

Candidate Authenticity: ‘To thine own self be true’

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‘Today you are You,

That is truer than true.

There is no one alive who is Youer than You’ – (Dr Seuss 1959)

In recent electoral contests, political observers and media outlets increasingly report on the level of “authenticity” of political candidates. However, even though this term has become commonplace in political commentary, it has received little attention in empirical electoral research. In this study, we identify the characteristics that we argue make a politician “authentic”. After theoretically discussing the different dimensions of this trait, we propose a survey battery aimed at measuring perceptions of the authenticity of political candidates. Testing our measure using data sets from different countries, we show that the answers to our items load on one latent concept that we call “authenticity”. Furthermore, perceptions of candidate authenticity seem to correlate strongly with evaluations of political parties and leaders, and with vote intention, while they are empirically distinguishable from other traits. We conclude that candidate authenticity is an important trait that should be taken into account by future research.

Keywords: Authenticity; candidate traits; political candidates; elections

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Party leaders play a key role in the outcomes of modern elections (Garzia 2017). Media attention, throughout the electoral cycle, often attributes the political success of parties and candidates to the personal characteristics of political actors. This increasingly personalized political arena has been driven, in part, by the changing way in which voters interact with political actors through the different media. Following a trend of what some political scholars refer to as the ‘presidentialization of politics’ (Poguntke and Webb 2005), more than ever before, political candidates are increasingly visible and their character more exposed. A substantial literature in political science suggests that the character traits of these political candidates and, in particular, party leaders, are very important in attracting voters to political parties (Mughan 2000; Aaldering and Van Der Pas forthcoming) as they influence voters’ evaluations of political candidates (King 2002).

The last decade has also seen the rise of so-called “anti-politics”, with growing distrust in politics and even political cynicism. This has been presented as a reaction to the professionalization of politics in the second half of the 20th century, and to the increase in senior political figures lacking substantial first-hand experience of the world outside politics (King 2002). Lacking attachments to “ordinary” or “real” people, the stereotypical politician comes to be seen as primarily interested in obtaining office above all else, even if this means advocating policies they know they cannot deliver, perhaps putting the interests of their funders above their own or those of their constituents (Kuran 2016). Such changing perceptions of the political class have been related to an erosion in political trust¹ and to a fueling of anti-politics sentiment (Clarke et al. 2018).

In this context of an increasing prominence of candidate personalities and distrust in politicians, candidate “authenticity” has recently received much media and public attention as a potentially desirable characteristic for candidates to possess in the eyes of voters. Politicians

¹ Figures from April 2019, for instance, show that only 17% of Americans trust the government in Washington to do what is right ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ (Pew Research Center 2019).

of both the left and right such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Donald Trump in the U.S., Jeremy Corbyn and Nigel Farage in the U.K., and Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, have all been described as “authentic”.² As an example, searching for the terms “authenticity” or “authentic” on the Factiva news database³ uncovers 11,200 news items in the past 5 years on Donald Trump. Yet, despite the widespread use of the term in media output, it largely remains a “buzzword” that has not yet been conceptualized, receiving little attention in electoral research. More specifically, while some academic research has referred to the term “authenticity,” less attention has been paid to empirically measuring voter perceptions of this supposedly important candidate quality.

In this study we present a detailed description of the concept, along with a battery of items designed to capture the perceived “authenticity” of party leaders and candidates. First, we offer a theoretical discussion of the concept. We next distinguish authenticity from other candidate traits. This discussion prepares the theoretical ground for the empirics, our other main contribution. In that respect, our test battery aims to identify the key components of authenticity. Then, we assess the battery, seeking validation of the items across different countries: the United States, Wales, Scotland, Denmark, Belgium, and Spain.⁴ Furthermore, we evaluate the relationship between perceived authenticity of political leaders and support for their parties, and the association between authenticity and other traits well-established in the literature.

Our analyses show that our items load on one latent dimension, which we label “authenticity”. Furthermore, we demonstrate that party support, and vote intention itself, are

²“Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s viral campaign video was a masterclass in authenticity” (Colton, 2018), “What if Donald Trump is an authentic douchebag?” (Potter, 2017), “Nigel Farage Sounds ‘More Authentic’ Than Us, Warns Labour’s Margaret Hodge” (Simons, 2015), “Mrs May is no longer winning the battle for authenticity – Mr Corbyn is” (Moore, 2017), “The Authenticity of Jacinda Ardern” (Michail, 2018).

³ A commercial news data base that contains 35,000 news sources in 200 countries. [Consulted December 2018]

⁴ Replication files (including data and code) for all analyses presented in this paper and the online appendix, are available at the Political Behavior Dataverse:

<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/SKUWAQ>

significantly related to candidate authenticity, and that authenticity can be empirically distinguished from other well-known traits. These results have practical as well as academic relevance. In times where the support of populist parties has increased substantially, it seems essential to understand what candidate traits draw citizen attention (Akkerman, et al. 2013; Mudde, 2004; Rico & Anduiza, 2019).

What is authenticity?

Derived from the Greek *auto-hentes*, meaning to make or create oneself (Kearney 1994: 54), authenticity in its broadest sense is a concept that relates to notions of “realness” or “trueness to origins” (Buendgens-Kosten 2014). As a character trait, authentic individuals are ‘true to themselves’ and ‘transparent about their views and values’ (Jones 2016: 490). It is quite closely related to sincerity, in which one’s actions and statements correspond accurately with one’s inner beliefs. While sincerity is concerned with the accurate representation of beliefs in general, authenticity is narrower as it emphasizes the accurate representation of beliefs that define one’s identity (Jones 2016: 491; Ilies et al. 2005: 376).

Authenticity can also be considered a test of a candidate’s “realness”, i.e., how genuine are the values that they portray in the political arena? In recent political discourse, a common criticism of political candidates is that they are “fake”, deceiving voters by hiding their “true self”, e.g., saying what they think people want to hear rather than what they truly believe (Jones 2016: 496; Umbach and Humphrey 2018: 68). Candidates who present themselves as authentic would put forward an image of being driven by policy or issues, rather than the seeking of office for its own sake.

Yet in politics candidates are, at least to some extent, motivated to seek office; therefore, it is unrealistic for candidates not to be concerned about (re)election. Rather than having a binary distinction between fake and real, Starr (2016) argues that the realities of

politics require a balance to be struck between playing the game and being true to oneself, in efforts to communicate to others the things that ultimately matter. Considering this, candidates can manipulate opinions and use their “authenticity” for electoral benefit. From a political marketing standpoint, branding a candidate as “authentic” sends the message that they can be trusted ‘not only in terms of who [they are] as a person, but also in terms of their [...] actions’ (Dumitrica 2014: 39).

In the political arena, there are many reasons why authenticity may be deemed a desirable trait for candidates to display. On a surface level, authenticity can be invoked in political campaigns to ‘criticize hypocrisy, stiltedness, and too much distance from the common folk’ (Hagel 2017: 221) and thus make candidates more relatable to voters. Moreover, if politicians display their authenticity through being clear about their own values and are consistent in reflecting such values in their actions, voters can trust them when they make decisions behind closed doors or in unforeseen circumstances (Jones 2016: 501). This also feeds into evidence that suggests that voters prize honesty, openness, and consistency in their candidates, even more than competence (Allen and Birch 2011; Allen et al. 2018). Further, not only would individuals prefer to have honest politicians; research has also shown that “hypocritical” politicians engaged in scandals are actually perceived as less competent than non-hypocritical politicians engaged in the same activity (McDermott et al. 2015).

It is important to note that “authenticity” may not always be desirable. For instance, if one represents their sincere values authentically in their behaviors and actions, but such values are antithetical to desirable democratic values such as equality and tolerance, an authentic individual may have a negative societal impact. As Jones (2016: 499) remarks, ‘inauthentic politicians can be preferable to authentic ones proudly touting reprehensible

values’.⁵ Moreover, if one consistently and strongly represents their core values at all times, there may be circumstances in which being true to oneself causes more harm than good. As Leary (2016) puts it: ‘in order for civilized society to function, people need to learn to restrain authentic impulses that might hurt themselves or others.’ That is, a candidate can exhibit the authentic property of “going against the norms” by telling their “truths” frankly and boldly, but this may come at some possible political risk.

While authenticity may be a recognizable trait, it could also be cultivated due to its desirable status. This raises questions of how voters formulate their perceptions of a candidate’s authenticity, and to what extent this coincides with reality. As with other candidate traits (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018), individuals with a partisan affiliation may use their partisanship as a screen through which they evaluate candidate authenticity. For instance, in a telephone survey of a non-probability sample of Delaware residents in 2012, Democratic partisans were more likely to say that the word “authentic” described Obama very well and less likely to say the same about Romney. The reverse was true for Republicans (Brewer et al. 2014). Moreover, with candidates attempting to portray themselves as authentic and their opponents as inauthentic, the media can play a pivotal role. While journalists may realize that uncovering a candidate’s authentic “self” is an impossible task, they appear to have a particular desire to call them out for their “inauthenticity” (Parry-Giles 2014: 11-12). Indeed, if a candidate is only “acting” authentically, it is difficult to keep up such appearances (Jones 2016: 492-493).

The rise of the internet and social media has given candidates the opportunity to bypass journalists, thus giving voters the opportunity to directly judge whether their private

⁵ When a politician exerts democratically antithetical values authentically, they may gain support among a part of their parties’ supporters that adhere to such values. However, two cautionary notes need to be made here. First, one’s “true self” can be at odds with core democratic values to such an extent that it decreases overall public support. Second, by no means do we argue that authenticity is only beneficial for increasing support among in-partisans. As with other traits that can be conceived desirable, authenticity can increase support among many, if not all, parts of the electorate, due to the reasons discussed above.

selves really do match up with their public selves. While this could aid perceptions of authenticity, it presents more opportunities for politicians to reveal inconsistencies, thus undermining their carefully cultivated image (Grow and Ward 2013). And as Allen (in Campbell 2017) remarks, ‘once you lose the reputation for authenticity it’s very, very difficult to come back’. Tony Blair serves as an example. Before becoming prime minister, he had been described as in part ‘an authentic likeable figure’ and a ‘principled and decent man’ (Hencke 1996) but by the end of his term he was described as ‘the archetypical, duplicitous politician’ (Campbell 2017), an image he is unlikely to recover from.

More recently, authenticity has become associated with the apparent rise of the “populist” politician.⁶ While authenticity is not a necessary component of populism, it can be used as a powerful tool that populists, of both the left and right, employ to their benefit. Definitions of populism emphasize the narrative of a “real people” against a “corrupt elite” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017), with populist politicians often invoking the ‘*volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 6). By projecting themselves as “authentic”, candidates make a distinction between themselves and other politicians who might be deemed “inauthentic”. They also position themselves as someone who, by nature of being one of the “real” people, can tap into and understand their interests. This allows candidates to more aggressively pursue a populist narrative, labelling candidates and even institutions to be “fake” or counter to the interests of the people.

Hence, to a large extent, populism and authenticity may go hand in hand, as it is clearly advantageous for a populist leader to be perceived as authentic. However, it is by no means a requirement for a politician to use a populist narrative to be perceived as authentic, as “establishment” candidates can also be authentic. The same also holds true for being perceived as charismatic (Merolla et al., 2007). While clearly it is advantageous for the

⁶ In a search of the New York Times online archive from 1 January 1981 to 8 April 2019, the phrases “authentic” and “populist” appear together in 318 articles.

authentic leader to be considered charismatic, a more discreet candidate can be authentic as well.

Existing Trait Research

In our investigation of authenticity, we wish to take into account other traits that have already been identified in the literature. While a long list of traits could be imagined, one leading scholar (Kinder 1986) has reduced them to a critical four – leadership, competence, integrity, and empathy – measured by presenting respondents with one or more statements describing the candidates.⁷ Of course, this list omits other possibly critical traits (Benoit and McHale 2003: 321) including the trait of authenticity that we are examining here. Further, variations on this list have been offered, often by merging leadership and competence or by dropping empathy. However, these four have been commonly used in the literature, each having conceptual breadth, and appearing important in its own right (Holian and Prysby 2014: 23).⁸

Key traits do appear to influence candidate chances at the democratic ballot box (Bittner 2011). Specifically, integrity and competence appear repeatedly as important characteristics of winning American presidential elections (Campbell et al. 1966: 55; Bartels 2002; Goren 2007; Miller et al. 1986; Kinder 1986). These characteristics have also been reported for victorious national candidates in elections of the United Kingdom and France (see, respectively, Clarke et al. 2004: 30-33; Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2015). However, a recent investigation with U.S. and U.K. survey respondents makes the claim that candidate warmth weighs more heavily on voters than the candidate traits of integrity or competence (Laustsen and Bor 2017).

In sum, as Costa Lobo and Curtice (2015: 4) observe, there exists ‘no consensus in attempts to measure the impact of leaders.’ However, there are a number of important

⁷ See our empirical section for a list of such statements, used in our research.

⁸ For a recent comprehensive comparative collection on political leadership characteristics and democratic elections, see Aarts et al. (2013).

conclusions on when and under what circumstances particular traits matter. First, in general, the more favourably a voter regards a candidate, the more likely they are to vote for them. (Lewis-Beck and Tien 2018). Still, this masks the fact that different candidates can have advantages on different traits. For instance, in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, George W. Bush was perceived to be strong on the leadership front, with John Kerry perceived as more competent and compassionate (Prysby 2008). Much like parties attempt to highlight issues that they are perceived “to own”, campaigns can try to focus on traits perceived as advantageous for their candidate, while seeking to minimize attention to less advantageous traits (Funk 1999: 703). Traits should not therefore be thought of on an absolute scale, but rather a relative one where candidates are judged relative to their competition (Holian and Prysby 2014).

In recent years, many candidates who have been presented as “authentic” lacked prior political leadership experience, making it difficult for them to be perceived as more competent than established politicians. As a result, they may choose to emphasize their “authenticity.” This could be especially beneficial for those in the opposition and those without political experience, since it can be easier for politicians to come across as authentic when their character is not being judged against their actions in delivering on their promises; after all, such a judgment can only truly be tested once politicians enter government (Campbell 2017).

The electoral context is also important for determining the traits most valued by voters in any given election, as research shows traits can vary in both magnitude and significance from one election to the next (Funk 1999; Laustsen and Bor 2017). For example, Merolla et al. (2007) demonstrate that perceptions of charisma can increase during times of national crisis (see also Merolla & Zechmeister 2011). Like charisma, the degree to which political

candidates are perceived as authentic is shaped by contextual factors and is therefore flexible (Conger, Kanungo, and Menon 2000).

Given the backlash against “scripted, career-politicians” that has been apparent in public discourse in recent years, the trait of authenticity may be particularly relevant for voters at the present time. Besides the relevance of certain traits changing from one election to another, candidate trait perceptions can be updated as voters accumulate impressions from long-term and recent experiences (Miller and Shanks 1996: 417). Indeed, some candidates can be perceived as increasing their levels of one trait while decreasing their levels of another trait. For example, Bill Clinton came to be perceived as more competent between 1992 and 1996, while his perceived levels of integrity decreased (Holian and Prysby 2014: 52). Given the difficulties in overturning perceptions of inauthenticity, as previously mentioned, one may expect increases in perceptions of authenticity from a low baseline to be particularly inelastic.

We take pains now to distinguish authenticity from the touted trait of integrity. Authenticity, we argue, forms a separate trait that requires its own investigation. Integrity captures whether a party leader is considered ‘moral and honest’ (Garzia 2017). But while integrity generally implies a commitment to desirable and worthy principles, an authentic individual can be committed to principles that could be morally undesirable or dubious (Jones 2016: 491-92). The “honesty” that plays a role here is not the honesty of telling the truth. Rather, it is presenting oneself to the general public openly and freely, not hiding one's thoughts or adapting one's behavior because of their positions. In this sense, “speaking one's mind” is far more important to perceptions of authenticity than “speaking the truth.” In the end, it is about “conviction”. Authentic candidates convey to voters that they have convictions.

Measuring authenticity

We observe that candidate traits, properly defined and measured, can alter the candidate's vote share, for better or worse. In attempting to design a measurement battery for the specific trait of authenticity, we start from previous research. While few systematic studies have been written on this topic in the political science literature, the same cannot be said for the organizational management and behavior literature. In these fields, the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) finds frequent use (Walumbwa et al. 2008). The questionnaire 'measures authenticity as a second-order factor comprised of the first-order factors of transparency, self-awareness, balanced processing, and an ethical component' (Clapp-Smith et al. 2009: 234). As indicated by these listed components, Walumbwa et al. (2008) believe that organizational leaders cannot be authentic if they do not live up to certain moral standards.

However, this view of authenticity is not shared by all scholars of organizational leadership. In fact, authenticity in that field can also be regarded as entirely separate from ethics and morals: 'Some have argued for a narrow definition [of authentic leadership], one that requires nothing more than self-consistency and is therefore implicitly value-neutral' (Caza et al. 2010: 55). We adopt this conception of authenticity in this study. Like Shamir and Eilam (2005: 398; see also Sparrowe 2005), 'our conceptualization [does not] say anything about the content of the leader's values or convictions.' Rather, our main concern here is whether or not the politician abides by those convictions – consistently defending what s/he stands for.

Thus, while we depart somewhat from the ALQ in our measurement of candidate authenticity, our survey items are adapted to the imperatives of political behavior and elections. We have observed recurring themes. An authentic candidate, in the ideal, is honest, transparent, and consistent, committed to advancing a truth, perhaps boldly so, with

conviction. To test whether, in fact, this “authenticity” trait exists, we designed a battery of survey items we believe tap the foregoing elements (noted below at the end of each item):

- On the key issues of the day, we know where Candidate X stands (transparent)
- Candidate X is not afraid to speak out (bold)
- Candidate X won’t change his/her opinion just to get votes (consistent)
- Candidate X says what he/she means (conviction)⁹
- When candidate X gives a speech, it's the 'straight stuff' (honest)
- Candidate X behaves the same in public as in private (truthful)¹⁰

For each of these statements, we ask respondents about their agreement using this scale: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neither Agree nor Disagree, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly Agree.¹¹

While we argue that these items are well-suited to measure the different aspects of authenticity, we should note that the specific statements are all based on phrases used in

⁹ With this item, we are capturing perceptions of whether a candidate has convictions. These convictions may be judged “good” or “bad”; however, the test item is value-neutral in that regard, simply assessing whether the candidate is perceived to act from some conviction he or she holds. This then differentiates it from the “honest” and “moral” items that are used for other standard measures, such as integrity.

¹⁰ Initially, we phrased this item as follows: ‘candidate X’s public persona is the same as their private persona’. When we fielded the pilot study, the respondents seemed to be able to respond to all the questions about one candidate. However, in the Welsh and the Scottish data, we recorded very high numbers of missing values (i.e., “don’t know” answers) on the last item – even for the better-known candidates. In the Danish data we obtained even higher levels of missing answers (see Appendix B). Apparently, respondents were not able to judge the private persona of political candidates, or they did not understand the word “persona” itself. Hence, as this item seems to be problematic and listwise deletion would result in the loss of many observations, we exclude this item from the analyses reported below. Furthermore, as an alternative, and following the suggestion by an anonymous reviewer, we replaced the question with the current item in the survey fielded in the U.S. In this survey, we were also able to distinguish respondents not knowing the candidate from respondents knowing the candidate but not being able to answer the question. This showed us that, of the respondents knowing each respective candidate, about 20% were not able to answer this last question (see Appendix B). While this proportion is lower than that for the original question, it is still somewhat higher than that of the other items. Hence, future studies might want to look for alternatives to improve the measure of this dimensions of authenticity even more.

¹¹ In the U.S. survey, we used a slightly adjusted scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) somewhat disagree, (4) neither agree nor disagree, (5) somewhat agree, (6) agree, (7) strongly agree.

everyday speech about authenticity. We list examples of these for each item respectively in Appendix A.

Data

To test our measures empirically, we use several data sources from a variety of countries.¹² The countries where the surveys were launched were selected in order to encompass diverse political systems, levels of polarization, and political culture. In this section, we briefly discuss the political context of each country in which we gathered data: a more detailed description of each study and the wording of each question included in the surveys is available in Appendix C.

We employ, first, surveys launched in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Denmark. This selection allows us to have data in very diverse political contexts. The U.S. is a presidential system well known for its polarized two-party system (Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006). Politics in the U.S. has become considerably personalized, as media focuses more and more on specific politicians rather than parties as a whole (McAllister 2007). Furthermore, president Donald Trump has been put forward as a prime example of an authentic candidate. To measure perceptions of authenticity there, we conducted an online study using the platform Lucid. The survey, fielded in the beginning of June 2019, included quotas to ensure sufficient spread on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Previous research has provided evidence on the validity of research findings using the Lucid platform (Coppock and McClellan 2019). Moreover, we are mostly interested in the internal coherence of our respondents' answers, rather than in making inferences about the population as a whole.

¹² We also conducted a pilot study among first year bachelor students in political science at KU Leuven (Belgium). The students seemed to be able to answer all our questions, and the answers seemed to be substantially correlated and to load onto one latent factor.

The U.K. was included as a European, non-presidential system, characterized by a small number of parties and a strong personalization of its politics. Whilst British politics has mainly revolved around two main parties, it has become more personalized over the last decades (McAllister 2007). Additionally, the U.K. has a number of sub-state political parties whose leaders have frequently been described as “authentic”. Hence, it provides a most-likely case for a European country having strong opinions on politicians’ authenticity and strong effects of perceptions of authenticity on electoral behavior. For the United Kingdom investigation, we included our questions in two online YouGov surveys (one in Wales and one in Scotland) using their panel, between 25 and 28 November 2017. YouGov uses “active sampling” to ensure demographic representativeness in terms of age, gender, social class, and educational level.

Denmark, on the other hand, was included because it should be more difficult for citizens to judge their politicians’ authenticity, and to link these with their overall evaluations of parties and candidates, since it has a highly proportional system in which parties – and party leaders – are numerous. To ensure we gave our respondents a challenging task, we asked about candidates of two rather small parties (i.e., Kristian Thulesen Dahl and Pia Olsend Dyhr). The data were collected between 6 December 2017 and 12 January 2018 through the internet-based YouGov Panel, using active sampling for better representativeness.

Secondly, to further test whether the concept of authenticity is empirically distinguishable from other traits, we supplement the analysis with two additional data sources collected in Belgium and Spain. Belgium as a case is close to Denmark, with a very fragmented party system. The Belgian data were collected as part of a postal election study in the city of Ghent, after the local elections of 14 October 2018. The Spanish data were collected through an online survey on the Netquest platform launched in January 2019, forming a demographically representative sample of the Spanish population, in terms of

quotas for education, age, and gender. Until 2015, the Spanish system was characterized as having a strong tendency to bipartisanship; while other parties had representation in the parliament, the government was always held by one of the two main parties (Dalton 2008). But in 2015, the entrance of Podemos and Ciudadanos into parliament broke this bipartisan tradition, and now the government is disputed between the four main parties, with the support of other smaller parties. Regarding expectations about the electoral strength of “authenticity”, the Spanish case can be positioned between the U.S. and the U.K. on the one hand, and Belgium and Denmark on the other.

Before presenting the results, the data structure warrants explanation. While some of our surveys included authenticity measures of multiple candidates, others included questions about one candidate only (see Appendix C). Thus, some of the results reported below are candidate-specific. Other analyses, however, are more general (e.g., correlation coefficients between the different questions, and factor analyses). In order to avoid reporting too many tables in the body of the text, long format data analyses are employed when we have measures on multiple candidates. That is, these are stacked data, with answers about the different candidates nested in the unique respondents. Hence, we report averages of the candidates between respondents, each time noting in which appendix we include the full tables for every candidate separately.

Results

Testing the authenticity index

To test whether our items are suitable for use as an index we first examine the correlation between the different items in our different data sources.¹³

Table 1. Correlations between the different authenticity items

	Transparent	Bold	Consistent	Conviction	Honest	Truthful		Transparent	Bold	Consistent	Conviction	Honest
Transparent	1						United States	1				
Bold	0.594	1						0.712	1			
Consistent	0.584	0.464	1					0.696	0.658	1		
Conviction	0.686	0.580	0.657	1				0.768	0.737	0.808	1	
Honest	0.635	0.484	0.681	0.721	1							
Truthful	0.558	0.503	0.596	0.624	0.637	1						
Transparent	1						Wales	1				
Bold	0.726	1						0.644	1			
Consistent	0.634	0.610	1					0.512	0.508	1		
Conviction	0.736	0.704	0.780	1				0.642	0.759	0.573	1	
Honest								0.643	0.684	0.587	0.757	1

Note: Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients

As can be seen in Table 1, the correlations between the indicators are high in all cases – with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.46 to 0.81 and a median value of 0.64.¹⁴ Thus, in general, the evaluations of the candidates seem to be consistent, with higher (lower) ratings of some statements correlating with higher (lower) ratings of the other indicators. These results provide preliminary evidence that our items make up one scale.

The items are then assessed with a factor analysis to investigate whether these indicators load onto one latent concept – “authenticity”. In Table 2, we summarize these results.¹⁵ Note that all analyses extracted only one strong factor from the data.

¹³ Note that here we report analyses based on a long data set. The full tables – for every candidate separately – are included in Appendix D.

¹⁴ We do not include the results of the Belgian data, as there were only two authenticity items included.

¹⁵ Note that we work with a long data set. The full tables – for every candidate separately – are included in Appendix E.

Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis of the authenticity items.

Item	U.S.A.	Wales	Scotland	Denmark
Transparent	0.783	0.834	0.824	0.750
Bold	0.660	0.801	0.796	0.820
Consistent	0.766	0.839	0.801	0.657
Conviction	0.848	0.907	0.888	0.870
Honest	0.822			0.840
Truthful	0.741			
Eigenvalue	3.579	2.864	2.742	3.130
Average interim covariance	2.283	1.014	1.008	0.706
Cronbach's Alpha	0.887	0.915	0.902	0.888

The results confirm what became clear in the correlation table: the different items load strongly on one underlying concept, with a median loading of 0.82. Furthermore, the loadings give some insight into the relative importance of the different items for measuring authenticity. In this regard, the “conviction” item always loads the highest. This component seems of central importance in defining the authenticity factor. (Recall that this item is distinct from a would-be integrity item, since it measures simply whether the candidate appears to have convictions, remaining silent on the moral content of those convictions.) The “bold” item, in contrast, generally seems to load the lowest. However, it should be mentioned that variation in the loadings remains quite low. Indeed, they hover around 0.70 or higher, following a common rule-of-thumb for what items define a factor. The results show very strong factors overall. Moreover, the Cronbach Alpha values are high, at about 0.90 each. These findings support the notion that our questions tap into one dimension, which we call *candidate authenticity*.

Authenticity and candidate/party evaluations

We can now test whether candidate authenticity has an impact on citizen evaluations of these candidates. We have available a general character evaluation of these candidates on a scale

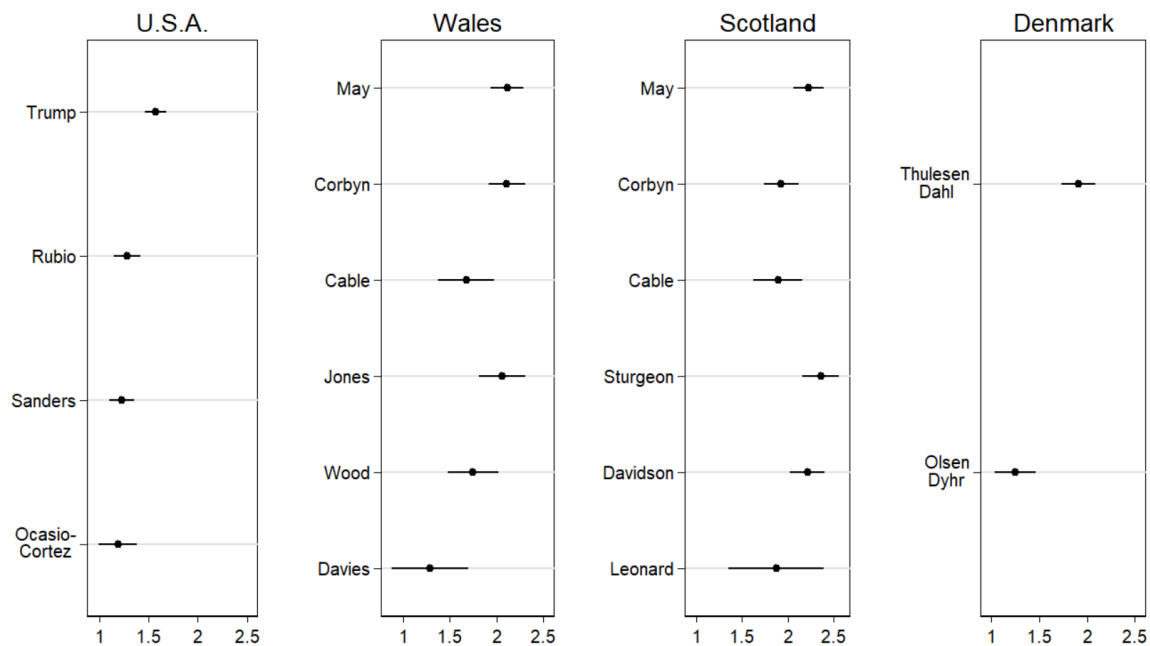
from 0 (very negative evaluation) to 10 (very positive evaluation).¹⁶ To operationalize authenticity, we construct a summary additive index that we call “candidate authenticity”, adding the scores on the individual items and dividing this value by the number of items. This results in the final authenticity score (ranging from 1 to 7 in the U.S., and 1 to 5 in the other countries under investigation).

To investigate the association between authenticity and these evaluations, we first estimate linear regression models with the evaluations as the dependent variable, and the authenticity scale as an independent variable. Further, to reduce possible bias in our estimate of the authenticity effect, we control on the standard socio-demographic variables of age, sex, educational level, and income. (The tables with full results are included in Appendix F.) Here, we focus on the authenticity scale coefficient, displayed in Figure 1 for each model respectively.

Before interpreting the results, we wish to clarify the direction of the uncovered relationships. While evaluations are regressed on authenticity, it can be expected that this relationship is at least partly endogenous – i.e., that respondents have a positive or negative overall evaluation of a candidate, and therefore give a positive or negative evaluation about this candidate’s level of authenticity. While we do not claim that the relationship is strictly exogenous, we argue that it is also not fully reciprocal. The items in the authenticity battery are evaluative, but to some extent also “factual” (e.g., the extent to which it is clear where the candidate stands on certain issues). Hence, although the answers may be partly biased because of a general evaluation of the candidate, we argue that the questions also urge respondents to think more objectively about the candidate’s characteristics. Further, in addition to controlling on socio-economic status, as already noted, we eventually introduce further long-term controls, with the aim of reducing bias still more.

¹⁶ In Denmark, we do not have candidate evaluations, so we use the evaluation of their respective parties.

Figure 1. Association between perceptions of authenticity and candidates' evaluations
(party evaluations in Denmark)



Note: The figure displays coefficients from OLS regressions. Full tables are included in Appendix F.

The results displayed in Figure 1 show a strong positive association between perceptions of authenticity, and the overall evaluation of the politician/political party: if the candidate is held to be more authentic, citizens are more favorable towards this politician or their party. Further, all the coefficients are statistically significant at conventional levels, as indicated by the confidence intervals around them. With respect to substantive significance, on average, a one-unit increase on the five-point (seven-point in U.S.) authenticity scale is associated with an increase of approximately 2 points (1.3 in U.S.) on the ten-point general evaluation scale.¹⁷ The potential strength of the authenticity variable also reveals itself via the model fit statistic of the R-squared, ranging from 0.18 to 0.54 (see Appendix F).

¹⁷ We also tested whether authentic behavior brings politically disenchanted voters back into the process. As a preliminary test, we included in each model an interaction between perceptions of authenticity and political interest. The results, reported in Appendix G, show that there is a strong correlation between authenticity and general evaluations for the least interested voters, and there is no evidence for a significant difference at higher levels of interest. Hence, it seems like perceptions of authenticity work in the same way for interested and uninterested voters alike.

It is worth interpreting the results for the individual countries. Take first the case of Denmark, with the sharpest results, despite the fact of its markedly proportional system with numerous, strong parties. Authenticity mattered for the two candidates there, and it clearly favored Dahl (with an authenticity coefficient almost twice the size of opponent Dyhr). Quite likely, this is partly due to the populist history of Dahl's party. In contrast to Denmark, the U.K. cases reveal more complexity. In Wales, authenticity influences leading contenders May, Corbyn and Jones more or less equally, while Davies is helped relatively little. For Scotland, the pattern varies, with May benefitting more than Corbyn, while the local, Sturgeon, leads the pack.

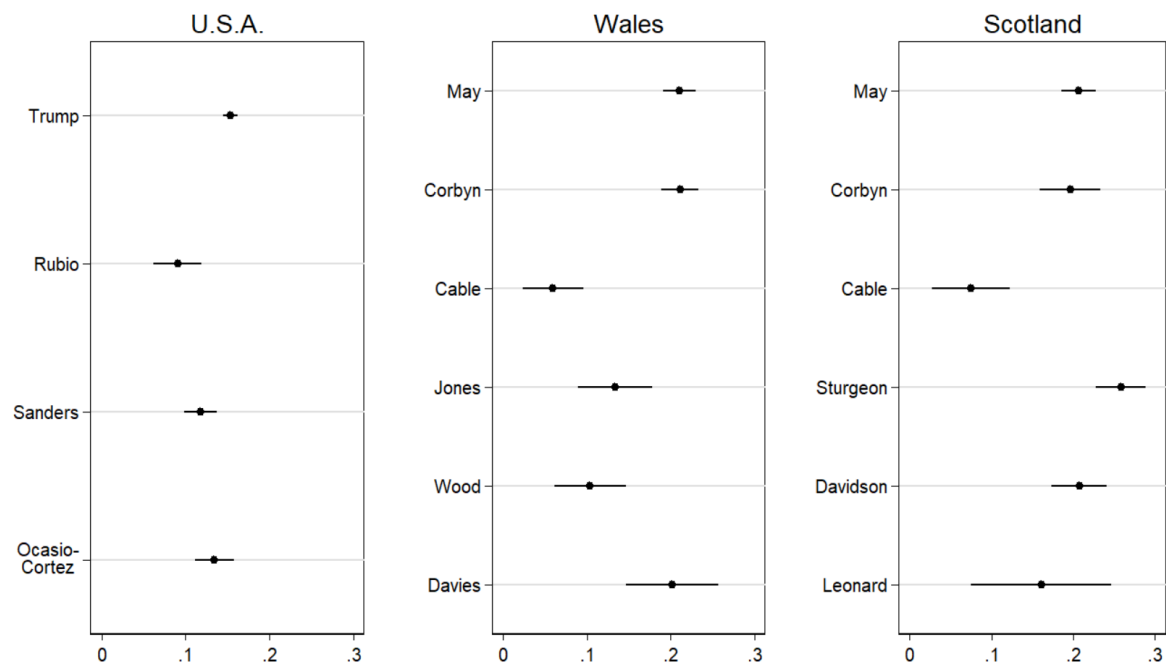
The U.S. case has special interest because of the Trump presence. We observe that authenticity matters more for his supporters than it does for supporters of the other candidates. Since the comparison has been made between Trump and Sanders, as representing the right and left of the political spectrum, it may come as a surprise that authenticity appears no more important for Sanders supporters than it does for Rubio supporters. Further, the impact of authenticity for Sanders does not distinguish its impact from the other left leader, Ocasio-Cortez.

Authenticity and political behavior: baseline models

The results above indicate that, for candidates and parties, authenticity appears to be a desirable trait. The more candidates are held to be authentic, the more citizens tend to evaluate them favorably. But does this apparent power of the trait carry over to the vote choice itself? To help answer that question, we test whether candidate authenticity helps explain the intention to vote. As a first step, we estimate a series of binary logit models, each time predicting the vote intention for the party of the candidate, as a function of the respective authenticity measure. As in the previous analyses, we include controls for age, sex,

educational level, and income. The full regression tables are included in Appendix H. We focus here on the coefficient of authenticity. Figure 2 displays the average marginal effect of authenticity on vote intention for the party of the candidate. (Note that we do not have vote intention data for Denmark.)

Figure 2. Average marginal effect of authenticity on the vote intention



Note: The figure displays average marginal effects based on logistic regression models. Full tables are included in Appendix H.

The results displayed in Figure 2 show that a candidate's perceived level of authenticity is strongly associated with the intention to vote for the party of this candidate. The average marginal effects range from approximately 0.06 to above 0.25, indicating that for every one-unit increase in perceptions of a candidate's level of authenticity, the probability of voting for the party of this candidate can increase rather strongly, with a range from 6 to 25 percentage points. Furthermore, for the two main Britain-wide parties for Wales and Scotland we included the national as well as regional party leaders, and the results do not show substantial differences in the effects of authenticity between these different levels. Overall, the models

are capable of accounting for a good deal of the variance in vote intention, with the pseudo-R-squared ranging from 0.09 to 0.44 (see Appendix H).

Interestingly, the substantive interpretations vary somewhat from what we saw when the dependent variable was candidate evaluation (recall Figure 1), rather than vote intention (as in Figure 2). Authenticity does continue to be statistically and substantively significant. However, the patterns change a bit. Foremost, authenticity appears to matter more for “local” candidates, like Davies, Sturgeon, or Ocasio-Cortez. Indeed, for these candidates, it may be the most important factor. When it comes to considering vote choice, authenticity appears just as important for Ocasio-Cortez as it is for Trump, suggesting that the notion of a left-right divide continues to have traction.

Authenticity and political behavior: more demanding models

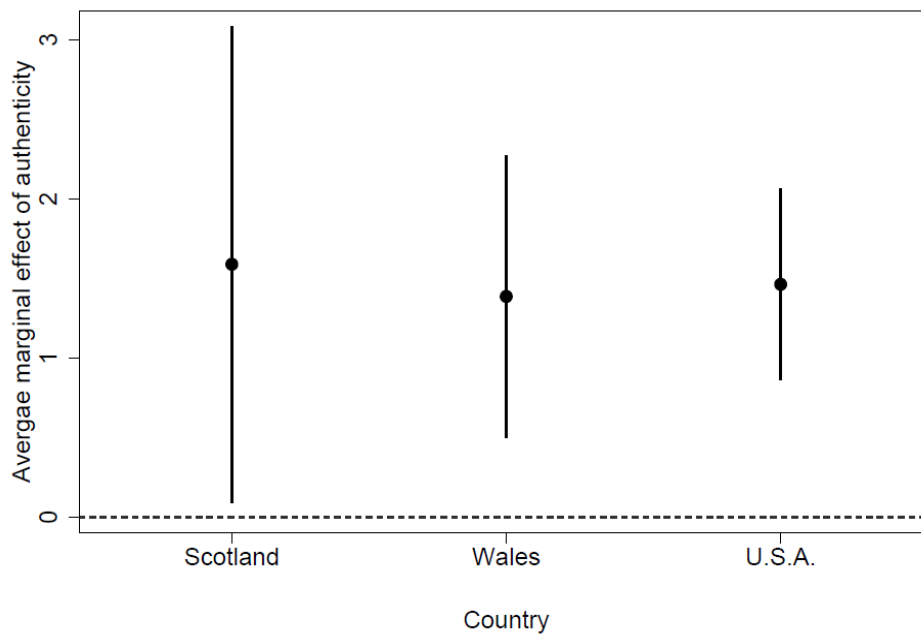
After examining the relationship between authenticity and vote intention using binary logistic regression models – which show evidence favoring the authenticity hypothesis – we move to the estimation of more demanding vote choice models. Specifically, we estimate alternative-specific conditional logit models that allow us to take into account alternative-specific variables – variables that vary over the different options the voter has, i.e., the different parties the voter can vote for (Alvarez and Nagler 1998). To estimate these models, we create a stacked data set with the parties a respondent can vote for nested in the voters. Hence, the number of observations is the amount of respondents times the amount of parties they can choose.

The analyses themselves are on the voter-party dyad, and the coefficients show the overall effect of alternative-specific variables on choosing a party conditional upon the other available alternatives (Dassonneville and Stiers 2018; Stiers forthcoming). Other than fixed-effects conditional logit models, which do not allow us to take into account variables that are

case-specific and thus constant over the different alternatives – such as the age and sex of the respondent – alternative-specific conditional logit models are more flexible in that they permit inclusion of alternative-specific and case-specific variables, basically combining a fixed-effects conditional logit model and a multinomial logit model (Alvarez and Nagler 1998; Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe, Lau, and Stiers 2019).

In these models, the perceptions of the authenticity of the candidates are included as alternative-specific variables. Hence, these are indicators on the voter-candidate dyad, pointing to how much a respondent thinks that each candidate is authentic. These variables are regressed on the dependent variable of vote intention for the party of every candidate. To make for a very strong test, and to control for possible endogeneity in our models, we also include the variable of party identification, measured for each voter-candidate dyad (whether the voter feels close to the party of this candidate (coded 1) or not (coded 0)). Finding authenticity to matter even when we control for party identification would show the value of our measure of authenticity more clearly. (In addition, we control for age, sex, and income as case-specific variables. The full regression tables are reported in Appendix I). In Figure 3, we focus on the coefficients of authenticity.

Figure 3. Effect of authenticity on the vote intention



Note: The figure displays coefficients from alternative-specific conditional regression models. Full tables are included in Appendix I.

The results in Figure 3 confirm that authenticity can have a strong influence on the vote intention. In both countries, higher perceptions of the authenticity of a candidate increases the probability of voting for the party of this candidate. Thus, despite the strong effect of the party identification control, authenticity manages to appear importantly related to vote choice. We find an effect of authenticity in each country, even taking into account very specific conditions for each respondent. What we further observe, perhaps surprisingly, is that the effect hardly varies country to country, hovering around a log-odds coefficient of 1.5.

Distinguishing authenticity from other leadership traits

Ultimately, to demonstrate the relevance of candidate authenticity for voting behavior, it becomes necessary to test its independence from other traits. Thus, we compare our authenticity measure to traits well-established in the literature: competence, integrity, empathy, and leadership (Kinder 1986). For this test, we use the data we gathered in the United States, Belgium, and Spain. In the latter case, authenticity, competence, and integrity

were each measured using one item. In Belgium, the same traits were measured with two items each. In the U.S., we included our full authenticity battery as well as two items each for competence and empathy, three for integrity, and one for leadership (see Appendix C for a full list of data and items included).

To get a first indication of the association between the different traits, we show the correlation between all traits in Table 3 (see Appendix J for the correlations between each item separately). The conclusion from Table 3 is clear: in all cases and for all traits, the correlation with authenticity is substantially lower than the correlations between other traits. While the traits well-established in the literature (competence, integrity, empathy, and leadership) are correlated with each other at an average of 0.84, the correlations with authenticity average around 0.66. While this is still a substantial correlation, it is clearly lower than the correlation between the other traits. Hence, if it is commonly accepted that the other traits are sufficiently different to be empirically distinguished, there is strong support that authenticity is empirically distinguishable from customary traits in the literature as well.

Table 3. Correlations between the different traits

		Authenticity	Competence	Integrity	Empathy	Leadership
<u>United States</u>	Authenticity	1				
	Competence	0.655	1			
	Integrity	0.685	0.850	1		
	Empathy	0.661	0.836	0.914	1	
	Leadership	0.676	0.824	0.865	0.834	1
<u>Belgium</u>	Authenticity	1				
	Competence	0.657	1			
	Integrity	0.656	0.751	1		
<u>Spain</u>	Authenticity	1				
	Competence	0.653	1			
	Integrity	0.653	0.823	1		

Note: Entries are Pearson correlation coefficients

As a more difficult test, we estimate exploratory factor analyses including all items of the different traits.¹⁸ As it has been shown that these different items are all highly correlated, this is indeed a very strict test of whether there are independent concepts underlying our trait batteries. In Table 4, we present the results from rotated analyses.

Item	U.S.A.		Belgium		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Transparent	0.310	0.735			
Bold	0.145	0.680	0.399	0.668	0.312
Consistent	0.479	0.613			
Conviction	0.432	0.736	0.282	0.660	0.296
Honest	0.557	0.645			
Truthful	0.407	0.633			
Competence 1	0.822	0.282	0.692	0.338	0.431
Competence 2	0.801	0.275	0.682	0.338	0.327
Integrity 1	0.885	0.249	0.497	0.326	0.622
Integrity 2	0.906	0.280			
Integrity 3	0.879	0.321	0.415	0.356	0.622
Empathy 1	0.873	0.282			
Empathy 2	0.865	0.259			
Leadership	0.824	0.336			
Variance	6.897	3.395	1.609	1.344	1.242

The results in Table 4 strongly indicate that the authenticity items load on a different latent construct than the items measuring other traits. For the United States, in the first factor, the six authenticity items load rather weakly (median value 0.42). The other trait items, in contrast, always load above 0.80. In the second factor, the authenticity items always load over 0.60, while the other items have low loadings (median value 0.28). Thus, Factor 2 clearly taps authenticity. The same pattern holds for Belgium, where Factor 2 clearly distinguishes itself as an authenticity factor. Taken together, these results provide strong evidence for our

¹⁸ Note that we do not include the Spanish data in this analysis, as the traits were measured with one item only.

argument that authenticity is a separate trait, empirically distinguishable from other traits established in the literature.¹⁹

As a last test, we include the different traits in models explaining vote intention.²⁰ The results are summarized in Table 5.²¹

Table 5. Fixed-effects conditional logit models explaining vote intention		
	Model 1	Model 2
	B	B
	(s.e.)	(s.e.)
Authenticity	0.315*** (0.089)	0.372* (0.168)
Competence	0.388** (0.124)	-0.077 (0.221)
Empathy	0.283* (0.137)	0.480 (0.260)
Integrity	0.133 (0.152)	-0.001 (0.273)
Leadership	0.409*** (0.106)	0.417* (0.180)
Party identification		4.029*** (0.352)
<i>N</i>	1495	1495
pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.531	0.844

Note: Entries are log-odds coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

The results in Table 5 further corroborate the importance of authenticity. In Model 1, for all traits, a positive assessment of the politician increases the probability of having the intention to vote for this politician – with the exception of integrity. In the second model, we include party identification as a very strong control. As the results of Model 2 indicate, this renders the effects of the traits non-significant, with the exception of authenticity and leadership.

¹⁹ We also conducted the factor analysis for the U.S. data on those items that were included in Belgium as well. The results are reported in Appendix K.

²⁰ In principle, these models are problematic, as the different traits that are included as independent variables are strongly correlated. Therefore, rather than attempting to present a full model of the vote, we estimate fixed-effects conditional logit models only including the variables of specific interest here.

²¹ Note that we only include the U.S. data in these analyses, as only in this data set do we dispose of measures of different politicians.

In conclusion, the results of this section indicate that authenticity is empirically distinguishable from other traits and has a strong influence on the intention to vote, even when other well-known traits are included and strong controls are imposed.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate a character trait highly visible in today's political commentaries and media reporting: the authenticity of political candidates. A considerable scholarly literature has devoted itself to character, or personality, traits and how they affect behavior. Of particular interest here is citizen political behavior, namely candidate support and party vote. Yet political science has paid less attention to the trait of authenticity, and especially its measurement. In this study, we present a timely first attempt to define authenticity as a trait, and to develop a measurement scale that can be used in future publications.

The trait of authenticity incorporates many desirable attributes including honesty, transparency, consistency, and conviction; attributes that stereotyped "career politicians" are often criticized for lacking. In this environment, having an authentic politician, one who seeks to advance policy congruent with their sincere values rather than with political expediency, can be seen as refreshing. Such authenticity – communicated through politicians' words and actions over a sustained time period – can thus also signal trustworthiness and predictability. For these reasons, we hypothesized that the perception of authenticity should be a political asset. The truly authentic politician would reap positive electoral benefits for themselves and, through leadership effects, their parties.

Therefore, we developed a measurement battery for authenticity as a leadership trait, testing it in survey data from a mixed set of polities: the United States, Wales, Scotland, Denmark, Belgium, and Spain. The results show that our indicators correlate strongly with each other, loading on one latent concept, which we label "authenticity". Furthermore,

multiple statistical analyses, accompanied with robustness checks, indicate that perceptions of authenticity clearly help explain citizen feelings about parties and candidates, and vote intention itself – even when strong control variables are imposed in the models. Such evidence provides clear support for our argument that authenticity coheres conceptually and empirically as a trait, an important trait that adds to understanding politicians’ popularity – as leaders, and at the ballot box. Furthermore, our scale seems to withstand tests of discriminant validity when horse-raced against well-established traits in the literature.

These first soundings on the political role and weight of authenticity are encouraging and point the way for future research in other countries, and against other measures, with evermore in-depth comparative exploration. We see multiple venues for future research. While we believe we have offered strong preliminary evidence of the validity – both internally and externally – of our scale, future research could gain more detailed insights into the relative importance of the different items. In line with this, it could be investigated whether some items of the authenticity battery are more important for certain politicians – perhaps those with different ideological leanings or different genders – and whether it is possible to “own” the trait of authenticity (Hayes 2005). Later studies could also focus more on the association between authenticity and other important contemporary leadership concepts, such as populism. Finally, while our studies are cross-sectional and thus rest on weaker causal claims, future research – possibly using experimental methods or panel data – could investigate more fully the causal underpinnings of the results presented here. Also, in the interests of further cross-national research, the notion of multiple versus single item measures of authenticity should be explored, and this is something we are currently working on (see Appendix L).

The contributions of this article are not only relevant for academic research but are important in substantive terms as well. Where the support of populist parties has increased

substantially, it becomes essential to understand whether perceived candidate authenticity makes for one of the factors explaining this trend. Overall, we hope we have laid a theoretical and empirical groundwork for future research on the relevance of political leaders' authenticity.

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