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Teflon leadership: crossing moral boundaries with impunity

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Introduction: Political leaders frequently violate social, political, and moral norms without facing meaningful consequences, particularly in polarized, identity-based communities. This phenomenon, commonly described as Teflon leadership, refers to leaders' ability to maintain legitimacy and public support despite repeated transgressions. In contemporary populist politics, norm-breaking itself often functions as a strategic resource, signaling authenticity, challenging liberal-democratic conventions, and reinforcing in-group loyalty.

Methods: Building on interdisciplinary scholarship, this study develops an integrative conceptual framework that synthesizes insights from leadership studies, social identity theory, and research on moral judgment and political behavior. The analysis systematically connects these literatures to theorize the social and psychological mechanisms that enable leaders' resilience in the face of moral and political violations.

Results: The article proposes a tripartite model of idiosyncrasy credit, transgression credit, and innovation credit to explain how followers grant conditional moral license to political leaders. These mechanisms are shown to potentially interact with deeper psychological processes, including populist attitudes, dark personality traits, identity-based authoritarianism, collective narcissism, identity uncertainty, and identity fusion, through which norm violations may be reframed as acts of loyalty, authenticity, or moral resistance.

Discussion: The resulting framework advances a set of conceptual propositions explaining how followers' moral leniency and affective attachment sustain Teflon leadership in polarized democracies. By theorizing the moral and psychological foundations of leader immunity, the study contributes to theory-building. It outlines a future research agenda that calls for empirical work integrating individual-level psychological factors with the social dynamics of political polarization.

KEYWORDS

authoritarianism, dark personality traits, identity politics, norm violations, political scandals, populism, Teflon leadership

I'll just ask you to follow me blindly
I know that history
will look on me kindly
cos I'm the Teflon Don
You know my song
I've done nothing wrong
Mike Lindup – Teflon Don.

1 Introduction

The concept of the “Teflon politician” was born with a metaphor coined by Democratic Congresswoman Pat Schroeder in 1983, when she described Ronald Reagan as a “*Teflon president*” who made sure that nothing ever stuck to him. Since then, the term has been used to describe leaders who prove surprisingly resistant to political scandals. Although the public often perceived Reagan as someone to whom “nothing sticks,” empirical research suggests that his popularity in fact declined during crises (Lanoue, 1989; Ostrom and Simon, 1989). Yet, thanks to his communication skills, optimistic image, and the stabilizing economy, he consistently managed to regain public support.

In the twenty-first century, Teflon politics has reached a new level. Donald Trump, frequently referred to as “*Teflon Don*,” not only survived political scandals but also turned them into political capital. In a 2016 campaign speech, he remarked, with ironic emphasis:

“My people are so smart. And you know what else they say about my people? The polls. They say I have the most loyal people. Did you ever see that? Where I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I would not lose any voters. It’s just incredible.” [CNN (Director), 2016].

This statement not only illustrated the extent of loyalty but also pointed to a transformation in the meaning of political scandals.

Across diverse political contexts, the label of “*Teflon leadership*” has been applied to leaders who demonstrate an exceptional resilience to scandal and an enduring capacity to preserve public support. In Spain, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has also been dubbed a “*Teflon Don*” for surviving repeated corruption allegations linked to his party. Ireland’s Bertie Ahern earned the nickname the “*Teflon Taoiseach*” for navigating persistent controversies without losing his grip on power. Angela Merkel, Germany’s long-serving chancellor, was frequently referred to as the “*Teflon Chancellor*” for her remarkable ability to emerge from political crises largely unscathed. Mark Rutte, the longest-serving prime minister of the Netherlands, became widely known as “*Teflon Mark*” for weathering multiple cabinet crises and policy failures. In the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson was often called “*Teflon Johnson*” or “*Mr. Teflon*,” reflecting how scandals—from personal misconduct to the “Partygate” affair—failed to diminish his political influence for years. French President Emmanuel Macron likewise gained the moniker “*Teflon Macron*,” as controversies and widespread public protests did not ultimately dislodge his authority. In Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and Péter Magyar, his most serious challenger in the past 16 years, have been portrayed by commentators as a rising Teflon figure, while Czech leader Andrej Babiš and Poland’s Jarosław Kaczyński have both been associated with the same resilient political style.

Beyond Europe and North America, the label has also been applied to leaders in diverse political contexts. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, despite facing corruption charges and even imprisonment, made a dramatic return to the presidency in Brazil, cementing his reputation as a Teflon politician. In Taiwan, former President Ma Ying-jeou maintained strong support even amid protests and accusations of weak governance. In India, commentators have spoken of “*Indian Teflon*” to describe Narendra Modi’s ability to thrive despite communal tensions and policy controversies. Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador has likewise turned repeated scandals into opportunities to

reinforce his populist outsider identity. Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad, who managed two comebacks to power across decades, was also seen as embodying the Teflon phenomenon. Finally, in South Africa, Jacob Zuma retained a strong base of loyalists throughout years of corruption scandals, epitomizing how Teflon leadership often transcends political systems, ideologies, and continents. Yet while the term has become widespread in political and media discourse, our actual understanding of the phenomenon remains surprisingly limited.

This lack of understanding is particularly striking given that the phenomenon touches upon the very essence of democracy: the accountability of leaders. According to Przeworski’s (1999) minimalist definition, the core function of democracy is to replace “bad leaders” without violence. Yet recent elections have repeatedly upheld or even reinstated highly controversial figures such as Donald Trump, Andrej Babiš, Viktor Orbán, and Robert Fico. The fragmented knowledge we have about Teflon leadership largely stems from the fact that different disciplines—political science, social psychology, and communication studies—have all recognized the phenomenon, but approached it from distinct perspectives, leaving us without a coherent framework.

Three main explanations emerge from the literature. *First*, leadership studies attribute the Teflon protection of leaders to their perceived personal qualities and behavior. Merolla and Zechmeister (2011) demonstrate that charismatic appeal provides leaders like Chávez with a form of insulation from negative performance evaluations. Similar insights arise from organizational research. Leaders who communicate a compelling vision with confidence and expressive delivery are more likely to be perceived as charismatic and effective, thereby gaining resilience against negative judgments (Awamleh and Gardner, 1999). Shapiro et al. (2011) extend this logic by showing that competent and inspirational leaders often escape punitive sanctions for transgressions, a phenomenon explained by Hollander’s (1958, 2006) concept of *idiosyncrasy credits*. According to this model, leaders accumulate “credits” in their followers’ eyes by demonstrating competence and conforming to group norms; these credits serve as a symbolic reserve of trust and legitimacy that can later be “spent” to justify deviations, innovations, or even moral transgressions without immediately losing follower support.

Second, more recent research suggests that a leader’s legitimacy does not derive solely from “credits” accumulated through past conformity and performance but can also be generated through group prototypicality and alignment with the group’s social identity. These factors, in themselves, create a form of trust capital that authorizes leaders to deviate from established norms (Platow and van Knippenberg, 2001). This idea is further elaborated in the concept of *transgression credit* (Abrams et al., 2013; Randsley De Moura and Abrams, 2013), which builds on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987). Its core premise is that when ordinary group members transgress norms, the community typically responds with harsh sanctions, since deviant behavior threatens the group’s cohesion, homogeneity, and distinctiveness from other groups (Abrams and Hogg, 1988; Hogg, 1992). Such violations undermine the perceived validity of the group’s values and its symbolic boundaries vis-à-vis out-groups with competing norms and identities. As a result, deviant members are often marginalized and stigmatized—symbolically excluded from the “real” community—to preserve the integrity of group norms (Marques et al., 1998). However, when a prototypical and trusted leader engages

in norm-breaking, it can be reinterpreted as authenticity or moral courage. In this sense, the mechanism resembles what Rottinghaus (2023) calls the “Trump effect.” In highly polarized environments, scandals no longer necessarily harm politicians but may instead reinforce their standing among loyal supporters.

Finally, the so-called *innovation credit* (Abrams et al., 2008; Randsley De Moura et al., 2010) can be understood as a synthesis of these two approaches under specific conditions: while a leader’s perceived personal abilities remain important, as Hollander’s theory suggests, their legitimacy is often conferred rather than accrued, as assumed in the model of transgression credit. Future or newly appointed leaders, unlike current or former ones, are temporarily granted greater latitude to deviate from group norms and to introduce innovation. Their followers tend to be more lenient toward such deviations, perceiving them not as acts of betrayal but as signs of competence and visionary leadership. Studies demonstrate that, compared to former leaders, new leaders are endowed with this temporary license to think differently and to redefine the group’s direction on its behalf.

Integrating these models, this study aims to understand a phenomenon increasingly observed in contemporary politics, commonly referred to as the Teflon effect—that is, situations in which political leaders retain their legitimacy and public support despite severe scandals or norm violations. We seek to identify the social-psychological and political factors that enable such resilience. Our work adopts an interdisciplinary approach that bridges classical and contemporary concepts of social psychology—such as the *populist attitudes*, *dark personality traits*, *identity-based authoritarianism*, *collective narcissism*, *identity uncertainty*, and *identity fusion*—with political science research on leadership, populism, and political scandals. In doing so, the paper not only introduces new empirical perspectives but also outlines a novel research agenda for examining the social acceptance of political norm violations, developing conceptual propositions grounded in these psychological models and theoretical constructions.

This study contributes to the literature on political leadership and collective behavior in two main ways. On the one hand, it redefines how the impact of political scandals is understood, emphasizing that scandal management is not merely a matter of communication strategy but rather the outcome of deep-rooted social identifications, collective and individual psychological processes. On the other hand, it argues that the Teflon effect should not be seen as a sign of apathy or misinformation but as a manifestation of identity-based leader-follower dynamics. Through this lens, we aim to build an analytical bridge between political communication, leadership studies, and social psychology.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section reviews the significance and mechanisms of political norm violations and scandals. The second examines how modern populist and charismatic leaders justify transgressions and convert them into political capital. The third section introduces the concept of the Teflon effect through the lens of social and political psychology. The fourth section develops a set of conceptual propositions, integrating insights from relevant psychological models to explain how followers’ moral leniency and loyalty are sustained despite leaders’ norm violations. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the proposed research agenda for future studies, outlining key directions for empirical testing and theoretical refinement.

2 The political significance of norm violations and scandals

Political scandals are not merely media-driven events but complex social and political phenomena that can fundamentally undermine the credibility of public figures and exert lasting effects on political trust, loyalty, and the legitimacy of institutions. Accordingly, the study of the nature and consequences of scandals has a long tradition in political science, with particular attention to their electoral and reputational impacts. Research typically classifies political scandals along three main dimensions of norm violation: political, financial, and personal misconduct (Rottinghaus, 2023; von Sikorski, 2018). Political norm violations include actions that undermine the principles of the rule of law, constitutional norms, or the system of institutional checks and balances. Financial scandals, such as corruption, embezzlement, or illegal campaign financing, primarily erode the integrity of governance and the fairness of political competition. In contrast, personal scandals, for instance, those involving sexual misconduct or the abuse of power in the private sphere, call into question the moral credibility and exemplary character of political leaders (Table 1).

Political scandals continue to exert a significant negative impact on politicians’ evaluations and electoral prospects, as confirmed by numerous empirical studies and meta-analyses (Praino and Stockemer, 2022; von Sikorski, 2018). Praino and Stockemer’s (2022) meta-analysis highlights that scandals significantly influence voting behavior, often diminishing re-election prospects, particularly when they surface close to elections (Pereira and Waterbury, 2019). Additionally, Rottinghaus (2014) also finds that candidates embroiled in scandals suffer financial and reputational setbacks, including reduced fundraising, loss of endorsements, and intensified media scrutiny.

At the individual level, empirical findings indicate that voters consistently sanction norm transgressions. Experimental studies have shown that voters punish corruption in Spain (Breitenstein, 2019), Italy (Franchino and Zucchini, 2015), the United Kingdom (Solaz et al., 2019), Sweden and Moldova (Klašnja and Tucker, 2013). Similarly, voters have been observed to penalize instances of sexual harassment (Masuoka et al., 2023) and to sanction democratic norm violations (Elena et al., 2024; Frederiksen, 2022; Graham and Svulik, 2020; Svulik, 2018). However, other factors, such as policy preferences (Graham and Svulik, 2020; Lewandowsky and Jankowski, 2023), competence, personal characteristics, and education (Breitenstein, 2019; Franchino and Zucchini, 2015; Frederiksen, 2022), as well as economic performance (Breitenstein, 2019), often exert a comparable or even greater influence. Among these factors, partisanship undoubtedly plays the most significant role (Graham and Svulik, 2020; Krishnarajan, 2023).

While citizens tend to react similarly to different types of norm violations, the political impact of scandals may vary depending on their nature. Research on scandals also indicates that leaders’ norm violations have varying political effects. A meta-analysis of 78 studies with over 54,000 participants found that scandals significantly harm politicians’ evaluations, but the effects depend on the nature of the scandal as well as on factors like candidate characteristics and prior attitudes (von Sikorski, 2018). Financial scandals involve the misuse of public funds, bribery, corruption, fraud, or financial mismanagement, and tend to be the most consequential, often leading to significant vote share losses (Praino and Stockemer, 2022) and

TABLE 1 Types, definitions and consequences of scandals.

Types of scandals	Definition and typical consequences	Illustrative example
Financial scandals	Financial scandals involve the misappropriation of public funds, bribery, corruption, fraud, or other financial irregularities. They usually carry the most severe institutional consequences, as they directly violate public trust and legal norms. Such scandals often lead to judicial proceedings, resignations, or even constitutional and political accountability.	<i>Silvio Berlusconi</i> (1990s–2010s): the former Italian Prime Minister faced numerous corruption trials, including accusations of bribing judges and committing tax fraud.
Political scandals	Political scandals encompass unethical or unlawful acts committed within the political sphere, such as election interference, obstruction of justice, or abuse of power. These violations undermine democratic institutions, erode public trust, and distort the separation of powers. Their consequences are often severe, including resignations, impeachments, or lasting political damage.	<i>Richard Nixon</i> (1972): during the Watergate scandal, operatives acting on behalf of the Republican Party broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters. Nixon's subsequent attempt to cover up the incident led to one of the most significant political crises in U.S. history and ultimately to his resignation.
Personal scandals	Personal scandals arise from the personal behavior of politicians, such as sexual misconduct, adultery, or other moral transgressions. Their impact varies widely depending on cultural attitudes, media framing, and partisan loyalty. Although they primarily damage an individual's reputation, they may also have broader institutional implications if they involve abuse of power or legal violations.	<i>Tony Blair</i> (2007): while publicly advocating improvements to public education, Blair enrolled his own children in private schools, raising questions about his personal integrity and political credibility.

higher resignation rates, particularly in parliamentary systems where party brand damage is a concern (Bågenholm, 2013). Systemic corruption also fosters disengagement and cynicism, weakening democratic legitimacy (Ares and Hernández, 2017). Personal scandals generally have less electoral impact than financial scandals (Gulati and Brown, 2021). However, when a politician's public stance contradicts their personal behavior, such as a conservative championing "family values" caught in a sex scandal, electoral penalties increase significantly (Wolsky, 2022).

Contemporary political polarization has profoundly transformed the consequences of scandals. Partisan loyalty often weakens the potential for moral accountability, turning scandals into partisan weapons rather than instruments for upholding democratic norms (Busby, 2022; Rottinghaus, 2023). The role of the media is central in this process: in some cases, media coverage of scandals leads to genuine political and moral sanctions, while in others, framing becomes selective and politically motivated, eroding the perceived significance of norm violations (Allern and von Sikorski, 2018; Busby, 2022). Tumber and Waisbord (2004) emphasize that scandals, through what they call the "politics of shaming," activate moral and political sanctions that publicly damage a politician's reputation and remind society that certain acts constitute moral violations even when they are not legally punishable. In a polarized media environment, however, this function becomes selective: the same act may be interpreted by one side as a moral reckoning and by the other as character assassination, thus weakening the universal validity of moral sanctions. After analyzing more than 800 scandals involving U.S. presidents, governors, and members of Congress between 1972 and 2021, Rottinghaus (2023) argues that the Trump era epitomizes a new political pattern in which scandals have become normalized and survival in office depends less on the severity of transgressions than on the strength of a leader's loyal base. This so-called "Trump effect" has redefined the standards of political accountability and the meaning of consequence in contemporary American politics.

Studies also show that support for illiberal and authoritarian leadership is highly contingent on partisan and group-based

considerations (Braley et al., 2023; Fossati et al., 2022; Graham and Svulik, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021). Specifically, individuals with authoritarian dispositions are more likely to tolerate democratic backsliding when their preferred leader or party is in power. However, they demand strict adherence to democratic norms from political opponents. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "democratic hypocrisy" (Simonovits et al., 2022), suggests that citizens often apply different standards to in-group and out-group political actors, legitimizing norm violations by allies while condemning similar behavior by opponents. Research on affective polarization suggests that strong partisan identification often overrides democratic commitments, leading individuals to rationalize or dismiss norm violations by their preferred leaders. A cross-national experimental study (Krishnarajan, 2023) reveals that citizens frequently reinterpret democratic principles to align with their political and moral preferences. They may label policies they oppose as undemocratic while justifying undemocratic actions by politicians they support.

In this sense, despite the strong association between authoritarianism and norm violations, this factor alone cannot fully account for the political resilience of leaders who withstand repeated transgressions—a phenomenon we define as Teflon leadership. While authoritarianism facilitates the acceptance of norm violations, its influence is highly conditional, shaped by partisan identity, perceived threats, and elite signaling. Research suggests that leaders themselves play a crucial role in either activating or suppressing authoritarian tendencies, as their rhetoric and strategic framing shape public perceptions of what constitutes acceptable political behavior (Kingzette et al., 2021). Thus, while authoritarianism provides a valuable framework for understanding why some individuals tolerate political transgressions, it must be analyzed alongside broader social and political dynamics that shape public reactions to norm violations.

Perspectives from social psychology have also become increasingly relevant to the interpretation of political scandals, as norm violations are not merely legal or instrumental transgressions but deeply moral events. According to *Moral Foundations Theory* (MFT: Haidt, 2012;

Haidt and Joseph, 2004, 2008), moral judgment is often the result of fast, intuitive reactions that are organized around six innate moral dimensions: care/harm, fairness/cheating, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect and purity/sanctity with liberty/oppression added later (Table 2). Although these principles are considered universal, their meaning and emotional salience vary across cultural and political contexts.

Political scandals lie at the intersection of moral foundations, publicly challenging the fundamental normative expectations citizens hold of political leaders, such as integrity, accountability, and ethical conduct. Empirical research demonstrates that political norm violations evoke complex social-psychological responses: they trigger not only individual but also collective emotional, cognitive, and identity-based reactions. These responses can influence social cohesion, contribute to the erosion of political trust, and, in more severe cases, precipitate systemic political crises.

In experimental settings, Walter and Redlawsk (2023) demonstrate that moral-emotional responses to political norm violations are shaped far more by partisan identity than by voters' own moral principles. When citizens share a partisan affiliation with a politician who commits a moral transgression, they exhibit significantly lower levels of anger, contempt, disgust, and shame compared to those outside the transgressor's political camp—an effect that intensifies among strong partisans. The study provides only limited support for MFT, showing that corresponding types of moral violations do not consistently activate specific moral emotions. Instead, moral judgment operates through the lens of partisan identity: shared group membership dampens negative emotional responses and redefines moral boundaries, revealing how identity-based loyalty can override

moral principle in evaluating political misconduct. Their subsequent study (Redlawsk and Walter, 2024) reveals partisan asymmetries in punitive reactions: Republicans tend to be harsher toward minor ethical violations but show strong in-group leniency. In contrast, Democrats are more punitive toward moderate or severe infractions, showing weaker partisan bias overall. These findings are consistent with broader evidence indicating that conservatives place greater emphasis on loyalty and authority, while liberals prioritize fairness and the avoidance of harm.

Empirical evidence consistently shows that individuals' political orientations play a decisive role in determining which moral foundations they consider most relevant. According to Graham et al. (2009), individuals with liberal political attitudes tend to prioritize individualizing moral foundations, such as care and fairness. In contrast, conservatives attribute roughly equal importance to all five binding foundations. The differences in moral sensitivity are particularly pronounced in the domains of authority and purity: liberals are typically more skeptical or dismissive of these values, while conservatives are more accepting or neutral (Frimer et al., 2013).

The moral interpretation of political scandals is shaped not only by individual belief systems but also by the discourses mediated through the press and popular culture. Tamborini's (2011) model of moral socialization posits that media consumption influences audiences' moral beliefs, which in turn shape their media preferences—a reciprocal process in which individuals tend to seek out information that reinforces their pre-existing worldviews. Narratives presented by the media, whether fictional or factual, can activate the same moral intuitions as direct personal experiences (Tamborini, 2012; Tamborini et al., 2010). This mechanism is

TABLE 2 Types of moral violations.

Moral foundation	Definition and typical consequences	Illustrative example
Care vs. harm	Refers to actions or policies that cause physical, emotional, or psychological harm, particularly to vulnerable groups. Such scandals often provoke intense public outrage and heightened scrutiny, as they raise serious ethical and humanitarian concerns.	<i>Boris Johnson</i> (2020–2022): during the COVID-19 pandemic, he repeatedly missed crisis meetings and appeared to prioritize personal interests over governmental responsibility.
Fairness vs. cheating	Occurs when a leader violates principles of justice, fairness, or integrity, for example, through favoritism, deceit, or the abuse of power.	<i>Rod Blagojevich</i> (2008): as governor of Illinois, he attempted to sell Barack Obama's vacated Senate seat.
Loyalty vs. betrayal	Involves acts of disloyalty toward one's group, nation, or political allies, such as betraying a party, abandoning shared values, or undermining trusted partners.	<i>Liz Truss</i> (2022): during her short premiership, she introduced economic policies that diverged from her party's principles, triggering market instability and the loss of intra-party support that led to her resignation.
Sanctity vs. degradation	Involves behavior that violates the community's moral or ethical expectations. This category includes corruption scandals and personal misconduct that offend collective moral sensibilities.	<i>Pope Francis</i> (2020s): despite promoting moral renewal, Vatican financial scandals, such as luxury property deals, emerged, undermining the Church's ethical credibility, even after subsequent reforms.
Authority vs. subversion	Occurs when a leader defies established hierarchies, breaches institutional norms, or challenges legitimate authority.	<i>Donald Trump</i> (2021): played a central role in the storming of the U.S. Capitol, widely interpreted as incitement to political violence and an assault on democratic institutions, leading to his second impeachment.
Liberty vs. oppression	Refers to violations that restrict individual freedoms, such as surveillance, censorship, or intimidation of citizens. These are especially serious in societies that value liberty as a core principle.	<i>Alexei Navalny</i> (2021): the prominent Russian opposition leader was imprisoned upon returning from Germany after surviving poisoning. Authorities violently dispersed solidarity protests and detained numerous activists.

particularly relevant in the context of political scandals, where framing, such as emphasizing responsibility or constructing victim narratives, strongly affects whom the audience holds accountable, the moral judgments they form, and the emotional responses they express (Rothmund et al., 2013).

An increasing body of empirical evidence suggests that moral framing is a highly effective political tool: it not only shapes citizens' moral convictions (Andrews et al., 2017; Barker, 2005; Lakoff, 2004) but also significantly influences support for political actors (Voelkel and Feinberg, 2018; Voelkel and Willer, 2019). Taken together, these findings indicate that the moral interpretation and social reception of norm violations are closely intertwined with patterns of media consumption and the framing of news, particularly in an information environment where scandals receive disproportionate attention (Tumber and Waisbord, 2019).

During periods of crisis, public tolerance toward norm violations tends to increase, as citizens prioritize stability, protection, and effectiveness over democratic principles and moral constraints. The *rally-round-the-flag* effect (Bligh et al., 2004; Feinstein, 2016, 2020) illustrates how crises can temporarily boost public support for incumbent leaders, even when their actions deviate from established norms. Nevertheless, such surges in approval are often short-lived and context-dependent, shaped by subjective perceptions of crisis severity and by leaders' personal attributes. Building on MFT, research indicates that in environments of heightened fear and insecurity, individuals become more accepting of authoritarian leadership styles that emphasize dominance and control (Mirowska et al., 2022). Those who prioritize *binding* moral values—loyalty, authority, and sanctity—are more likely to tolerate or even endorse coercive leadership as a protective mechanism. In contrast, individuals who emphasize *individualizing* values such as care and fairness tend to resist such tendencies. This dynamic suggests that crises not only reinforce the legitimacy of leaders but can also normalize norm violations by shifting moral expectations toward more coercive and illiberal forms of governance.

3 Crossing the line: transgressive politics of populists

One of the most striking cases of a political leader surviving and even thriving despite serious norm violations is that of Marion Barry, the former mayor of Washington, D.C. Barry, a civil rights activist and the city's first African American mayor, was re-elected multiple times despite corruption scandals and even a drug conviction (Kellerman, 2004, pp. 103–117). His enduring popularity was not due to ignorance of his misconduct but rather because of the strong collective identity he forged with the African American community in Washington. As a leader, Barry's rhetoric and policies resonated deeply with a historically marginalized group, and his personal failings were often framed as struggles against a hostile political and judicial system. His re-election after serving a prison sentence underscores the power of group identity in shaping perceptions of norm violations. Barry's case highlights a broader dynamic: political leaders can maintain public support even after transgressing moral and legal norms if they successfully align themselves with a collective identity. This dynamic is particularly relevant in contemporary politics, where populist leaders frequently engage in norm-breaking behavior while maintaining—or even enhancing—their legitimacy.

Populist leaders strategically engage in transgressive rhetoric and behavior, positioning themselves as anti-establishment figures who challenge the political status quo. Unlike cases where norm violations are incidental, modern populist politics elevates transgression into a deliberate strategy. Populist leaders differentiate themselves from the political establishment by intentionally breaking norms, portraying themselves as authentic representatives of ordinary people in contrast to detached elites.

Scholars have long examined this dynamic at the theoretical level. Ostiguy's (2017) *high–low framework* helps elucidate the phenomenon: whereas mainstream politicians tend to conform to the “high” norms of refined, rule-bound governance, populist leaders embrace a “low” style marked by informality, political incorrectness, and emotional expressiveness. Moffitt (2016) further develops this insight by introducing the concept of *bad manners*, showing how populist figures intentionally violate the conventions of political decorum and institutional restraint to reinforce their outsider appeal. Through inflammatory rhetoric, public outbursts, and deliberate provocations, they construct a distinctive political persona that resonates powerfully with their followers. Building on these accounts, Aiolfi (2025) further develops this idea by framing norm violation in populist politics as a form of transgression, arguing that it extends beyond mere bad manners. It becomes a staged, dramaturgical act through which leaders embody authenticity, dramatize their opposition to the elite, and transform deviance itself into a source of political legitimacy.

For instance, his detailed analysis revealed that leaders such as Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen strategically reframe their controversial actions not as misconduct but as necessary disruptions, positioning themselves as the sole defenders of “the people” against a corrupt and self-serving elite (Aiolfi, 2025). This performative defiance serves a dual purpose: it strengthens their outsider identity while constructing a crisis narrative in which they appear as embattled protectors resisting an unjust system. Similarly, Joosse and Zelinsky (2022) introduce the notion of *berserk charisma* to capture how rage and transgressive anger—particularly in Trump's case—function as cues of authenticity. Recent scholarship situates these dynamics within the broader field of moral and emotional dramaturgy: Metz (2024) identifies the interplay of moral panic and euphoria in Orbán's leadership; Harrison (2025) depicts Trump's crisis performances as acts of moral entrepreneurship; and DeHanas (2024) emphasizes sacred and apocalyptic registers that present leaders as embodiments of the people's moral destiny.

The ability of political leaders to define what constitutes a norm violation, and to manipulate its moral and political consequences—hinges on the concept of *moral entrepreneurship*. Moral entrepreneurs actively reshape societal moral frameworks, amplifying certain transgressions while downplaying others to serve political objectives. Becker's (1963) original theory of moral entrepreneurship emphasized that specific individuals, groups, or institutions assume the role of persuading society to adopt specific moral norms and values. In this sense, moral entrepreneurs are “moral crusaders” who construct and enforce rules that define some groups as deviant because their identities fall outside the boundaries of the “good society.” These actors play a pivotal role in attaching or removing moral labels, thereby redrawing the moral geography of public life and acting as highly visible agents of social control who shape collective perceptions of legitimacy and deviance. Similarly, Posner (2002) argues that moral entrepreneurs reshape collective moral frameworks by appealing

simultaneously to self-interest and emotion, influencing whom the public learns to love, hate, admire, or fear. From a political perspective, these actors can also operate as *polarisation entrepreneurs* (Sunstein, 2000): they cultivate like-minded communities, reinforce ideological frontlines, and push rival camps toward greater extremity. Charismatic leaders, in particular, function as moral entrepreneurs by evoking, revoking, and reframing emotional and moral norms (Wasielowski, 1985). Through rhetoric, symbolism, and affective communication, they manipulate collective emotions, such as fear, pride, or resentment, thereby reinforcing their own authority while redefining the boundaries of what counts as transgressive or acceptable behavior.

Shaping of a community's normative boundaries is inherently intertwined with the construction of its collective identity (Aiolfi, 2025). Political leadership rarely emerges from a vacuum of pre-existing norms or identities; instead, it gains power by actively defining and transforming them. This is the essence of identity entrepreneurship—the process through which leaders construct and redefine the shared sense of “we” that psychologically unites their followers (Haslam et al., 2020). Identity entrepreneurs do not merely reflect existing social divisions; they reinterpret what it means to belong to the group, redefining its boundaries, grievances, and moral purpose. In doing so, they mobilize followers not through command but through identification—by positioning themselves as both of the group and for the group.

A striking illustration of this dynamic is the January 6, 2021 assault on the U.S. Capitol, where, as Haslam et al. (2022) argue, Donald Trump's identity leadership during the “Stop the Steal” movement exemplified a dual-agency process: leader and followers co-produced collective action. Trump's repeated invocation of “we” and “our” constructed an image of a besieged yet morally superior American ingroup, threatened by “them”—Democrats, elites, and the media. He reframed loyalty and resistance as a patriotic duty, thereby creating the emotional and moral scaffolding for collective mobilization, even violent action, without the need for explicit instruction. This episode illustrates how identity entrepreneurship can transform diffuse discontent into coordinated political action, and how populist leaders harness shared identity narratives to cultivate unity, moral righteousness, and a sense of collective purpose among their followers.

In the context of populism, this dynamic becomes especially visible. The populist leader operates as a paradigmatic identity entrepreneur, reconstructing the moral boundaries between “the people” and “the elite.” By framing politics as a moral struggle between the “pure” and the “corrupt,” the leader amplifies collective resentment and shared victimhood, strengthening emotional bonds among followers (Uysal et al., 2022). Populist identity entrepreneurship thus represents a distorted and polarizing form of identity leadership: it relies on the same psychological mechanisms—group identification, the construction of a common enemy, and the “us versus them” logic—but uses them not to empower the group inclusively, but to exclude opponents and maximize political loyalty.

Crisis generation is a pivotal strategy for populist leaders, serving both as a mechanism to reinforce their legitimacy and to reshape democratic norms (Aiolfi, 2025; Moffitt, 2016). Harrison's (2025) dramaturgical perspective on *leadership by crisis* deepens this understanding by demonstrating that moral entrepreneurship is not merely rhetorical but performative. Contemporary leaders do not simply respond to crises; they actively construct them as moral dramas

in which they star as saviors or redeemers. In this view, crisis becomes both a political resource and a stage upon which moral authority is enacted and contested. By dramatizing social tensions as moral emergencies, leaders justify exceptional measures and consolidate loyalty around their own moral persona. This process transforms politics into a form of *moral theatre*, where the leader's ability to define good and evil—and to channel collective emotions toward allies and enemies alike—becomes a central source of legitimacy.

As Körösenyi et al. (2016) argue, political actors are not merely interpreters of crises but active producers of them, using crisis construction to expand their authority and normalize extraordinary measures. This aligns with Metz's (2024) analysis, which shows how populist leaders deliberately invoke moral panic and polarizing narratives to sustain a permanent state of emergency.

On one hand, such strategies compel citizens to prioritize security and stability over democratic norms and moral constraints (Mirowska et al., 2022). Empirical studies of crisis-driven charisma confirm this dynamic: during the U.S. presidential elections (Williams et al., 2009, 2012), the 2003 California recall election (Bligh et al., 2005), and the aftermath of 9/11 (Bligh et al., 2004), followers attributed heightened charisma and legitimacy to those who were perceived as capable of resolving crises. Pastor et al. (2007) similarly found that fear-arousal states triggered by crisis contexts increase followers' susceptibility to charismatic influence. On the other hand, this performative construction of crisis enables leaders to justify and legitimize policies that directly challenge democratic norms. By framing political tensions as existential threats, populist leaders not only delegitimize opposition but also consolidate power—often at the expense of liberal institutions and the democratic order itself.

4 Teflon leadership: idiosyncrasy, transgression, and innovation credits

The consequences of political norm violations extend far beyond electoral outcomes; they profoundly shape how the public perceives leaders. A scandal can undermine a politician's moral credibility or perceived professional competence, yet not all leadership attributes are equally vulnerable to reputational damage. For instance, in the case of Bill Clinton, the Monica Lewinsky affair severely undermined perceptions of his moral integrity, yet public evaluations of his vision, competence, and transformational leadership remained relatively stable throughout the crisis (Pillai et al., 2004). This suggests that certain leadership qualities, such as charisma, strategic thinking, or rhetorical skill, may be more resilient to scandal-induced reputational loss.

This is particularly true for charismatic and populist leaders, who often embody the archetype of the “*Teflon politician*”: even in the face of severe transgressions, they manage to retain their support base. Their followers not only refuse to abandon them but frequently reject or reinterpret criticism altogether. Merolla and Zechmeister (2011), for example, found that Hugo Chávez's supporters remained loyal despite economic recession, as his charisma acted as a perceptual filter that distorted negative information. Moreover, as discussed above, norm violations themselves may serve as deliberate political tools—performative rejections of liberal-democratic standards that deepen social division and strengthen the leader's moral authority among in-group followers.

A similar mechanism has been identified in organizational contexts. Leaders who communicate a compelling vision with confidence and emotional resonance are more likely to be perceived as charismatic and effective, thus enjoying greater resilience against negative judgments (Awamleh and Gardner, 1999). Shapiro et al. (2011) further demonstrate that followers tend to judge inspirational and competent leaders more leniently when they transgress, often rationalizing or minimizing the severity of the violation—particularly if they believe that the leader acted in the collective interest or pursued a higher goal. In such cases, charisma and professional prestige function as symbolic shields that buffer outrage and reduce the likelihood of sanctioning.

This pattern can be traced back to Hollander's (1958, 2006) classic theory of *idiosyncrasy credits*, which posits that leaders accumulate “credits” in their followers’ eyes by demonstrating competence and conforming to group norms. These symbolic credits serve as a reserve of trust and legitimacy that can later be “spent,” allowing leaders to deviate from norms, innovate, or even commit moral transgressions without immediately losing support. This protective effect, however, is not limitless: prolonged crises, declining performance, or deteriorating public conditions, such as economic instability or insecurity, can eventually deplete even the strongest leader's store of legitimacy.

A complementary theoretical perspective has emerged, positing that collective identities are central to the formation of moral judgments (Platow and van Knippenberg, 2001) by influencing how individuals perceive and evaluate ethical transgressions—a process known as *moral tuning* (Van Bavel et al., 2023). This mechanism fosters leniency toward in-group members while intensifying moral condemnation of out-group individuals. Whereas competence-related failures by leaders are often forgiven (Giessner et al., 2009), moral transgressions tend to elicit more adverse reactions (Giannella et al., 2022). However, leaders may benefit from a form of moral license, in which their norm violations are tolerated more than comparable infractions by ordinary group members and out-group leaders.

When leaders from within the group violate its norms, they trigger a cognitive–moral conflict among followers, who must reconcile two competing motivations: maintaining loyalty to their leader and upholding the integrity of the group's values. Rather than rejecting the leader outright, followers often resolve this tension through motivated leniency, reinterpreting or minimizing the violation so that both loyalty and moral coherence can be preserved. This process grants the leader what Abrams et al. (2013) term *transgression credit*—a temporary suspension of moral accountability justified by the leader's group prototypicality and symbolic importance. Ordinary in-group members who transgress do not generate this dilemma because their actions do not threaten the group's identity, while out-group members, lacking relevance to the in-group's moral order, elicit straightforward condemnation. As a result, only in-group leaders, those who are simultaneously norm violators and identity representatives, can benefit from the psychological privilege of transgression credit.

The literature explains this tolerance through two mechanisms. The leader's (1) *perceived prototypicality* refers to the extent to which they embody the defining attributes, norms, and values of the group. According to social identity theory, becoming a leader is not merely about occupying a formal position of authority but about being recognized as “one of us” and, simultaneously, the “best of us” (Haslam

et al., 2020). In this sense, leadership represents the collective acknowledgment that the individual most fully captures what it means to belong to the group, granting them a central role in shaping the group's self-concept and collective understanding of “who we are.” When group identity becomes a dominant frame of reference, followers evaluate their leaders primarily by how strongly they personify the group's defining values and collective self-image, rather than by their individual performance or moral conduct (Barreto and Hogg, 2017). This identification strengthens the leniency effect, as followers become more inclined to excuse or rationalize their leader's transgressions. Such leniency is further amplified by affective polarization, which—through mechanisms of dehumanization and group mobilization—reduces empathy toward political opponents while legitimizing hostility and even aggressive actions against out-groups (Piazza, 2023).

The (2) *normative conferral of a “right to lead”* refers to the collective belief that leaders are entitled to exercise discretion and make decisions on behalf of the group (Abrams et al., 2018). A shared social identity plays a crucial role in this process, as it facilitates the attribution of charisma—leaders who are perceived as embodying the group's defining values and prototypical traits are more likely to be seen as legitimate and inspirational (Platow et al., 2006; Steffens et al., 2014). This mechanism departs from the logic of the idiosyncrasy credit model, which holds that legitimacy is gradually accumulated through demonstrated competence and conformity to group norms. In contrast, the transgression credit framework proposes that legitimacy is often granted in advance: leaders are not rewarded for past adherence to norms. However, they are assumed to conform simply by virtue of their leadership status. Consequently, leadership authority derives less from accumulated moral or performance-based capital and more from the group's collective act of normative endorsement, which temporarily entrusts the leader with the right to innovate, deviate, and redefine the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

In such contexts, loyalty and perceived representativeness can outweigh moral or procedural considerations, further reinforcing leaders' insulation from the consequences of transgression. According to Abrams et al. (2018), this distortion stems from the leader's transformation into a normative authority within the group, where loyalty and collective cohesion often override moral consistency. For example, Davies et al. (2024) conducted a large-scale analysis of Twitter data to empirically test the transgression credit theory in the context of British politics. Their study revealed that Conservative MPs and supporters were more lenient toward Boris Johnson's unlawful behavior during the COVID-19 lockdown breaches than toward Dominic Cummings' similar infractions, even though both individuals belonged to the same political camp and were implicated in comparable scandals. The researchers argue that this discrepancy reflects Johnson's symbolic role as party leader and his centrality to the Conservative Party's group identity. As a prototypical and identity-defining figure, Johnson was granted transgression credit, meaning his violations were interpreted through a lens of loyalty and justified as serving higher group interests. Cummings, by contrast, lacked this symbolic authority and was judged more harshly, as his actions were perceived as self-serving and as damaging to the group's reputation.

A growing body of empirical research supports this pattern. Yentür and Akfirat (2024) found that leaders who explicitly defend and promote the group's identity enjoy heightened support even when committing moral violations, particularly when the harm targets

outsiders rather than in-group members. Similarly, [Marques et al. \(2021\)](#) demonstrated that norm violations by legitimate leaders elicit greater tolerance, whereas illegitimate leaders are more likely to face demands for formal sanctions or even collective protest. These findings suggest that judgments of transgressions are strongly contingent on perceived legitimacy. In this sense, elections play a crucial role in shaping how followers interpret their leaders' norm violations. Research indicates that electoral victory enhances a leader's perceived prototypicality, reshaping collective identity and increasing tolerance toward transgressions ([Gaffney et al., 2019](#)). Democratic authorization, in particular, strengthens perceived legitimacy and moral flexibility, especially when the leader was previously regarded as an outsider or a norm violator ([Syfers et al., 2022](#)). Identification with a victorious leader enables followers to reinterpret moral failings as outcomes of external constraints or strategic necessity. In contrast, supporters of the losing side tend to display greater moral rigidity and reduced leniency ([Morais et al., 2020](#)). Taken together, these findings suggest that electoral success not only consolidates political legitimacy and reinforces group prototypicality but also fosters moral flexibility among followers, expanding the boundaries of acceptable leadership behavior.

Another crucial factor shaping tolerance for norm violations is the distance between leaders and followers. [Travaglino et al. \(2016\)](#) demonstrate that group size moderates the transgression credit effect: leaders of larger groups tend to receive greater leniency, whereas leaders of smaller groups face harsher judgment, as their transgressions provoke stronger embarrassment among members. The leader distance thesis posits that physical, social, and psychological distance simplifies attribution processes—followers idealize distant leaders while perceiving those closer to them more critically ([Antonakis and Atwater, 2002](#); [Popper, 2013](#); [Shamir, 1995](#)). The only political science study explicitly testing this claim, [Van Esch and Steenman \(2025\)](#), found that European Union leaders benefit from greater perceived distance, which reinforces their legitimacy. Yet recent evidence complicates this picture: political scandals appear to erode trust across all levels of governance. In Belgium, local scandals have significantly diminished confidence in municipal leaders ([Close et al., 2023](#)), while the Qatargate affair undermined public trust in the European Parliament ([Hegewald and Schraff, 2024](#)). These findings suggest that distance does not uniformly shield leaders from accountability, raising new questions about how leader proximity, scale, and visibility interact to shape public tolerance for political transgressions.

The *innovation credit* model can be positioned between the idiosyncrasy and transgression credit frameworks, as it places greater emphasis on *perceived leadership potential* and expected performance ([Abrams et al., 2008](#); [Randsley De Moura et al., 2010](#)). Developed within the theoretical framework of social identity theory and the subjective group dynamics, the concept explains the conditions under which groups tolerate, or even welcome, norm deviations from their leaders. Research demonstrates that tolerance toward deviance depends on the leader's developmental phase. Future leaders are granted more latitude for norm deviation, which is interpreted as innovative renewal ("a new leader, a new direction"). In contrast, current or past leaders are judged more harshly, as their transgressions are seen as self-serving or destabilizing to the group's identity.

In this sense, innovation credit represents a symbolic license that followers grant preemptively to emerging leaders, allowing them to challenge conventions and redefine norms. Unlike legitimacy earned

through demonstrated competence or past conformity, this license stems from collective expectations that the leader will elevate the group's status or renew its identity. The three models thus distinguish between two forms of legitimacy: accrual and conferral ([Abrams et al., 2008](#)). *Accrual legitimacy*, consistent with Hollander's idiosyncrasy credit theory, is retrospective and merit-based—earned through past performance and alignment with group norms. *Conferral legitimacy*, by contrast, is prospective and role-based—granted in advance simply because an individual is perceived as a potential source of renewal and collective elevation. In other words, while the idiosyncrasy credit model views deviance as a reward for accumulated loyalty, the innovation credit model treats it as a privilege grounded in anticipated promise. Followers believe that a visionary leader has the right to innovate—to "think differently" and to redefine boundaries in pursuit of the group's moral and symbolic advancement. Consequently, norm deviation is not seen as betrayal but as creative reinterpretation in the service of collective renewal. In this way, innovation credit reveals how leader deviance can revitalize rather than undermine group identity, especially when followers perceive it as evidence of competence, authenticity, and transformative potential.

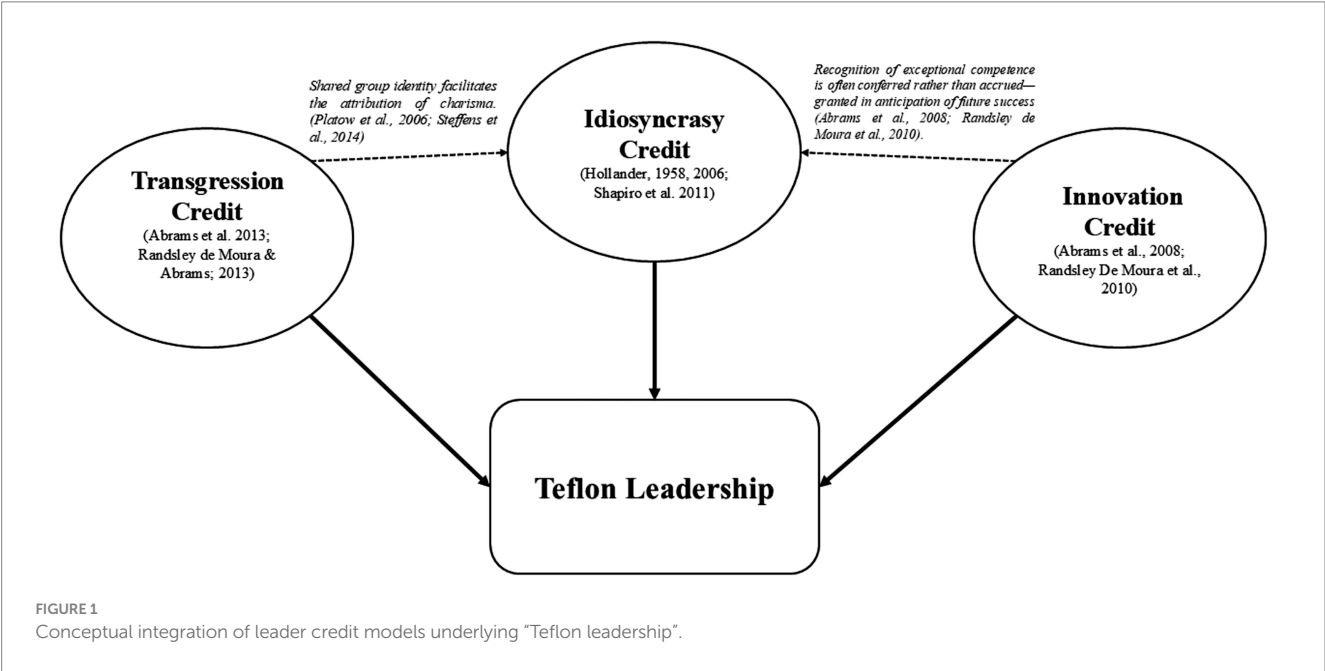
Taken together, these three credit models illustrate how legitimacy and tolerance toward leader deviance shift across different temporal and psychological logics ([Table 3](#), [Figure 1](#)). *Idiosyncrasy credit* represents a retrospective and merit-based form of legitimacy, earned through conformity and competence. *Transgression credit* captures the situational leniency extended to in-group leaders whose norm violations threaten collective identity yet are reinterpreted as loyalty. *Innovation credit* is prospective and symbolic: legitimacy is conferred in advance on future leaders, whose deviations are framed not as defiance but as visionary renewal. Together, they trace a continuum from earned trust, through motivated leniency, to anticipated license to innovate.

The double standard in moral judgment can be so strong that even serious norm violations, such as coercion or blackmail, may be met with leniency when committed by an in-group leader ([Randsley De Moura and Abrams, 2013](#)). Yet, as [Davies et al. \(2022\)](#) demonstrate, this tolerance has limits. In the case of Donald Trump, behaviors such as deception and abuse of power were perceived as less immoral by his supporters, but the explicit incitement of the Capitol riot provoked widespread condemnation across partisan lines. Similarly, [Davies et al. \(2024\)](#) caution that proximity to the leader does not guarantee protection from moral scrutiny. When transgressions are highly visible, morally salient, or threaten the integrity of the group itself, even prototypical leaders may lose their protective credit. This finding highlights the boundaries of the transgression credit effect and shows that moral judgment depends not only on group alignment but also on perceptions of motive, legitimacy, and identity centrality.

These results suggest that followers' leniency toward leaders has its limits. Norm violations are tolerated only as long as followers perceive the leader's actions as serving the collective good. When transgressions are self-serving or aimed at personal gain, they are sanctioned as severely as those of ordinary group members ([Abrams et al., 2013](#)). Moreover, although motivated reasoning can sustain denial and rationalization for an extended period, this psychological defense eventually breaks down. [Von Sikorski et al. \(2020\)](#) found that once followers are confronted with undeniable evidence of their leader's wrongdoing, their sense of betrayal is often stronger than that

TABLE 3 The continuum of psychological tolerance in leadership.

Dimension	Idiosyncrasy credit	Transgression credit	Innovation credit
	Hollander (1958, 2006), and Shapiro et al. (2011)	Abrams et al. (2013, 2018), and Randsley De Moura and Abrams (2013)	Abrams et al. (2008), and Randsley de Moura et al. (2010)
Core idea	Leaders accumulate symbolic “credits” by conforming to group norms and demonstrating competence, which later grants limited freedom to deviate.	In-group leaders receive leniency for norm violations due to their symbolic importance and prototypicality within the group.	Future leaders are granted a pre-emptive license to deviate from norms, as deviation is seen as a sign of innovation and renewal.
Temporal orientation	<i>Retrospective</i> : legitimacy is earned over time through demonstrated loyalty and competence.	<i>Immediate and situational</i> : leniency arises in response to the leader’s perceived service to the group.	<i>Prospective</i> : legitimacy is conferred in advance based on perceived potential or visionary promise.
Mechanism	Gradual accumulation of trust and legitimacy through conformity and contribution to collective goals.	Motivated leniency and moral double standards toward prototypical in-group leaders who transgress.	Symbolic pre-authorization of norm deviation; followers collectively expect innovative leadership.
Evaluation basis	Past performance, loyalty, and consistent adherence to group norms.	The extent to which the leader is seen as acting in the group’s interest and embodying its identity.	Expected competence and visionary potential that promise group advancement.
Type of deviance	Controlled and constructive; justified by earned trust and credibility.	Moral and behavioral violations are tolerated when perceived as protecting or representing the group.	Norm-challenging behavior interpreted as creative transformation or strategic renewal.
Psychological function	Reinforces stability and cohesion by rewarding past loyalty.	Resolves the <i>loyalty–morality dilemma</i> , enabling moral coherence alongside group loyalty.	Facilitate adaptation and innovation by legitimizing deviation from outdated norms.
Source of legitimacy	<i>Accrual</i> : legitimacy is earned through consistent conformity and competence.	<i>Conferral</i> : legitimacy is granted through perceived prototypicality and group identification.	<i>Conferral</i> : legitimacy is pre-emptively granted based on the expectation that new leaders have the right to innovate and redefine norms.
Outcome for leader	Gains temporary freedom to innovate without losing legitimacy.	Receives moral leniency and protection from sanctions or exclusion.	Gains symbolic authority and interpretive freedom to redefine group identity and direction.



of independent voters, turning the most devoted supporters into the harshest critics.

Indeed, certain moral boundaries cannot be blurred even by extreme loyalty. Abrams et al. (2014) showed that explicitly racist behavior constitutes a moral taboo that can strip even in-group leaders of their privileged status. In such cases, rejection is often more severe than for other types of transgression, as followers perceive the leader's behavior as threatening the moral integrity—and even the very identity—of the group itself.

5 A new research agenda: conceptual propositions for understanding moral resilience

Understanding why some political leaders remain resilient in the face of moral transgressions requires a closer examination of the psychological mechanisms that shape followers' moral judgment and loyalty. While earlier sections discussed how norm violations can become politically functional acts within populist and charismatic leadership and how the three social-psychological models can address this phenomenon at the individual level, this chapter advances a set of conceptual propositions to explain the micro-level factors that are likely to sustain such resilience. Specifically, the framework highlights how populist attitudes, dark personality traits (such as narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism), and identity-based processes, including authoritarianism, collective narcissism, identity uncertainty, and identity fusion, can generate varying degrees of moral leniency toward transgressive leaders. These characteristics do not operate in isolation but within emotionally charged, often polarized group contexts, where moral judgments are reframed as expressions of loyalty, authenticity, or collective protection. By integrating these factors, the following conceptual propositions outline a new research agenda to investigate the psychological foundations of moral resilience in political leadership.

At the individual level, *populist worldview*—as a set of specific attitudes structured around the moral struggle between the “good” people and the “corrupt” elite or dangerous outsiders (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2020) has long been assumed to play a central role in legitimizing norm violations. Yet the underlying dynamics are far more complex. Individuals with populist and authoritarian tendencies are more likely to abandon liberal democratic norms when doing so aligns with their political preferences (Lewandowsky and Jankowski, 2023). Furthermore, some studies show that populist individuals are more likely to justify or tolerate political violence, driven by fears of social change and a preference for “strongman” leaders who bypass democratic institutions, thereby reinforcing illiberal and authoritarian tendencies (Piazza, 2024). Disillusionment with mainstream politics and representative institutions—often exacerbated by economic, political, and social crises—fuels anxiety, anger, and susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, creating a fertile ground for populist mobilization (Marcos-Marne et al., 2023). Yet the relationship between populist attitudes and anti-democratic orientations is not straightforward. Populist citizens do not necessarily reject democracy per se; rather, they tend to favor direct democracy and majoritarian rule while

selectively endorsing liberal-democratic principles such as freedom of expression and legal equality (Bos et al., 2023; Zaslove and Meijers, 2024).

A crucial aspect of the relationship between populism and Teflon protection is the indirect yet emotionally immediate relationship between leaders and followers. While populism is linked to charismatic leadership, empirical findings remain inconclusive on whether populist followers perceive their leaders as more charismatic than others (Michel et al., 2020; van der Brug and Mughan, 2007). Instead, their followers' emotional attachment to their populist

Proposition 1 *Populist attitudes contribute to moral leniency toward transgressive leaders not directly but conditionally, through identity-based emotions that reframe norm violations as authentic, protective, or innovative acts in defense of the in-group.*

leaders is shaped by partisan identity (Metz and Plesz, 2023, 2025). In short, populist attitudes alone do not necessarily translate into automatic support for populist leaders; they require activation by political elites (Hawkins et al., 2020). Ferrari (2022) shows that voters' responses to populist and anti-populist messages are shaped mainly by party identification, with support or rejection aligning with elite endorsements. These findings indicate that populism alone cannot account for moral leniency toward transgressive leaders. Instead, shared identity worldviews act as psychological catalysts that convert populist grievances into moral justification for norm violation.

Beyond the populist worldview, the so-called *dark traits* have also emerged as key psychological factors shaping tolerance for political norm violations. Paulhus and Williams (2002) conceptualization of the Dark Triad—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—has become a pivotal framework for understanding political behavior and its social consequences. These traits, though subclinical and non-pathological, reflect manipulative, self-enhancing, and emotionally detached tendencies that can yield harmful outcomes in leadership contexts. Narcissism manifests as grandiosity and a constant need for admiration; Machiavellianism as strategic manipulation and moral pragmatism; and psychopathy as impulsivity, emotional coldness, and disregard for ethical constraints. Together, they provide a psychological foundation for understanding why certain leaders engage in corruption, manipulation, or moral transgressions—and why such behavior can, at times, be tolerated or even normalized.

Recent research has shown that dark personality traits are strongly associated with aggression, political extremism, and moral disengagement. Individuals high in Dark Triad traits exhibit moral disengagement, the cognitive and emotional processes that allow them to rationalize unethical behavior such as bribery, fraud, or white-collar crime (Azizli et al., 2016; Egan et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2016). Psychopathy, in particular, predicts support for politically motivated violence across democratic contexts (Nai and Young, 2024). Moreover, individuals with high Dark Triad scores are more likely to justify violence when perceiving their group as threatened (Pavlović and Franc, 2023), while narcissism and psychopathy predict

ideological radicalism and extremist support on both sides of the political spectrum (Pavlović and Wertag, 2021).

A recent theoretical advancement, the *Dark-Ego-Vehicle Principle* (DEVP; Bertrams and Krispenz, 2024, 2025; Krispenz and Bertrams, 2024a,b,c) offers a compelling explanation of how dark personality dynamics relate to the tolerance of leaders' norm violations. The DEVP posits that individuals high in dark traits, particularly narcissism, may engage in moral, social, or political activism not primarily out of genuine conviction but as a means of satisfying ego-driven motives such as admiration, dominance, or thrill-seeking. Ideological engagement thus becomes a vehicle for self-enhancement, enabling individuals to project moral superiority while pursuing self-serving goals. Importantly, this principle is ideologically impartial: antagonistic narcissism predicts radicalism across both progressive and conservative movements, indicating that dark personalities can exploit any moral cause for egoistic purposes. In such contexts, collective causes are transformed into arenas for personal glorification.

Although individuals with Dark Triad traits often seek power and influence (Blais and Pruyers, 2017; Lilienfeld et al., 2012; Nai, 2019; Peterson and Palmer, 2021; Pfeffer, 2021; Watts et al., 2013), the public does not necessarily favor leaders who display these characteristics. Voter preference studies show that citizens

Proposition 2 *Dark personality traits reinforce moral leniency toward transgressive leaders by interacting with identity-based processes: individuals high in narcissism, Machiavellianism, or psychopathy are more likely to justify norm violations when these are perceived as serving the collective identity or advancing moralized political goals.*

generally disfavor candidates with pronounced dark traits, yet individuals who share similar personality dispositions are more accepting of such leaders (Hart et al., 2018; Nai et al., 2021). However, evaluations of political leaders are rarely objective (Wright and Tomlinson, 2018). They are filtered through identity-based biases, with partisanship shaping perceptions of competence, charisma, and moral worth. Moreover, partisan identity amplifies the effects of dark personality: strong identification increases the justification of political violence, particularly among individuals with dark traits, whose moral reasoning is already characterized by strategic self-interest and emotional detachment (Götzsche-Astrup, 2021).

While dark personality traits and ego-driven motivations help explain why some individuals tolerate or even admire morally transgressive leaders, they do not fully account for the collective processes through which such tolerance becomes socially legitimized. To understand how moral flexibility is embedded within shared worldviews and group dynamics, it is necessary to examine the motivational and identity-based orientations that shape individuals' responses to authority and hierarchy. This perspective leads us to the study of authoritarianism and social dominance as complementary pathways to moral resilience in leadership evaluation.

This approach aligns with Duckitt's *Dual Process Motivational Model* (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt and Sibley, 2009), which identifies two fundamental worldviews shaping prejudice-prone attitudes. Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994) reflects a competitive, zero-sum view of the world in which inequality and hierarchy are perceived as natural and desirable. Authoritarian attitudes (RWA; Altemeyer, 1981, 1996, 1998) and their left-wing analogues (LWA; Costello et al., 2022; Conway et al., 2018), by contrast, derive from a worldview emphasizing threat, danger, and the need for order, conformity, and security.

Building on social identity theory, Kreindler (2005) critiques these models for their overly individualistic focus and proposes that both RWA and SDO can be understood only through the group relations that give rise to them. In her *Dual Group Processes Model*, the two orientations represent distinct types of social differentiation:

- SDO emerges from category-based differentiation, where social evaluation focuses on intergroup relations. Individuals high in SDO see the world as a competitive hierarchy and prioritize maintaining their group's dominant position over others. The motivation here is not personal selfishness but collective superiority, the protection of group status and legitimacy through hierarchy and exclusion.
- RWA/LWA, by contrast, arises from normative differentiation, where evaluation focuses on intragroup behavior. Individuals high in RWA/LWA perceive internal deviants—those who fail to conform to the group's symbolic norms—as greater threats than external out-groups. Maintaining cohesion requires conformity with values, loyalty, and submission to authority. Thus, authoritarian submission serves to preserve collective identity, as leaders are perceived to embody the group's values and to represent its moral and symbolic unity.

Kreindler's (2005) work provides an essential foundation for understanding transgression credit, reframing tolerance for leaders' norm violations as a product of collective identity dynamics rather than as a function of personal trust or accumulated legitimacy. It can be assumed that in high-RWA contexts, leaders are evaluated less for moral consistency and more for their perceived capacity to safeguard the group's symbolic integrity. Conversely, in high-SDO environments, leniency arises when deviant behavior reinforces the group's hierarchical dominance and sense of superiority. In both cases, moral flexibility reflects not a failure of ethics but a strategic expression of identity maintenance—an effort to preserve the cohesion, stability, and moral legitimacy of the in-group.

Proposition 3 *Individuals high in SDO are more likely to exhibit moral leniency toward norm violations committed by leaders who reinforce existing hierarchies or group superiority. In such contexts, leader transgressions are reinterpreted not as ethical breaches but as strategic acts that protect or advance the in-group's dominant position.*

Proposition 4 *Individuals high in RWA/LWA are more likely to tolerate or justify leaders' norm violations when these are perceived as expressions of loyalty, order preservation, or moral unity within the group. In such cases, moral transgressions are reframed as acts of symbolic protection that maintain group cohesion and normative conformity, thereby generating transgression credit rooted in identity defense rather than moral reasoning.*

This logic also clarifies a central assumption of transgression credit: while norm violations by ordinary group members typically invite sanctions—since they threaten group cohesion, homogeneity, and distinctiveness from out-groups (Abrams and Hogg, 1988; Hogg, 1992; Marques et al., 1998), leaders' transgressions are often perceived differently. Because leaders embody the group's prototypical values and symbolic core, their deviance is less likely to be seen as betrayal and more as innovation, strategic necessity, or moral courage. In this asymmetry lies the essence of transgression credit: whereas members' deviance signals disloyalty, a leader's deviance can signify commitment and protection of the collective self. Ultimately, these frameworks reveal that tolerance toward leaders' transgressions is embedded in deeper collective processes.

While authoritarian attitudes explain how followers maintain loyalty through conformity and submission to authority, they do not fully capture the emotional intensity and collective moralization that often accompany such loyalty. Authoritarianism secures obedience and order, but *collective narcissism* explains why this obedience becomes imbued with moral passion—why followers defend their leaders not merely as legitimate authorities but as sacred symbols of the group's moral worth. The concept of collective narcissism, therefore, offers a broader framework for understanding why moral exceptions become collectively sustained and emotionally charged.

According to Golec de Zavala's works, collective narcissism—a belief in the exaggerated greatness of one's own group combined with resentment over its perceived underappreciation—creates fertile ground for motivated moral reasoning (Golec de Zavala, 2023; Golec de Zavala and Lantos, 2020). When individuals high in collective narcissism identify with a leader who embodies their group's identity, external criticism or accusations of misconduct are not perceived as moral indictments of the leader but as hostile attacks on the group itself. This defensive solidarity reshapes moral judgment: followers reinterpret the leader's transgressions as necessary acts of protection, revenge, or symbolic self-defense, thereby reframing deviance as virtue.

Empirical evidence indicates that collective narcissism transcends ideological boundaries and is more closely associated with leadership style than political orientation. Individuals high in collective

Proposition 5 *Collective narcissism amplifies moral leniency toward transgressive leaders by reframing norm violations as acts of collective self-defense and moral virtue. In such contexts, criticism of the leader is perceived as an attack on the in-group, thereby transforming moral deviance into a reaffirmation of group identity and superiority.*

narcissism tend to prefer confrontational, authoritarian, and populist leaders, even at the expense of democratic norms (Golec de Zavala, 2023, 2024; Golec de Zavala and Federico, 2018; Golec de Zavala and Keenan, 2021; Marchlewska et al., 2018, 2024). During the Trump era, for instance, collective narcissism in the United States strongly predicted voters' willingness to support Trump's retention of power through non-democratic means (Golec de Zavala and Keenan, 2021). These findings suggest that collective narcissism not only reinforces the identity-based mechanisms underlying transgression credit but also transforms moral violations into expressions of collective virtue. Emotional investment in the perceived moral superiority of the in-group erodes accountability, converting deviance into loyalty and moral outrage into political cohesion.

Identity uncertainty increases susceptibility to populist rhetoric and the appeal of strong leadership, activating the mechanisms described by *uncertainty reduction theory* (Hogg, 2021). When individuals feel uncertain about who they are and where they belong in society, they are drawn toward highly entitative groups that offer clear boundaries and a coherent sense of “we,” as well as toward decisive, often authoritarian leaders who provide simple and morally charged narratives about “who we are” and “who threatens us.” Populism is particularly effective in exploiting this psychological need: by constructing a moral dichotomy between “the people” and the “corrupt elite,” it promises to reduce self-uncertainty through a strong collective identity and channels personal anxiety into a shared sense of victimhood, thereby reinforcing loyalty to both the leader and the imagined community of the “true people” (Göttsche-Astrup and Hogg, 2024; Hogg, 2021; Hogg and Göttsche-Astrup, 2021).

Recent empirical evidence shows that self-uncertainty does not operate merely as a main effect but also interacts with authoritarian predispositions to predict support for populist ideology and candidates. Specifically, uncertainty heightens populist sympathy, such as support for the Tea Party or intentions to vote for Donald Trump, particularly among individuals with low to moderate authoritarianism. At the same time, a ceiling effect appears among those already high in

Proposition 6 *Identity uncertainty fosters moral leniency toward transgressive leaders by increasing followers' need for clarity, belonging, and symbolic protection. When leaders reduce uncertainty through simple, morally charged narratives, their norm violations are reinterpreted as acts of renewal or collective restoration, generating innovation credit within the in-group.*

authoritarianism (Göttsche-Astrup and Hogg, 2024). The exact mechanisms—seeking clarity, strong norms, and hierarchical leadership—can also facilitate radicalization and violent extremism, especially when the protection of the in-group's identity is framed as an existential struggle and out-group hostility is moralized as justified retribution (Göttsche-Astrup et al., 2020).

Through this lens, identity uncertainty can be seen as a psychological foundation of innovation credit, a mechanism by which followers reframe leaders' norm violations as acts of moral renewal or visionary change. When populist leaders reduce uncertainty through clear moral boundaries and emotionally resonant narratives, their transgressions are interpreted as protective or transformative actions that restore meaning and stability to the collective self.

From a different angle, recent research on *identity fusion* (Swann et al., 2009; Swann and Jetten, 2018) offers a valuable psychological lens through which the mechanisms of transgression credit can be more deeply understood. Although this link has not been explicitly made in previous literature, fusion helps explain the extreme moral tolerance that followers sometimes display toward transgressive leaders. Moniz and Swann (2025), for instance, examined the psychological dynamics underlying loyalty to Donald Trump during and after the 2020 U.S. presidential election using original three-wave online survey. Relying on questionnaire data collected from Trump supporters, they measured identity fusion with the political leader through standardized fusion scales and analyzed how this deep psychological alignment shaped perceptions of threat, misinformation, and moral judgment. Their analyses show that many supporters experienced a visceral sense of oneness with the leader—a form of fusion in which personal and collective selves become functionally intertwined. This deep alignment blurred the boundary between the leader's reputation and the follower's self-concept, such that criticisms of Trump were experienced as personal or collective attacks. Under these conditions, followers became willing to reinterpret misinformation, such as the “Big Lie” about electoral fraud, not as falsehoods but as moral truths defending the integrity of the shared in-group. Fusion thus fostered an unconditional loyalty that transformed factual claims into moral convictions and moral transgressions into acts of collective protection.

Extending this work, Martel et al. (2025) analyzed three-wave longitudinal panel survey data collected before and after the January 6th U.S. Capitol insurrection to investigate how identity fusion shapes moral judgment in moments of political crisis. The study followed the same respondents across multiple time points surrounding the 2020 election and the insurrection, allowing the authors to trace within-individual changes in identity fusion, perceived outgroup threat, and support for authoritarian actions over time. Using panel regression models and mediation analyses, they demonstrate that individuals highly fused with Trump perceived existential threats from political

outgroups as personally directed, which in turn predicted greater support for anti-democratic measures, political violence, and tolerance

Proposition 7 *Identity fusion intensifies moral leniency toward transgressive leaders by collapsing the boundary between personal and collective identity. When followers perceive the leader's fate and moral standing as inseparable from their own, norm violations are reinterpreted as authentic expressions of shared purpose and moral unity.*

of norm violations committed in defense of the leader. Crucially, they also found that fusion with a broader, superordinate identity, such as the American nation, had the opposite effect: it reduced perceived existential threat, dampened authoritarian impulses, and promoted greater moral accountability. Together, these studies illuminate how identity fusion magnifies the psychological processes underlying transgression credit. When followers experience their leader as an extension of themselves, loyalty overrides moral scrutiny: deviance becomes authenticity, and defending the leader becomes a moral obligation. In this sense, fusion represents the micro-level foundation of transgression credit, revealing how the moral boundaries of leadership tolerance expand through emotional merging and the sacralization of group identity.

Figure 2 offers a detailed synthesis of how the seven propositions may interact with the three protective mechanisms of *Teflon Leadership*. Each psychological or ideological factor is assumed to reinforce a distinct form of credit—*innovation*, *idiosyncrasy*, or *transgression*—through which leaders could gain moral latitude and resilience against criticism or scandal.

Populist attitudes (Proposition 1) may reinforce *innovation credit*, as followers who hold such attitudes tend to interpret norm-challenging behavior as moral restoration rather than deviance. Populist worldviews valorize leaders who “speak truth to power,”

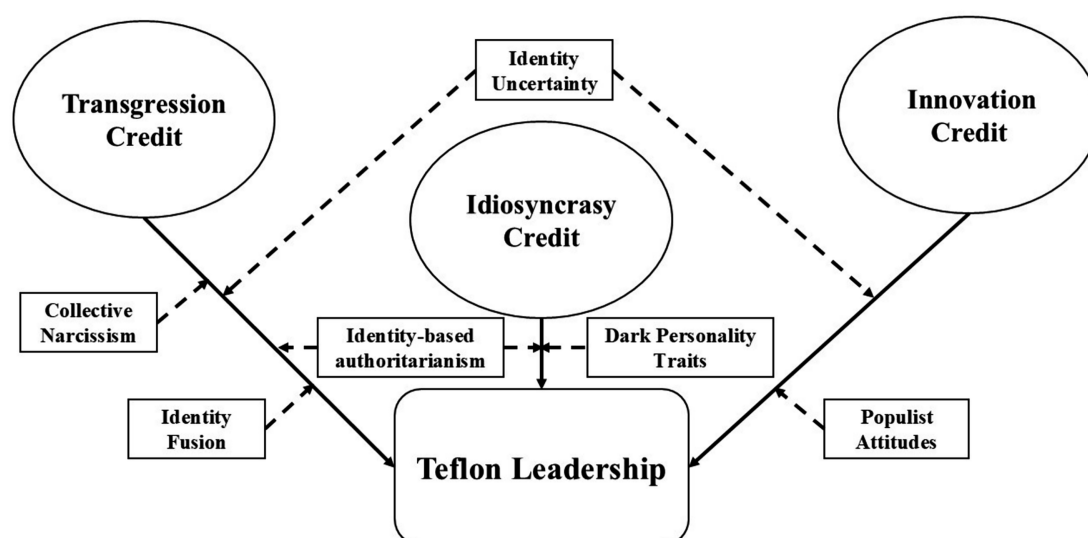


FIGURE 2

Proposed framework linking individual dispositions to the protective mechanisms of Teflon leadership.

TABLE 4 Conceptual mapping of psychological constructs and leader credit mechanisms.

Theoretical construct (propositions)	Dominant credit mechanism	Core psychological mechanism	How norm violations are reinterpreted by followers (credit-based logic)
P1: populist attitudes	Innovation credit	<i>Conditionally activated moral reframing through identity-based emotions</i> : populist attitudes organize political perception around a moralized people–elite antagonism, but translate into moral leniency only when activated by partisan identity and elite cues. Under these conditions, norm violations are selectively reinterpreted as necessary acts of moral restoration, protection, or renewal in defense of the in-group.	Norm violations are interpreted as <i>innovative and restorative interventions</i> rather than deviance; <i>innovation credit</i> grants leaders a symbolic license to challenge institutional constraints and to redefine the boundaries of legitimacy in the name of the people and collective renewal.
P2: dark personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy)	Idiosyncrasy credit	<i>Instrumental moral disengagement combined with dominance and self-enhancement motives</i> : dark personality traits foster outcome-oriented reasoning and emotional detachment that normalize unethical behavior. When activated through partisan and identity-based processes, these traits promote the strategic justification of norm violations as effective, necessary, or identity-serving actions, consistent with ego-driven self-enhancement (Dark-Ego-Vehicle logic).	Norm violations are reframed as <i>signals of exceptional competence, dominance, or strategic acumen</i> ; <i>idiosyncrasy credit</i> enables leaders to draw on accumulated perceptions of strength and effectiveness, allowing deviance to be interpreted as evidence of leadership capacity rather than moral failure.
P3-P4: identity-based authoritarianism	Idiosyncrasy + transgression credit	<i>Group-based threat regulation and asymmetric norm evaluation</i> : identity-based authoritarian orientations (RWA/LWA and SDO) organize moral judgment around the protection of collective order and hierarchy. Leaders are evaluated as prototypical embodiments of the group, resulting in asymmetrical norm enforcement in which submission, conformity, and loyalty heighten tolerance for leader deviance while maintaining strict standards for ordinary group members.	Norm violations are justified as <i>legitimate exercises of authority, strategic necessity, or moral duty toward the collective</i> ; <i>idiosyncrasy credit</i> legitimizes discretionary leadership grounded in hierarchy and discipline, while <i>transgression credit</i> suspends moral accountability when deviance is framed as protecting group cohesion, order, or dominance.
P5: collective narcissism	Transgression credit	<i>Emotionally charged collective moralization and defensive identity protection</i> : collective narcissism encodes external criticism of the leader as an attack on the group's moral worth and symbolic status. This triggers motivated moral reasoning, moral exceptionalism, and heightened affect (anger, resentment), through which leader transgressions are reinterpreted as necessary acts of protection, revenge, or affirmation of collective superiority.	Norm violations are reframed as <i>morally virtuous acts of collective self-defense and symbolic resistance</i> ; <i>transgression credit</i> converts deviance into justified defiance, suspending moral accountability by casting criticism of the leader as hostility toward the in-group itself.
P6: identity uncertainty	Transgression + innovation credit	<i>Uncertainty-driven moral outsourcing and entitativity seeking</i> : weakened self-concept heightens the need for clarity, belonging, and normative guidance, increasing reliance on leaders who provide clear moral boundaries and identity-defining narratives. Under conditions of self-uncertainty, followers outsource moral judgment to the leader, becoming especially receptive to protection-oriented and renewal-oriented frames that promise existential security and collective meaning.	Norm violations are accepted as <i>reassuring acts of protection or visionary interventions of renewal</i> ; <i>transgression credit</i> normalizes deviance when it signals defense of the in-group, while <i>innovation credit</i> frames norm-breaking as necessary transformation that restores order, meaning, and identity coherence.
P7: identity fusion	Transgression credit	<i>Self-leader identity overlap and moral self-extension</i> : identity fusion collapses the boundary between personal and collective identity, rendering the leader's moral standing psychologically inseparable from the self. As a result, criticism and moral sanction of the leader are experienced as self-relevant threats, activating self-defensive moral justification, unconditional loyalty, and the sacralization of the leader–group bond.	Norm violations are experienced as <i>shared, authentic, and morally virtuous acts of collective self-assertion</i> ; intensified <i>transgression credit</i> transforms deviance into moral obligation, such that condemning the leader becomes psychologically equivalent to condemning the self or betraying the collective identity.

thereby granting them symbolic license to redefine the boundaries of legitimacy. By framing institutional transgressions as necessary acts of renewal, populist attitudes may provide a cognitive and moral basis for excusing violations that would otherwise provoke moral condemnation.

Dark personality traits (*Proposition 2*)—including narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—may strengthen *idiosyncrasy credit* by amplifying perceptions of competence, confidence, and dominance. Such traits often project an aura of exceptionalism and self-assuredness that followers interpret as leadership strength. As a result, norm-deviant or manipulative behavior may be rationalized as evidence of strategic brilliance or moral courage, rather than as a breach of integrity.

Identity-based authoritarianism (*Propositions 3–4*) may simultaneously reinforce *idiosyncrasy* and *transgression credit*. On the one hand, its emphasis on hierarchy and conformity may strengthen the leader's *idiosyncrasy credit* by valorizing rule-following and group discipline, thereby legitimizing the leader's adherence to selective moral standards. On the other hand, its identity-protective dimension may enhance *transgression credit*, since loyalty to the in-group can override universal norms of fairness or legality. In such contexts, followers may perceive the leader's discretionary authority and norm-breaking as expressions of moral duty toward the collective identity rather than as personal misconduct.

Identity uncertainty (*Proposition 6*) may reinforce both *transgression* and *innovation credit*. On one side, it can increase individuals' dependence on the leader as a moral compass, transforming perceived transgressions into acts of reassurance. On the other, the absence of a stable sense of self may heighten receptivity to leaders who embody moral renewal and offer a vision of collective transformation, thereby strengthening *innovation credit*.

Collective narcissism (*Proposition 5*) and identity fusion (*Proposition 7*) may together intensify *transgression credit* by reframing norm violations as moral acts of protection and unity. Collective narcissism, by interpreting external criticism as an assault on the in-group, legitimizes the leader's defensive defiance. In contrast, identity fusion—where personal and collective identities deeply overlap—makes followers experience the leader's moral standing as inseparable from their own. In such cases, norm violations may be reimagined as shared, even virtuous, expressions of collective self-assertion.

Taken together, these propositions (*Table 4*) suggest that *Teflon Leadership* may arise not from a single trait or ideology but from the convergence of dispositional, attitudinal, and identity-based mechanisms. The model illustrates how each factor could contribute to a broader system of moral insulation, within which psychological needs for belonging, protection, and meaning transform deviance into legitimacy and criticism into confirmation of leadership authenticity.

6 Conclusion

This study set out to conceptualize why political leaders remain resilient in the face of moral transgressions, advancing the notion of *Teflon leadership* as the product of intertwined psychological, social, and political processes. Rather than interpreting scandal survival as a matter of communicative skill or strategic maneuvering alone, the framework developed here locates moral leniency in the affective,

motivational, and identity-based attachments that followers form toward their leaders. By integrating three complementary credit mechanisms—*idiosyncrasy*, *transgression*, and *innovation credit*—with key psychological orientations such as populist attitudes, dark personality traits, identity-based authoritarianism, collective narcissism, identity uncertainty, and identity fusion, the paper proposes a multidimensional model of moral resilience. In doing so, it bridges previously fragmented literatures and underscores that moral tolerance in politics cannot be reduced to ignorance or instrumental calculation, but emerges from motivated cognition embedded in emotionally charged and polarized group contexts.

The implications of this framework extend beyond the study of individual leaders or isolated scandals. It suggests that moral transgressions become politically functional when they resonate with followers' deeper psychological needs for belonging, protection, and meaning. Under conditions of uncertainty or perceived threat, norm violations may reaffirm rather than erode legitimacy by reinforcing collective identity and moral order. The mechanisms identified here—particularly those related to identity fusion and collective narcissism—highlight that moral boundaries are socially negotiated rather than fixed. Once leaders come to embody the symbolic core of the group, moral scrutiny gives way to moral protection: deviance is reinterpreted as authenticity, and disobedience as virtue. This dynamic helps explain the durability of populist and charismatic leaders who frame their transgressions as moral crusades carried out in the name of “the people.”

At the same time, the framework also points to the conditional nature and limits of *Teflon leadership*. Moral leniency is neither automatic nor unconditional. It depends on the leader's continued ability to embody the group's moral identity and to successfully frame norm violations as serving collective goals. When scandals undermine the leader's symbolic role or expose self-serving motives that conflict with the group's moral narrative, protective credit may erode rapidly. Future research should therefore pay particular attention to the situational thresholds at which *transgression credit* collapses and to the emotional and cognitive processes through which followers transition from moral defense to moral rupture. Longitudinal perspectives are especially important for capturing how moral resilience accumulates, stabilizes, or disintegrates over time.

To advance this research agenda empirically, future studies should move toward a more systematic and integrated methodological approach. A crucial first step involves greater conceptual and operational clarity, as many of the psychological constructs discussed here partially overlap in both theory and measurement. Comparative assessments of conceptual boundaries and empirical distinctiveness—through scale validation, measurement models, and construct-level mapping—are essential for clarifying causal pathways and avoiding redundancy. Building on this foundation, integrative survey experiments and vignette-based designs offer particularly promising tools for testing the proposed mechanisms. Such approaches allow researchers to manipulate norm violations while measuring followers' psychological orientations, making it possible to examine how different forms of leader credit are activated under varying conditions.

Crucially, these designs should systematically incorporate contextual factors that shape moral evaluation but are often treated as secondary: the leader's institutional position, partisan alignment

between leader and follower, and the type of norm violation at stake (e.g., corruption, democratic erosion, symbolic transgression, or personal misconduct). Longitudinal and panel data can further illuminate how moral leniency evolves over time, how repeated transgressions affect leader credit, and when identity-based protection gives way to disillusionment. Together, these strategies would allow scholars to test Teflon leadership not as a monolithic phenomenon, but as a conditional and context-sensitive process rooted in the interaction between psychological predispositions, identity dynamics, and political structures.

Ultimately, by locating moral leniency in social identity and emotional processes, this framework contributes to broader debates about democratic accountability in polarized societies. The resilience of Teflon leaders signals not only the personalization of politics but also the moral fragmentation of the public sphere, in which collective identities increasingly determine what counts as right or wrong. Understanding the psychological underpinnings of this phenomenon is therefore essential for explaining why democratic norms erode unevenly across contexts and why some citizens come to defend moral violations as acts of loyalty or moral truth. Rather than treating political scandals as episodic failures, this study encourages scholars to analyze them as windows into the moral psychology of democratic decline.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

RM: Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Resources, Writing – original draft. VK: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT and DeepL to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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