

Political Authenticity: Cases and Consequences

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Authenticity, a term increasingly invoked in political discourse and viewed as a prized trait, is rising to the top of the agenda for politicians and election scholars. Consider its role in electoral competition, as might be illustrated by the two bovines staring each other down on the cover of this special issue of *Polity*¹. Which one will win the prize? That is, which will get to savor the turnip dangling before them? It depends on many things, perhaps including which is more authentic. It's not always easy to tell. Is it the one on the left? Or the right? The judges—the voters—will decide. In the world of elections, with the democratic

¹ The artwork is by Thomas Agran, who kindly provided us permission to use his work. Agran was born in Stanford, Kentucky. He has worked as the Director of Public Art for the Iowa City Downtown District, taught painting and drawing at the University of Iowa, and has been involved in dozens of mural projects. He lives in Iowa City with his daughter and partner, where he paints, draws, and gardens.

challenges posed by political distrust and anti-politics sentiment² where “politicians are increasingly perceived as scripted, disingenuous and polished,”³ the search for authentic representatives has at its core the need of citizens to feel that they can trust their politicians.⁴ Political candidates and campaigns thus may invest considerable time, thought, and resources in presenting themselves as authentic and their opponents as inauthentic.⁵

In recent elections, authenticity—or its antithesis inauthenticity—has commonly appeared in the media as an explanation for why a particular politician is (dis)liked or has been (un)successful in their election endeavors. In the 2024 US presidential election, Donald Trump was presented as having a perceived authenticity advantage among voters that aided his victory,⁶ whereas Kamala Harris faced accusations of being inauthentic that contributed to

² Daniel Devine, “Does Political Trust Matter? A Meta-Analysis on the Consequences of Trust,” *Political Behavior* 46 (2024): 2241–61; and Pippa Norris, *In Praise of Skepticism: Trust but Verify* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022).

³ Viktor Valgarðsson et al., “The Good Politician: Competence, Integrity and Authenticity in Seven Democracies,” *Political Studies* (2024): doi.org/10.1177/00323217241261180, at 6.

⁴ Diego Ceccobelli and Luigi Di Gregorio, “The Triangle of Leadership. Authenticity, Competence and Ordinarity in Political Marketing,” *Journal of Political Marketing* 21 (2022): 113–25, at 116.

⁵ Dieter Stiers et al., “Candidate Authenticity: ‘To Thine Own Self Be True,’” *Political Behavior* 43 (2021): 1181–1204, at 1185.

⁶ Ben Lowry, “Trump’s Authenticity in the Minds of US Voters Helped Him Beat Harris and the Polls,” *The Scotsman* (November 9, 2024),

her loss.⁷ An article in *The Guardian* remarked, for example, that during her campaign Harris’s “authenticity gap, in contrast [to Trump], was reaffirmed at every turn,”⁸ echoing a similar problem that Hillary Clinton experienced against Trump in 2016.⁹ Another example can be seen at the 2024 UK General Election, where the leader of the Liberal Democrats Ed Davey—whose party increased their parliamentary representation from eleven to seventy-two seats—managed to portray an image of an authentic self, for instance through his moving

<https://www.scotsman.com/news/world/trumps-authenticity-in-the-minds-of-us-voters-helped-him-beat-harris-and-the-polls-4859703>.

⁷Fox Business, “GOP Rep says Kamala Harris Lost Because She Was ‘inauthentic,’ That’s the Bottom Line,” *Fox Business* (November 28 2024), <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/gop-rep-says-kamala-harris-lost-because-she-was-inauthentic-that-s-the-bottom-line/vi-AA1uT0yy?ocid=HPCDHP>; and Zachary Faria, “Harris Campaign is as Inauthentic as She is,” *Washington Examiner* (October 14 2024), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/beltway-confidential/3188614/harris-campaign-inauthentic-as-she/>.

⁸ Samuel Hammond, “Why Kamala Harris Couldn’t Convince an Anti-Establishment America,” *The Guardian* (November 19 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/nov/19/kamala-harris-democrats-anti-establishment-election>.

⁹ See articles in this issue that provide insights on Hillary Clinton’s authenticity issues: Dena Levy and Charles Tien, “Why Trump? Candidate Authenticity, Trust in Government, and Primary Elections,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx; and Christina Holtz-Bacha, “Staging Political Authenticity: Does The Same Strategy Fit All?,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

broadcast that recounted the challenges he faces as a father to a disabled child. As articulated by Campbell, arguably “Davey’s efforts in that elusive quest for authenticity was the most successful of all the party leaders.”¹⁰ Sharkey and Quirk further remark that the party’s wider campaign indeed hinged on Davey’s authenticity.¹¹ And in Greece, the former SYRIZA leader Stefanos Kasselakis has been observed as utilizing his presence on TikTok to construct an image of authenticity,¹² even remarking himself in advance of the 2024 European Parliament elections that, for his party, “the most important [thing] for us is to be authentic and consistent.”¹³

¹⁰ Vincent Campbell, “Party Election Broadcasts: the Quest for Authenticity,” in *UK Election Analysis 2024: Media, Voters and the Campaign*, ed. Daniel Jackson, Katy Parry, Emily Harmer, Darren Lilleker, Scott Wright, Julie Firmstone and Einar Thorsen (Bournemouth, UK: The Centre for Comparative Politics and Media Research Bournemouth University, 2024), 76.

¹¹ Tom Sharkey and Sophie Quirk, “Ed Davey: towards a Liberal Populism?,” in *UK Election Analysis 2024*, 127

¹² Dimitris Elafropoulos, “How Stefanos Kasselakis Constructed his Digital Persona on TikTok,” *tovima.com* (September 18 2024), <https://www.tovima.com/politics/how-stefanos-kasselakis-constructed-his-digital-persona-on-tiktok/>.

¹³ Athens News Agency, “SYRIZA Leader Kasselakis: We Will Be First in the Euroelections,” *The National Herald* (April 26 2024), <https://www.thenationalherald.com/syriza-leader-kasselakis-we-will-be-first-in-the-euroelections/>.

While political science had long overlooked the role played by authenticity,¹⁴ in contrast to its implied importance by commentators who have drawn upon it as a buzzword with little reference to any theoretical rigor,¹⁵ the academic literature on political authenticity has finally started to blossom. Researchers have put forth thoughtful arguments for the theoretical cornerstones of political authenticity, including proposing concrete ways of measuring the trait in empirical research.¹⁶ The lines of inquiry that studies have started to tackle include the characteristics that make certain politicians appear more authentic than

¹⁴ John Kenny, Jac Lerner, and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, "Candidate Authenticity and the Iowa Caucus," *Electoral Studies* 73 (2021): doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102390, at 2.

¹⁵ Gabrielle Grow and Janelle Ward, "The Role of Authenticity in Electoral Social Media Campaigns," *First Monday* 18 (2013): doi.org/10.5210/fm.v18i4.4269.

¹⁶ Ben Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19 (2016): 489–504; Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity"; Kenny et al., "Candidate Authenticity and the Iowa Caucus"; Simon M. Luebke and Ines Engelmann, "Perceiving Politicians as True to Themselves: Development and Validation of the Perceived Political Authenticity Scale," *PLOS ONE* 18 (2023): doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0285344; Simon M. Luebke, "Political Authenticity: Conceptualization of a Popular Term," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26 (2021): 635–53; and Viktor Valgarðsson et al., "The Good Politician and Political Trust: An Authenticity Gap in British Politics?," *Political Studies* 69 (2021): 858–80.

others,¹⁷ longitudinal trends in the performance of authenticity by political figures,¹⁸ elite-public differences in the perceived benefits of authenticity,¹⁹ and the potential electoral consequences of being perceived as more or less authentic.²⁰

Our timely special issue builds on the momentum of this growing subfield by bringing together a range of novel scholarly contributions. It both consolidates existing perspectives and shares cutting-edge developments from across a wide variety of geographic contexts, drawing on a diversity of approaches including interviews, in-depth case studies, public opinion surveys, and experimental methodologies. Below, we highlight key points from these ten papers. While they all speak to a common theme, each one manages a distinct contribution. Taken together, they offer an ideal collection, to be read by the eager student, the dedicated scholar, or the informed lay reader.

¹⁷ Gunn Enli and Linda Therese Rosenberg, "Trust in the Age of Social Media: Populist Politicians Seem More Authentic," *Social Media + Society* 4 (2018): doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764430.

¹⁸ Henrique Sposito, "Radiating Truthiness: Authenticity Performances in Politics in Brazil and the United States," *Political Studies* 0 (2024): doi/10.1177/00323217241261229.

¹⁹ Valgarðsson et al., "The Good Politician and Political Trust"; and James Weinberg, "Building Trust in Political Office: Testing the Efficacy of Political Contact and Authentic Communication," *Political Studies* 72 (2024): 1288–1312.

²⁰ Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity"; and Kenny et al., "Candidate Authenticity and the Iowa Caucus."

In the first paper of our issue, “The ‘Reality’ of Campaign Production Strategy: What We Talk About When We Talk About Political Authenticity,”²¹ Michael Serazio begins by tracing the roots of contemporary political authenticity, whereby such authenticity stands out in its aversion to the undesirable “two-faced self” and “marketplace motives.” Drawing on interviews with twenty-eight high-level, US-based professionals who operate in the sphere of political campaigning, Serazio goes on to illustrate how political authenticity gets constructed in contemporary America through strategies that try to convince voters of the realness of candidates. These include emphasizing their ordinariness, opening up their private lives without ever seeming staged, and leveraging social media platforms. It ends with a cautionary note on the current desire for political authenticity as it may negatively impact the quality of democracy under certain circumstances.

While the development of a subfield of political authenticity is a recent phenomenon which responds to the emergence of authenticity’s increasing visibility in the contemporary political sphere, the paper “Why Trump? Candidate Authenticity, Trust in Government, and Primary Elections”²² by Dena Levy and Charles Tien argues that it has been part and parcel of US presidential politics for the past five decades. They contend that the decline in trust in government, combined with the advent of the primary in 1972 to select each party’s

²¹ Michael Serazio, “The ‘Reality’ of Campaign Production Strategy: What We Talk About When We Talk About Political Authenticity,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

²² Levy and Tien, “Why Trump?”

presidential nominees, facilitated authenticity becoming an important trait for candidates and voters. The article traces the authenticity of presidential candidates starting from Jimmy Carter in 1976—whose authenticity has indeed been remarked upon in many of his recent obituaries and tributes following his passing²³—right up to Trump. It then utilizes 2016 American National Election Study data to show how Trump was perceived as more authentic than Clinton in the 2016 Presidential Election, as well as showing that Trump was perceived as more authentic by those with lower levels of governmental trust. Echoing the previous article in this issue, its conclusion raises questions of the trade-offs for the quality of representation when candidate authenticity is prioritized over policy achievement.

In “The Authentic A**hole: Candidate Consistency, Causality, and the Vote,”²⁴ Sofia Breitenstein, John Kenny, Jac Larner, Dieter Stiers and Michael S. Lewis-Beck demonstrate through a survey vignette experiment in Britain that a hypothetical political candidate who consistently implements their campaign promises during their term of office is considered

²³ Jacob Gallagher, “Jeans in the White House? President Carter Made it So,” *The New York Times* (December 30 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/30/style/jimmy-carter-fashion.html>; and Maher Kawash, “Obamas, Illinois and Chicago leaders share tributes for late former President Jimmy Carter,” *Eyewitness News* (December 30 2024), <https://abc7chicago.com/post/barack-obama-michelle-illinois-gov-pritzker-chicago-mayor-johnson-share-tributes-late-former-president-jimmy-carter/15724808/>.

²⁴ Sofia Breitenstein et al., “The Authentic A**hole: Candidate Consistency, Causality and the Vote,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

more authentic than one who sometimes reneges on them when faced with political pressure to do so. This is the case whether or not the respondent's policy views are congruent with those of the presented candidate. A candidate who has a policy position that matches that of the respondent, and who consistently implements such a policy, has the highest likelihood of receiving a respondent's vote. This association, moreover, is mediated by how authentic the candidate is perceived.

Diego Ceccobelli and Arianna Colombo's paper "Political Leaders or Social Media Influencers? The Cases of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Chiara Ferragni"²⁵ applies the applicability of the triangle of leadership theory²⁶—in which successful leadership depends on striking a balance between being perceived as authentic, ordinary, and competent—to the contrasting cases of US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni. By doing so, it extends the application of the triangle of leadership, demonstrating that not only is it a useful theoretical tool for furthering our understanding of successful political leaders, but also functions well in explaining the success of digital influencers. The case of Chiara Ferragni, moreover, illustrates that once one loses the perception of being authentic, it becomes difficult to recover it.

²⁵ Diego Ceccobelli and Arianna Colombo, "Political Leaders or Social Media Influencers? The Cases of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Chiara Ferragni," *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

²⁶ Ceccobelli and Di Gregorio, "The Triangle of Leadership."

In “The Impact of Politicians’ Populist Performance on Perceived Political Authenticity,”²⁷ Haye Stein, Simon M. Luebke, and Ines Engelmann analyze how aspects of populist performance by politicians may affect perceptions of their authenticity. This is innovatively carried out through an online survey experiment in Germany, in which visual advertisements are manipulated to vary whether a candidate’s material contains populist content or not, whether the language used was formal and professional or colloquial and emotional, and whether they wore formal or informal clothes. The findings show that while language and clothing styles of populist politicians are associated with perceptions of greater authenticity, the sharing of populist content is not.

Marques G. Zárate’s article “Opportunistic Behavior and Its Effect on Perceptions of Pandering”²⁸ investigates the impact of political opportunism on candidate evaluations. It does so by manipulating examples of a candidate in the US strategically relocating to a district where they have a better chance at winning. The results across two survey experiments demonstrate that candidates running in a district they did not grow up in are more likely to be considered to be pandering: that is, as Zárate defines it within the article, to be making a “disingenuous appeal [...] toward a group that the politician views as necessary

²⁷ Haye Stein, Simon M. Luebke, and Ines Engelmann, “The Impact of Politicians’ Populist Performance on Perceived Political Authenticity,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

²⁸ Marques G. Zárate, “Opportunistic Behavior and Its Effect on Perceptions of Pandering,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

for electoral success.”²⁹ Such candidates are also more likely to be seen as having self-serving motivations, to generally be evaluated more negatively as , and to be deemed as less authentic.

In “Who Values Political Authenticity? The Antecedents and Electoral Consequences of Voters' Preference for Authentic Politicians,”³⁰ Simon M. Luebke and Dennis Steffan develop research on the relationship between political authenticity and voting behavior through an original survey experiment in Germany. Their findings confirm those of previous empirical work: when a politician is perceived as more authentic, it can pay dividends in increasing voters' likelihood of voting for them. Furthermore, they establish an important moderating condition, in that the magnitude of the association is stronger for those respondents who deem authenticity to be an important factor in deciding how to vote. This preference for authenticity differs according to individual characteristics such as age, gender, education, and interest in politics. Thus, the article points to the need to recognize the diversity of preferences for political authenticity within societies, and how such differences in preferences may affect voters' decision-making processes.

²⁹ Ibid., xxx.

³⁰ Simon M. Luebke and Dennis Steffan, “Who Values Political Authenticity? The Antecedents and Electoral Consequences of Voters' Preference for Authentic Politicians,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

John Kenny and Lucas Geese’s article “An Authenticity Expectations Gap? A comparison of Publics’ and Members of Parliament’s Views on Politicians Being True to Themselves”³¹ also analyzes heterogeneity in preferences for authenticity. This is carried out not only among publics, but additionally among sitting Members of Parliament (MPs) in Germany and Britain. Comparing the views of these political elites with the general population, the article emphasizes that there may be a discrepancy between MPs’ willingness to be true to themselves, and public preferences for what they should do. It also highlights that MPs may be more constrained in their ability to be true to themselves under certain conditions—such as whether their views are conflicting with those of their voters, their party, or independent experts—or dependent on the different institutional constraints for career advancement that are present in different parliamentary settings.

Amanda Bittner and Emil Francis’s article “Who’s ‘Really’ Authentic? The Role of Race, Gender, and Party in Shaping Perceptions of Candidate Authenticity”³² moves past the examination of hypothetical politicians and evaluates public perceptions of actual Canadian MPs. Addressing the core research question of why some politicians are perceived as more

³¹ John Kenny and Lucas Geese, “An Authenticity Expectations Gap? A Comparison of Publics’ and Members of Parliament’s Views on Politicians Being True to Themselves,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

³² Amanda Bittner and Emil Francis, “Who’s “Really” Authentic? The Role of Race, Gender, and Party in Shaping Perceptions of Candidate Authenticity,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

authentic than others, the authors identify a number of patterns. MPs from the ruling Liberal party are perceived as less authentic than MPs from other parties, while indigenous MPs are perceived as the most authentic, and women are perceived as more authentic than men.

Furthermore, from Stiers et al.'s³³ six-item authenticity index, the perceptions of politicians giving the “straight stuff” in speeches appears to be the most consistent predictor of general evaluations of each MP’s authenticity. However, other items in the index do also appear as statistically significant predictors, dependent on the party affiliation, race, and/or gender of the MP.

In the final article “Staging Political Authenticity: Does The Same Strategy Fit All?”³⁴

Christina Holtz-Bacha explores the challenges that female politicians face when it comes to the performance of political authenticity. Commencing from the double bind that faces female candidates seeking office, she argues that when female candidates lean into strong leadership traits that are typically associated with masculinity, they may risk being perceived as inauthentic for not complying with typical gender stereotypes and being too calculated; but conversely, if they emphasize typical female traits in their political behavior this may help them with their authenticity but can cast doubts on their competence. This bind may be further complicated for women in populist-right political parties where the ideology is generally anti-feminist. Drawing on a variety of rich cases from different continents and

³³ Stiers et al., "Candidate Authenticity."

³⁴ Holtz-Bacha, “Staging Political Authenticity.”

political systems, Holtz-Bacha identifies and explores four interrelated strategies that female politicians may draw upon to appear authentic, and the implications that such strategies can have.

The issue concludes with the “Ask a Political Scientist” segment for which Eva Anduiza is our featured interviewee. Eva Anduiza, professor of political science at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and founder of the Democracy, Elections, and Citizenship Research Group, is a distinguished scholar whose research focuses on political behavior and political attitudes. She was also a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. This engaging dialogue follows on from the preceding papers, providing thoughtful reflections on some of the themes explored throughout the issue.

Anduiza stands out as a rare scholar who combines brilliant, innovative ideas with rigorous cutting-edge research and offers clear, insightful perspectives on key societal and social science issues. Her ability to convey complex concepts in an engaging and accessible manner makes her an inspiring figure for colleagues and students alike. These qualities shine through in her engaging conversation with *Polity* editor Charles Tien and co-editor of this special issue Sofia Breitenstein,³⁵ as Anduiza discusses her research on affective polarization, attitudes toward gender equality, and the perception of feminism as a threat. She also reflects

³⁵ Sofia Breitenstein and Charles Tien, “Ask a Political Scientist: A Conversation with Eva Anduiza on Polarization, Equality, and Being a Leader,” *Polity* 57 (2025): xxx–xx.

on the challenges of working with survey data, shares her experiences with the satisfactions and difficulties of leading a large research group in an academic setting, and offers insights into the fascinating projects currently being carried out by the Democracy, Elections, and Citizenship Research Group.

In conclusion, this special issue underscores the growing relevance of political authenticity as both a concept in political science and a force shaping electoral dynamics. From exploring its roots in campaign strategies to examining its influence on voting behavior and perceptions of political leaders, the contributions in this volume collectively highlight the complexity and significance of authenticity in contemporary politics. While the articles show that the trait of authenticity has a number of core features such as being consistent and upfront, others show that the perception of being authentic is something that can also be socially constructed and context-dependent. The articles also reveal authenticity's double-edged nature—while perceived authenticity can enhance trust and connection between politicians and voters, it may come at the expense of effective representation if authenticity is emphasized over substantive policy outcomes. Together, these insights advance the emerging field of political authenticity and provide a roadmap for future research, offering valuable perspectives for scholars, practitioners, and anyone interested in understanding the evolving landscape of electoral competition and representation.