towards the development of a comparative systematic understanding of the phenomenon, in line with recent collections of systematic multi-country studies (Aalberg *et al.* 2017; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). Second, our results are informative about the resonance of entrenched narratives that are commonly used when describing populists worldwide. If, for a given candidate, a consensus seems to exist between scholars and commentators about their character and public image, then the chances are that such traits are also perceived by the public at large – and, potentially, resonate in its electoral choices. Third, there is evidence that the public personas of political figures are not unrelated to their performance (Bartels 2002; Joly *et al.* 2018). For instance, Watts *et al.* (2013) show that US presidents higher in reported narcissism score more favourably in public persuasiveness and 'presidential greatness' but are also more likely to be associated with unethical behaviour (see also Glad 2002). Fourth, and more importantly, our result could help shed light on the populist phenomenon: that is, the (real or alleged) increase of populist movements across established democracies. Indeed, two alternative rationales link candidates' personality with their electoral success. On the one hand, voters might be more likely to support candidates with personalities that 'match' their own, as individuals with congruent personality profiles tend to 'like' each other (e.g. Selfhout *et al.* 2010). In politics, evidence of congruence exists between party leaders and their supporters (Caprara *et al.* 2003); more generally, voters tend to select candidates

whose traits match their own (Caprara and Zimbardo 2004; but see Klingler *et al.* 2018). Fortunato *et al.* (2018) suggest that similar mechanisms were also at play during the 2016 US election. On the other hand, certain candidate personality profiles could be more appealing for some voters but not for others. Although the evidence in this sense is more limited, some studies suggest, for example, that voters scoring low in agreeableness are more likely to support populist candidates (Bakker *et al.* 2016), who have been shown to exhibit a specific set of personality traits – as we discussed in this article. Similarly, we could expect candidates high in conscientiousness to be preferred by voters on the right, and candidates high in openness and agreeableness by voters on the left, reflecting correlations between ideology and personality found at the individual level (Gerber *et al.* 2011; Vecchione and Caprara 2009).

In this sense, then, providing systematic evidence of the personality of populists might contribute to explaining their momentum (or absence thereof) in elections worldwide, now and in the future.

Notes

1. See, for instance: Dan P. McAdams, 'The mind of Donald Trump', *The Atlantic*, June 2016; Chris Cillizza, 'The case for Donald Trump's mental fitness', *CNN online*, 4 January 2018.
2. https://www.alessandro-nai.com/negative-campaigning-comparative-data
3. Below, we discuss a series of robustness checks that replicate the analyses but with a more restrictive condition (minimum five independent experts per candidate); results are overall very similar, although based on a smaller sample of candidates.
4. The reliability scores are, respectively, $\alpha = 0.74$ (extraversion), $\alpha = 0.59$ (agreeableness), $\alpha = 0.78$ (conscientiousness), $\alpha = 0.84$ (emotional stability), $\alpha = 0.65$ (openness), $\alpha = 0.85$ (narcissism), $\alpha = 0.89$ (psychopathy), and $\alpha = 0.78$ (Machiavellianism).
5. Two additional candidates could have made the list: Spain's Pablo Iglesias (*Podemos*) and Hungary's Gabor Vona (*Jobbik*). For these two candidates not enough experts provided their ratings on the personality batteries, which is the reason why we excluded them from our analysis altogether.
6. We also ran tests based on a more restrictive classification that codes candidates for which only one scientific reference was found as non-populists (this is the case of three candidates; Kosovo's Albin Kurti, Montenegro's Milo Đukanović and Russia's Gennady Zyuganov). All effects are virtually identical, regardless of the classification used. Results for these additional tests are available from the authors upon request.
7. Ed Vulliamy, 'In the lions' den again', *The Guardian*, 2 September 2001.
8. We used a simplified variable that sorts populists on the left (including centre-left; $N = 8$) from populists on the right (including centre-right; $N = 23$); two candidates are excluded from this t-test because they are considered as ideologically centrists (Croatia's Ivan Vilibor Sinčić and Italy's Luigi di Maio).

9. To compute the effect size (Cohen's d) for independent samples t-tests, we used the following approximation: $(2 \times t)/\sqrt{(df)}$.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Alessandro Nai is Assistant Professor in Political Communication and Journalism at the University of Amsterdam. Recent publications have appeared in *European Journal of Political Research*, *Political Psychology*, *Electoral Studies*, *Personality and Individual Differences*, *Government & Opposition*, *Journal of Political Marketing*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, and more. He is Associate Editor of the *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*. [a.nai@uva.nl]

Ferran Martinez i Coma is lecturer at Griffith University. His research interests include: political behaviour, public opinion and electoral integrity. He has published in *European Journal of Political Research*, *Electoral Studies*, *Democratization* and *Party Politics*, amongst others. [f.martinezcoma@griffith.edu.au]

ORCID

Alessandro Nai http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7303-2693
Ferran Martínez i Coma http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3486-6596

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