

In the Age of Populist Leaders: Insights from Ideational, Strategic, and Discursive-Performative Perspectives

Abstract

Purpose:

This article argues that political leadership is not a peripheral feature of populism but its constitutive force. It seeks to clarify how contemporary scholarship conceptualizes the role of populist leaders and to map the theoretical and empirical developments that place leadership at the center of populist mobilization across diverse contexts.

Approach:

The study offers a theory-driven review of the literature, comparing how three major frameworks—the ideational, strategic, and discursive–performative approaches—conceptualize the relationship between populism and leadership. It systematically assesses recent empirical findings on leader traits, authoritarian attitudes, strategic behavior, and media performance, and evaluates how these dimensions intersect in the construction of populist authority.

Findings:

Across divergent theoretical traditions, a shared recognition emerges: populist leadership is not merely communicative or tactical, but a relational and performative process that reshapes how “the people” are imagined and represented. The ideational approach highlights the role of leaders in activating moral binaries and collective identities. The strategic approach demonstrates how leaders exploit institutional weakness and public disillusionment. The discursive–performative tradition reveals how leaders enact symbolic authority through affective narratives, norm-breaking, and embodied representation. Together, these insights show that populist leadership is ideologically activated, strategically personalized, and symbolically constructed.

Originality:

By bridging theoretical divides, this article offers an integrative synthesis of leadership-centered populism research. It advances an original analytical framework that repositions leadership not as a residual variable but as the primary site where populism is performed, legitimized, and sustained.

Keywords: populism; political leadership; charisma; mediatized performance; personalized relationship; strategic mobilization; representation

Article classification: Research paper / Conceptual analysis

“I awakened to the cry
that the people have the power
to redeem the work of fools
upon the meek the graces shower
it's decreed the people rule”
Patti Smith *People Have the Power* (1988)

“Let fury have the hour, anger can be power
Do you know that you can use it?”
The Clash *Clampdown* (1979)

Introduction

We are living in the age of populist leaders. Across continents, figures like Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, Giorgia Meloni, and Javier Milei have risen to power by claiming to speak for “the real people” against “corrupt elites.” Despite divergent ideological profiles—from Trump’s alt-right nationalism and Orbán’s illiberalism to Modi’s Hindu nationalism and Milei’s libertarianism—these leaders rely on a shared populist logic: bypassing institutions, dramatizing existential threats, and positioning themselves as the sole saviors of a unified people. Populism has thus moved from the margins to the center of global politics, transforming democratic practices and norms. What Mudde (2004) once described as a populist *Zeitgeist*—the mainstreaming of populist discourse without dismantling liberal democracy—now requires reconsideration: today’s politics marks a shift from a populist *Zeitgeist* to the age of populist leaders.

These leaders are not merely spokespersons of their parties and movements—they are their architects. Scholars have long noted the emotional and symbolic power of populist leadership, often grounded in charisma (Canovan, 1999; Taggart, 2000). Yet recent research urges us to move beyond essentialist notions of charisma, viewing leadership as a relational and performative process co-constructed by leaders and followers (De La Torre, 2023). Populism may thrive on “great leaders” or “great masses” (Taggart, 2000), but what binds them is a shared emotional and symbolic logic of representation.

Understanding this dynamic is crucial, as a growing body of scholarship shows that the democratic consequences of populism are largely driven by political leaders rather than mass sentiment alone. Populist incumbents deliberately weaken institutional checks, delegitimize opposition, and centralize power through plebiscitarian appeals (Bartels, 2023; Hawkins and Mitchell, 2025; Weyland, 2020). Others highlight how such leaders exploit weak state capacity and public disillusionment to entrench personalist rule (Foa, 2021; Frantz *et al.*, 2021) and reconfigure representative democracy around a direct and exclusive bond between leader and people, displacing pluralism with executive dominance (Pappas, 2019; Urbinati, 2019). As Berlucci and Kellam (2023) argue, democratic backsliding is most pronounced where executive power becomes unbound under personalist and populist presidents. Collectively, these accounts underscore that populism’s most corrosive effects stem from the top—from the strategic actions of leaders who exploit democratic legitimacy to dismantle liberal institutions.

This article surveys the *state of the art* on populist leadership by examining how the three dominant approaches in populism studies—the *ideational*, *strategic*, and *discursive-performative*—conceptualize leadership, even when not always explicitly acknowledged. Clarifying these perspectives is essential, as the way populism is defined fundamentally shapes how leadership is theorized and studied.

While the distinction between these approaches has been noted before (Moffitt, 2020), this article advances the debate by recasting them through the lens of leadership. Doing so not only systematizes a fragmented literature but also demonstrates how populism can be re-examined as a problem of leadership: ideationally, through the resonance between citizens’ populist worldview and their perceptions and need of leadership; strategically, through the central role

of leaders in mobilizing supporters and bypassing institutions; and discursively, through the performative styles and embodied practices by which leaders cultivate popular identification. The typology thus provides a meta-framework that clarifies why the field often appears fragmented, offering scholars both a conceptual map of the terrain and a vantage point from which to design future research on leadership as the pivotal mechanism of populism.

What is populism?

In the social sciences—perhaps by their very nature—many concepts are considered *essentially contested*, and populism (Brubaker, 2020; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019) is no exception. Yet it would be an overstatement to claim that this characterization fully applies to the study of populism. In practice, there is considerable scholarly agreement on its core features: a broad consensus holds that populism centers on the fundamental conflict between "the people" and "the elite." Although some scholars introduce additional criteria—such as personalistic leadership (Weyland, 2001), the articulation of crisis (Moffitt, 2016), or the exclusion of dangerous "others" (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008)—these extensions remain firmly grounded within the people–elite dichotomy.

Conceptual debates are never merely academic; how we define populism—ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically—shapes how we understand and investigate populist leadership. Foundational choices influence not only how leaders are interpreted but also how they can be systematically studied. At the heart of these debates lies a major divide between those who view populism as an attribute of political actors (for instance, as an ideology) and those who conceptualize it as something actors perform (such as a discourse or a strategy).

This article explores how different conceptualizations of populism shape our understanding of leadership by examining three major traditions in the literature (Moffitt, 2020):

- (1) the ideational approach (e.g., Hawkins *et al.*, 2019; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016);
- (2) the strategic approach (e.g., Barr, 2019; Weyland, 2001);
- (3) the discursive–performative approach (e.g., Laclau, 2005; Moffitt, 2016; Mouffe, 2018; Ostiguy, 2017; Wodak, 2015).

From Ideology to Identity: Rethinking Populist Leadership through the Ideational Lens

The ideational approach, widely adopted in political science, treats populism as a “thin-centered ideology” defined by a moral and antagonistic divide between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” with politics seen as an expression of the *volonté générale* (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). While Müller (2016) shares this logic, he frames populism as a moralized claim to exclusive representation, where leaders present themselves as the sole embodiment of the unified and virtuous people. Similar definitions emphasize the people/elite binary and the presumed moral superiority of the people (e.g., Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008). As a thin ideology, populism rarely stands alone, typically combining with fuller ideologies such as nationalism or socialism. This malleability has led Taggart (2000) and others to describe populism as “*chameleonic*,” highlighting its capacity to adapt to diverse political contexts while retaining the same core antagonism. In this view, populism may manifest as a redistributive, left-wing project in Latin

America or as a nationalist, exclusionary project in Europe, yet it consistently draws strength from its moralized construction of “the people” against “the elite.”

According to some scholars in this paradigm, leadership is central to this logic. By presenting themselves as the extraordinary voice of an otherwise ordinary people, populist leaders claim unique legitimacy, delegitimizing opponents and bypassing institutions (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Müller, 2016). Taggart (2000, p. 102) captures this paradox succinctly, arguing that populism celebrates “the ordinariness of its constituents and the extraordinariness of their leaders.” In this sense, personalistic leadership replaces institutional mediation with symbolic identification, whereby loyalty to the leader equates to loyalty to the people, and dissent becomes perceived as betrayal. Advancing this perspective, Hawkins (2011) conceptualizes charisma as a moralized communication style that elicits loyalty and emotional attachment through symbolic identification, though his approach did not initially generate widespread empirical engagement.

Yet the ideational tradition also contains more skeptical assessments of the charisma-populism nexus. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014, 2017) challenge the assumption that populism inherently requires charismatic leadership. They argue that while charismatic strongmen often accompany populism in practice, charisma is neither unique to it nor required for its emergence. Still, in real-world politics, populist actors frequently adopt personalized leadership styles that facilitate emotional identification, reinforce plebiscitarian tendencies, and weaken institutional checks. Thus, the ideational tradition ultimately treats the populism–leadership relationship as context-dependent rather than conceptually intrinsic. While I share this view in part, it can also be assumed that populism may succeed without overtly charismatic figures, but leadership remains pivotal in activating populist identification through dynamic relationships rather than through “great leaders” alone.

Empirical research provides mixed evidence for the “*charismatic leadership thesis*”. Van der Brug and Mughan (2007), analyzing Dutch elections, found limited evidence that charismatic populist leaders exert greater electoral influence than mainstream ones. Even Fortuyn—often considered charismatic—had no disproportionate effect on his party’s vote share, leading them to caution that charisma risks becoming unfalsifiable without clear definitions. By contrast, Michel et al. (2020), using cross-national data, show that populist radical right-wing (PRR) leaders are frequently perceived as charismatic, suggesting that media-driven personalization underpins their success. Angelucci et al. (2024) add nuance by showing that PRR parties perform best among voters who perceive their leaders as strong and empathetic, traits more influential than competence or integrity. López Ortega (2024) similarly finds that while personality matters, its effect diminishes once party affiliation and competence are salient, indicating that personality cues function as heuristics rather than irrational impulses. In contrast, Seijts and Clercy (2020) show that voters with strong populist attitudes are less likely to prioritize leader character, underscoring the contextual and selective role of traits in shaping populist appeal.

Growing interest in the darker sides of leadership has drawn attention to the psychology of populism. Donovan (2021), using data from 14 European countries, finds that PRR voters are

especially likely to favor a “strong leader who doesn’t have to bother with parliament and elections,” reflecting a moralized and authoritarian worldview. Beyond voter preferences, leader personality has become a focus of analysis. Nai and Coma (2019), assessing over 150 candidates in 73 elections, show that populist leaders tend to score lower on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability, and higher on extraversion and Dark Triad traits—narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Donald Trump exemplifies this profile in extreme form. Supporting these findings, Maier et al. (2022) show that younger, ideologically extreme, and right-leaning German politicians report higher Dark Triad traits. At the same time, evidence on followers is more mixed: some studies suggest populist voters accept dark traits in leaders (Bakker *et al.*, 2016; Nai, 2022), while others find no straightforward mirroring effect (Galais and Rico, 2021; Pruyssers, 2021). Hofstetter and Filsinger (2024) identify psychopathy as the most consistent predictor across contexts, but stress variation by country. These findings suggest that while dark traits resonate with populism, their effects are conditional, shaped by political cues and sociocultural environments.

A major development within the ideational approach has been the rise of validated measures of populist attitudes (Hawkins *et al.*, 2019), enabling follower-centered studies of leadership. Metz and Plesz (2023, 2025) show that individuals high in populist attitudes are especially attuned to charismatic cues and value leadership, although emotional attachment is more influenced by party identification and social identity. Their findings highlight the leader’s role in activating populist attitudes by constructing “the people” as a collective identity. As Hawkins et al. (2020) note, populist attitudes are not constantly salient but must be activated through leader-driven identity work.

This activation is most effective when it resonates with existing identity groups. Ferrari (2022) finds that party identification shapes responses to populist and anti-populist messages, while Bos et al. (2013, 2020) show that emotional and anti-elitist language enhances leader appeal, particularly among disillusioned voters, mobilizing those who feel relatively deprived. Marchlewska et al. (2018) further link populist support to national collective narcissism across Poland, the UK, and the US, suggesting that populist appeals often mobilize defensive in-group identities. Finally, leadership scholars have increasingly drawn on the social identity approach to explain the appeal of populist figures. Leaders mobilize support by fostering in-group identification, emphasizing antagonism toward elites and minorities, and presenting themselves as prototypical group members (Uysal *et al.*, 2022). In contexts of self-uncertainty, individuals are attracted to groups that provide moral clarity and boundaries (Hogg, 2021). Empirical evidence suggests that self-uncertainty increases support for populist leaders among individuals low in authoritarianism, whereas high authoritarians exhibit stable support (Hogg and Götzsche-Astrup, 2021).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the success of populist leadership lies less in inherent magnetism than in the ability of leaders to activate identity-based grievances and psychological needs. Populist leadership is not reducible to ideology, charisma, or personality traits, but emerges through resonance between leaders’ claims, followers’ worldviews, and institutional contexts. In this sense, the ideational approach, when reframed through leadership, provides not

only a conceptual lens but also a bridge to follower-centered and identity-based accounts of how populism is enacted and sustained.

Populist Strategy and the Centrality of Personalist Leadership

The strategic approach shifts attention from ideological narratives to political agency, examining how leaders pursue and consolidate power through personalist strategies. Weyland (2001, p. 14), a central proponent, defines populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.” Although he later downplays charisma as definitional, he acknowledges its symbolic utility as the “glue” binding leaders to followers (Weyland, 2017, p. 68) and, more recently, links populism to Weber’s theory of charismatic authority (Weyland, 2024). Despite such refinements, the strategic approach maintains that populism fundamentally revolves around individual politicians: “populism is a political strategy that rests on personalistic leadership” (Weyland, 2017, p. 56). Barr (2009, 2019) refines the strategic view by demonstrating how populist leaders consolidate power through anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages that bypass traditional party structures and mobilize largely unorganized followers. He interprets charisma not as an inherent leader quality but as a performative resource that enhances leaders’ claims to direct representation, while cautioning that without empirical precision the concept risks analytical vagueness. Meanwhile, Critics such as Rueda (2020) highlight three limitations of the strategic view: its exclusive leader-focus, its reduction of leaders to rational actors that neglect emotional and symbolic dimensions, and its normative bias equating populism with authoritarianism. However, Weyland (2021) defends the approach by arguing that fragmented publics require leaders to articulate grievances, concentrate power, and claim to embody the popular will.

Building on this debate, Pappas (2016, 2019, 2020) offers a stricter definition of charismatic populist leadership, centered on personalism and radicalism. He operationalizes charisma through four indicators—centralized control, direct ties to followers, rejection of the status quo, and legitimacy building—and finds that only five of 45 European leaders meet these criteria. Most, he argues, remain “ordinary political leaders.” McDonnell (2016, 2017) also challenges the automatic link between populism and charisma, analyzing intra-party dynamics and follower perceptions. He demonstrates that charisma is relational, rooted in followers’ belief in the leader’s exceptional mission, and contingent on organizational contexts, with varying degrees of what Eatwell (2006) terms *coterie* charisma. Favero (2022) similarly shows that party institutionalization in the Swiss People’s Party limited charismatic attachment to Christoph Blocher. Together, these findings stress that charisma is not inherent to populist leadership but contextually shaped by organizational and follower dynamics.

The strategic focus has also been extended to how charismatic attachments are formed and sustained among mass publics. Merolla and Zechmeister (2011), using survey data from Venezuela, show that perceptions of Chávez’s charisma were dynamic and performance-dependent, while charismatic beliefs in turn shaped outcome evaluations. Andrews-Lee (2021) explores how charismatic movements such as Peronism and Chavismo can survive a leader’s

departure, sustaining political identities through symbolic links to the original figure. Approaching charisma from a sociological perspective, Viviani (2017, 2023, 2024, 2025)(2017, 2023, 2024, 2025) argues that populist leadership emerges in contexts of institutional distrust and identity erosion, where authority is plebiscitarian and disintermediated, relying on affective and symbolic ties rather than party structures. Similarly, Pinto (2023) blends strategic, discursive, and performative lenses to depict populist leaders as modern-day Princes, who in times of crisis enact domination and redemption through moral narratives and plebiscitarian appeals.

The centrality of the leader also illuminates why populist politicians can shift positions on core issues with little political cost. Free from strong party structures or ideological constraints, they display policy flexibility and symbolic adaptability. Populist governance often replaces pluralism, expertise, and checks and balances with ideologically eclectic reforms, majoritarian responsiveness, and hostility to technocratic authority (Bartha *et al.*, 2020; Munoz and Pfeiffer, 2022). Leaders rely on permanent campaigning, crisis narratives, polarization, and the construction of elites and minorities as enemies of “the people,” while strategically manipulating participatory mechanisms such as national consultations to manufacture legitimacy and marginalize dissent (Batory and Svensson, 2019). These practices accelerate democratic backsliding, with outcomes shaped by institutional resilience and opposition strength.

Recent research also explores how leader traits shape foreign policy in populist regimes. Thiers and Wehner (2022), comparing Chávez and Trump, find that populist leaders score low on task orientation and high on interpersonal focus, privileging loyalty over institutional constraints. Their leadership reflects in-group bias and elevated distrust, framing international politics in binary moral terms. Fourquet and Brummer (2023) similarly show that populist foreign policy makers exhibit greater self-confidence, distrust of others, and lower conceptual complexity—traits linked to unilateralism, confrontation, and the personalization of diplomacy. These findings suggest that strategic populist leadership extends beyond domestic politics, with personality-driven dynamics interacting with populist narratives in the international arena.

In sum, the strategic approach has significantly advanced understanding of populist leadership by highlighting its instrumental, performative, and personalized nature. While early formulations emphasized rational power-seeking, more recent contributions incorporate emotional resonance, follower perceptions, symbolic performance, and psychological traits. Leaders emerge not merely as tactical actors but as figures who construct and embody political identity in contexts of institutional voids and collective disorientation. From Barr’s direct charismatic representation to Pappas’s operational indicators, from McDonnell’s relational account to leadership trait analyses of foreign policy, the literature converges on one key insight: populist leadership thrives where institutions are weak, identities are fluid, and political meaning is concentrated in the figure of the leader. At the same time, the strategic tradition also reveals the limits of leader-centered explanations when divorced from broader social and institutional contexts, underscoring the need for integrative frameworks that connect leaders, followers, and institutions.

Performing the People: Discursive and Symbolic Dimensions of Populist Leadership

Building on long-standing concerns with antagonism and identity construction (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018), the discursive-performative approach recasts populist leadership as a symbolic and embodied practice rather than the outcome of ideology or organizational strategy. Here, populism is understood as a discourse that dichotomizes “the people” and “the elite,” manifested not only in language (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2018; Wodak, 2015) but also in embodied performance (Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017). Similarly, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) conceptualize populism as a communication style that can be adopted by leaders across the spectrum, while de Vreese *et al.* (2018) argue that it is embedded in a wider communication ecology shaped by leader–media–citizen interactions. This perspective emphasizes practices and repertoires, treating populism as a matter of degree rather than a binary category, depending on the frequency and intensity with which leaders deploy these repertoires. Populist leadership thus hinges on cultural proximity and norm-breaking resonance: leaders dramatize crises, reject elite codes, and embody the affective authenticity of “the people.” These accounts underscore that leadership is not optional but constitutive of how populist claims are articulated and received. Empirical studies provide concrete illustrations of this performative communicative style.

In this account, leadership is not about intrinsic greatness but about performing closeness and belonging. Ostiguy (2017) shows how leaders draw on the cultural codes of the “low” to signal authenticity, while Moffitt (2016) defines populism as a political style enacted through mediated performances that dramatize crisis and flout conventions. Brubaker (2020) likewise highlights how anti-institutionalism, majoritarianism, and a “low” performative style generate affective bonds between leader and people. In Laclau’s (2005) theory, the leader is a nodal point unifying disparate social demands, discursively constructing “the people” through equivalential chains and embodying an “empty signifier.” Ostiguy and Moffitt (2021) reframe this idea by casting leaders as “overflowing signifiers”: highly affective and performative figures whose gestures, tone, and boundary-crossing behaviors overflow with symbolic meaning. Leadership here is constitutive of collective identity itself, embedding dense emotional content into political representation.

This performative logic extends to charisma, reframed not as an intrinsic quality but as a mediated and situational resource. Moffitt (2016, p. 62) stresses that while charisma can facilitate populist mobilization, it is neither essential nor defining, echoing methodological skepticism in Mudde (2007, p. 262) and van der Brug and Mughan (2007, p. 44). Rather than a fixed trait, charisma emerges through performative acts amplified by traditional and digital media. Empirical studies illustrate this dynamic: Lamour (2021) shows how Orbán, in televised interviews, reframed journalists as symbolic adversaries to dramatize a clash between “the people” and “the elite,” while Sonnevend and Kövesdi (2023) highlight his carefully curated digital charisma on Facebook, where he blends the roles of fighter, national symbol, relatable politician, and competent statesman to embody “Hungarianness.”

An important dimension of the communicative and performative approach lies in the embodied and gendered nature of populist leadership. Casullo (2019, 2020) places the leader’s body at the

center of analysis, showing how gestures, attire, and physical presence enact synecdochal representation, whereby the leader's body comes to stand for "the people." With Colalongo (2022), she demonstrates how digital media amplifies this "populist aesthetic regime," making bodily presence a key dispositif of emotional mobilization. Building on this line of inquiry, Joosse and Zelinsky (2023) advance the concept of charismatic mimicry to capture how charismatic styles and repertoires circulate not only between leaders and followers but also among elites themselves. Their analysis of Volodymyr Zelensky's interactions with European leaders shows how institutional actors adopted and adapted his protocols of wartime charisma—for example, Macron's bearded hoodie portrait at the Élysée, the Eastern European prime ministers appearing in fleeces and flak jackets during their visit to Kyiv, or EU figures such as Metsola and von der Leyen donning Zelensky-style olive drab attire. These instances of sartorial emulation illustrate how elites sought to appropriate the affective authority embodied in Zelensky's corporeal style, highlighting a mimetic and mutualistic dimension of performative leadership that complements Casullo's emphasis on embodiment.

A crucial extension of this communicative and performative logic concerns gender, since populist leadership styles are not only embodied but also deeply gendered in both their enactment and reception. Mostov (2021) highlights how masculinist narratives and bodily metaphors underpin exclusionary populist identities, while Abi-Hassan (2017) shows that women such as Eva Perón or Marine Le Pen strategically blend masculine and feminine repertoires to project authority. Extending this perspective, Casullo (2025) illustrates how female populist leaders mobilize maternal imagery alongside combative rhetoric to assert authenticity in a field long dominated by masculinized styles. Complementing these accounts from a different ontological and epistemological perspective, de Clercy, Seijts, and Ruiz Pardo (2025) provide empirical evidence that gender also shapes reception: their Canadian survey data reveal that right-wing populist attitudes more strongly erode women's evaluations of leader character than men's. Taken together, these insights confirm that embodiment and gender are constitutive of populist leadership, shaping both how leaders perform and how citizens perceive their authority.

Bridging discursive and strategic concerns, scholars highlight how populist leadership transforms representation itself. Urbinati (2019) characterizes it as "direct representation," a plebiscitarian mode that personalizes authority and displaces pluralism. Diehl (2018, 2019) describes a "populist twist" that fuses horizontal appeals to unity with vertical authority, while Giusta (2023) emphasizes how leaders emerge as the sole moral embodiment of the people. Representation becomes a redemptive performance, framing the leader as savior in moments of crisis.

This dramaturgical dynamic has been empirically traced in multiple contexts. Aiolfi (2025) shows how Trump and Le Pen construct people/elite antagonism, transgress norms, and dramatize crisis through national repertoires. Similarly, Joosse and Zelinsky (2022) introduce "berserk charisma" to capture how rage and transgressive anger, particularly in Trump's case, function as authenticity cues. Other studies highlight mythic hero and savior narratives, in which leaders perform redemptive struggles through sacred or superhero imagery (Kelsey, 2016; Schneiker, 2020). This resonates with Joosse's (2018) theory of charismatic counter-

roles, which conceptualizes charisma as a relational system co-produced by different actors. Beyond devoted followers, Joosse points to unworthy challengers, whose failure underscores the leader's extraordinariness, and colossal players, whose scale amplifies the mission by situating it within grand confrontation. Recent work situates these dynamics in moral and emotional dramaturgy: Metz (2024a) identifies the interplay of moral panic and euphoria in Orbán's leadership; Harrison (2025) depicts Trump's crisis performances as moral entrepreneurship; and DeHanas (2024) emphasizes sacred and apocalyptic registers that present leaders as embodiments of the people's moral destiny.

Taken together, discursive-performative perspectives illuminate the symbolic, emotional, and embodied nature of populist leadership. Authority emerges not through static charisma or institutional control but through continuous acts of crisis dramatization, boundary-drawing, and embodied performance. Leaders craft resonance through affective repertoires that channel fear, anger, and hope, often invoking moral and sacred registers. By treating leadership as a performative relationship co-produced by leaders, followers, and media ecologies, this body of work redefines populist leadership as a dynamic enactment of identity, authenticity, and emotional authority.

Discussion

This article has argued that leadership is not peripheral but foundational to the logic and success of populist mobilization. As the comparative overview of theoretical approaches shows, each perspective—ideational, strategic, and discursive—performative—offers distinct insights into how leadership operates within populist movements (*Table 1*). The ideational approach highlights how populist messages resonate with citizens' worldviews and their perceived need for strong leadership, as research on traits, charisma attribution, authoritarian preferences, and dark personality profiles demonstrates. The strategic approach places leadership at the very core of populism, emphasizing how leaders mobilize support by exploiting institutional weaknesses, crises, and affective grievances, with recent work expanding to intra-party dynamics, elite strategies, and policy outcomes. The discursive—performative perspective underscores the symbolic and embodied dimensions of leadership: populist leaders are not only transmitters of discourse but performers who construct identity, dramatize crisis, and signal authenticity through gestures, style, and emotionally resonant narratives.

Despite their differences, these approaches converge on a crucial insight: leadership is not incidental to populism but its constitutive force. Although their divergent premises could be read as obstacles to synthesis, they are better understood as complementary vantage points rather than incommensurable paradigms. Taken together, the ideational, strategic, and discursive—performative perspectives illuminate distinct mechanisms—cognitive, institutional, and embodied—that, in their very diversity, enable a fuller account of populist leadership. Whether conceptualized as ideological activation, strategic personalization, or affective performance, leadership operates as the mechanism through which “the people” are imagined, legitimacy is claimed, and crises are rendered meaningful. What ultimately unites these perspectives is the recognition that populist leadership is a relational and performative process, co-produced through symbolic practices, media environments, and followers' emotional

investments, and in turn reshaping both political action and the very logic of democratic representation. The tripartite typology can thus be read not only as a heuristic classification but also as a meta-framework that maps directly onto the main lines of contestation in contemporary populism research. The ideational approach crystallises debates over whether charisma is a necessary condition of populism, with Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser sceptical about its indispensability while Hawkins and colleagues advance systematic measures of charismatic appeal. This connects to broader discussions in leadership studies on the “post-heroic” turn (Collinson *et al.*, 2018) which questions the centrality of individual leaders while opening space for follower-centric perspectives (Metz, 2024b; Metz and Plesz, 2023, 2025). The strategic approach intersects with disputes about the degree of leader centrality, from Weyland’s emphasis on leader primacy to Rueda’s caution against overstating personalism at the expense of institutional dynamics. The discursive–performative approach captures tensions between viewing populism as a communicative style or as a broader political practice, echoing Laclau’s notion of the “empty signifier” versus Ostiguy and Moffitt’s idea of the “overflowing signifier.” This perspective also invites dialogue with critical leadership studies (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010), which treat leadership as a discursive, socially constructed process rather than a fixed attribute. By situating these debates within a common framework, the typology clarifies why the field often appears fragmented and how distinct strands can be put into more productive dialogue.

The payoff of this framework lies less in a detailed operationalization than in demonstrating how these approaches complement and can be integrated. Populism research has traditionally centered on leaders and parties—the content of their claims, their stylistic repertoires, their power-seeking strategies, and their performative practices—while leadership studies add a follower-centered lens (Metz, 2024b) that reveals how citizens resonate with populist worldviews, respond emotionally to stylistic markers, and tolerate, or even embrace, disruptive tendencies such as bypassing democratic institutions. Bringing these strands together allows scholars to move beyond a narrow leader-centric understanding toward a relational account of populist leadership as a dynamic interaction between leaders, followers, and institutional settings. Future research could take this integration further by operationalizing the typology in comparative designs that capture not only leader traits and rhetorical repertoires but also follower perceptions of authenticity, emotional resonance, and institutional tolerance. Such designs might combine survey experiments on charisma attribution, discourse analyses of leader performances, and comparative case studies of strategic adaptation across parties and regimes. In this way, the typology functions not only as a classificatory tool but also as an integrative and generative research agenda, clarifying sources of fragmentation in the field while systematically linking conceptual debates with empirical investigation.

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that populist leadership is best understood as a multifaceted phenomenon: ideationally grounded, strategically enacted, and symbolically performed. Future research would benefit from integrating these dimensions more explicitly, linking leader-centric analyses with voter perceptions and institutional effects. In the age of populist leaders, leadership is not simply a tool of populism—it is its most visible, persuasive, and contested expression.

Table 1. Populism and Leadership: Theoretical Approaches and Key Research Contributions

Approach	Key Theoretical Focus	View of Leadership	Representative Research & Authors
Ideational Approach	Populism as a “thin-centered ideology” centered on people-centrism and anti-elitism.	Leadership is secondary but instrumental in conveying the core populist worldview.	• Charismatic leadership thesis: Hawkins (2011), Michel et al. (2020), Van der Brug and Mughan (2007) • Charisma attribution and populist attitudes: Metz and Plesz (2023, 2025) • Leader character traits: Angelucci et al. (2024), López Ortega (2024), Seijts and Clercy (2020) • Authoritarian leadership preferences: Donovan (2021) • Dark side of populist leadership: Bakker et al. (2016), Nai and Martínez i Coma (2019), Nai (2022)
Strategic Approach	Focus on leader-centric mobilization, personalism, and the erosion of institutional norms.	Leadership is central; leaders exploit opportunities and mobilize popular support to gain and maintain power.	• Strategic populist leadership: Pappas (2016, 2019, 2020), Weyland (2001, 2021) • Charismatic perceptions within populist parties: Favero (2021), McDonnell (2016, 2017) • Charismatic perceptions in populist movements: Andrews-Lee (2021), Merolla and Zechmeister (2011) • Populist governance: Bartha et al. (2020), Muno and Pfeiffer (2022) • Leadership profiles and foreign policy: Fourquet and Brummer (2023), Thiers and Wehner (2022)
Discursive–Performative Approach	Populism as a style or mode of political performance that constructs the “people” and the “other.”	Leadership is enacted through media performance, embodiment, and symbolic communication.	• Populist performative style: Brubaker (2019), Moffitt (2016), Ostiguy (2017), Ostiguy and Moffitt (2021) • Populism as the content and style of political communication Jager and Walgrave (2007), de Vreese et al. (2018) • Populist bodily representation: Casullo (2019, 2020), Casullo and Colalongo (2022), Joosse and Zelinsky (2023) • Communication of populist leaders: Lamour (2021), Sonnevend and Kövesdi (2023) • Populist representation: Diehl (2018, 2019), Giusta (2023), Urbinati (2019) • Populist norm-breaking, moral panic, and the redemptive hero: Aiolfi (2025), DeHanas (2024), Harrison (2025), Joosse (2018), Joosse and Zelinsky (2022), Kelsey (2016), Metz (2024) • Gendered populist leadership Casullo (2025)

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