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Self-Worth and Politics: The Distinctive Roles of Self-Esteem and Narcissism

Aleksandra Cichocka 

University of Kent

Marta Marchlewska 

Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences

Aleksandra Cislak 

SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities

One of the classic questions in political psychology has been whether feelings of self-worth are relevant for politics. In this review, we summarize seven decades of research attempting to address this question, focusing on three sets of political outcomes: (1) political ideology, (2) political interest and engagement, and (3) intergroup relations. We rely on the distinction between self-esteem (feelings of adequacy and satisfaction with oneself) and narcissism (feelings of entitled self-importance and superiority over others). We argue that this distinction allows us to integrate the literature and explain the mixed effects observed in past research on self-evaluation and politics. Our review points to a key role of narcissistic status pursuit and psychological defensiveness in predicting potentially problematic political attitudes and behaviors. We discuss practical implications these associations might have for democratic functioning and for understanding political leaders. We conclude by identifying outstanding questions and promising new research directions.

KEY WORDS: self-esteem, narcissism, political ideology, intergroup attitudes, support for democracy

One of the classic questions in political psychology has been whether feelings of self-worth matter for politics (Adorno et al., 1950; McClosky, 1958; Sniderman & Citrin, 1971). The need for positive self-regard is a core human motive (Baumeister, 1993; James, 1890/1950; Maslow, 1954; Tajfel, 1969), leading early researchers to theorize that it should be linked to political attitudes and behaviors (Rosenberg, 1962; Sniderman, 1975). For example, in his study of democratic politics, Sniderman (1975) argued that individual self-evaluation “appears to lie at or near the center of personality system. It appears to be bound up with our most central needs and values, our conception of ourselves and others, our aspirations and our actions” (p. 12). It has then been thought that certain ideologies or political behaviors might serve to manage the need

for positive self-worth (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Jost et al., 2003; Sniderman & Citrin, 1971; Wilson, 1973). Yet, over the years, research on the association between self-evaluation and political attitudes or behaviors has yielded mixed results (Jost et al., 2003; Onraet et al., 2013).

Recent developments in the study of self-worth suggest that the nature of these relations might be more complex than originally presumed. Specifically, distinguishing self-esteem from narcissism (e.g., Bosson et al., 2008; Brummelman et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2002; Hyatt et al., 2018; Tracy et al., 2009) can be especially fruitful for elucidating the ways in which self-worth might be relevant to politics. In this review, we summarize classic and recent findings examining whether narcissism and/or self-esteem underlie various political outcomes, including (1) political ideology, (2) political interest and engagement, as well as (3) intergroup relations. We discuss implications these associations might have for democratic functioning, social cohesion, and understanding political leaders. We conclude by identifying promising new research directions and applications.

Two Types of Self-Evaluation

Differentiating Narcissism From Self-Esteem

Having a high self-esteem means feeling adequate and satisfied with oneself (Rosenberg, 1962). Because self-esteem assumes a positive self-evaluation, it tends to correlate positively with narcissism (Brummelman et al., 2016; Cichocka et al., 2019; Emmons, 1984; Hyatt et al., 2018; Marchlewska & Cichocka, 2017; Stronge et al., 2016)—a constellation of personality traits characterized by self-importance and a sense of entitlement to special treatment (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). Narcissism is an individual difference that is normally distributed in the general population. Just as people can have higher or lower self-esteem, they can be higher or lower in narcissism. This should be treated distinctly from a clinical manifestation of narcissism, that is, the narcissistic personality disorder (NPD; see Miller & Campbell, 2008).

Although narcissism used to sometimes be viewed simply as an excessive or inflated form of self-esteem, in more recent theorizing narcissism and self-esteem are seen as separate dimensions of the self: They have distinct developmental origins, phenotypes, and consequences and are rooted in distinct core beliefs about the self and others (Brummelman, 2018; Brummelman et al., 2016; Crowe et al., 2018; Hyatt et al., 2018). Both self-esteem and narcissism seem to be relatively stable (e.g., Back et al., 2013; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005; Stronge et al., 2019), and within-person fluctuations in self-esteem are unrelated to levels of narcissism (Cichocka et al., 2019).

Those scoring high in narcissism see themselves as superior to others, and they use others mostly to gain validation of their grandiose self-image (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001). When they do not get the recognition they feel they deserve, they tend to lash out and behave aggressively towards those who might dare to criticize them or simply fail to appreciate them (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Horvath & Morf, 2009; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Self-esteem, in contrast, reflects inherent satisfaction with oneself. As explained by Rosenberg (1965), “When we deal with self-esteem, we are asking whether the individual considers himself adequate—a person of worth—not whether he considers himself superior to other” (p. 62). While narcissistic beliefs about one’s own greatness are often unfounded, those with high self-esteem are more likely to base their feelings of self-worth in reality (Sedikides, 2021).

Measuring Self-Evaluation

How can we then capture these different types of self-evaluation? As is typical for relatively stable personality predispositions, narcissism and self-esteem are measured with the use of psychometrically validated scales. Reviewing all the models of self-esteem and narcissism is beyond the scope of this review. However, we felt it would be helpful to give readers an overview on how these concepts are typically operationalized. In this, we focus on measures and dimensions most frequently considered in political psychological research.

Measures and Dimensions of Self-Esteem

Although several measures of self-esteem exist, by far the top choice for most researchers remains the famous Rosenberg (1965) 10-item Self-Esteem Scale (Donnellan et al., 2015; see also Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Sample item reads: “I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.” Recently, a tool gaining in popularity is a simple “I have high self-esteem” item, which is aimed at assessing one’s overall self-worth or the attitude one holds about oneself (Robins et al., 2001). It is thought to serve as a proxy for the Rosenberg scale, especially in research where longer measures cannot be included. Both of these measures assume a single dimension, although some researchers tend to distinguish components of self-esteem. For example, Tafarodi and Swann Jr. (1995) differentiated a sense of worth (i.e., “self-liking”) from a sense of personal efficacy (“self-competence”). However, as we will see, distinct components or facets of self-esteem are rarely studied in relation to political outcomes. Thus, unless noted otherwise, when we refer to self-esteem in this review, we refer to the single dimension.

Measures and Dimensions of Narcissism

Matters become a bit more complicated with respect to the measurement of narcissism. Just like self-esteem, narcissism is sometimes measured with a single item by Konrath et al. (2014): “I am a narcissist (*Note: The word ‘Narcissist’ means egotistical, self-focused, and vain.*)” However, when space allows it, researchers prefer to use more extensive measures of the trait. Arguably, the most popular scale to measure narcissism is the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), originally proposed by Raskin and Hall (1979; see Foster et al., 2018). The most typically used revision of the scale published by Raskin and Terry (1988) consists of 40 pairs of statements: one neutral (e.g., “I prefer to blend in with the crowd.”) and one characteristic of narcissism (e.g., “I like to be the center of attention.”). Respondents are asked to indicate which one of the two describes them best. Although the scale is often used as a composite index of narcissism, it is thought to capture its different aspects: authority, self-sufficiency, superiority, vanity, exhibitionism, entitlement, and exploitativeness (Raskin & Terry, 1988). While there is a lack of consensus about the precise number of these facets, one often relied-on model by Ackerman et al. (2011) proposes three: entitlement/exploitativeness (e.g., demanding special treatment and taking advantage of others), grandiose exhibitionism (e.g., being self-absorbed and vain), and leadership/authority (e.g., seeing oneself as a great leader).

Another popular measure of narcissism, proposed by Back et al. (2013), is the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; see also Grosz et al., 2017). This tool, which comes in a longer 18-item and a shorter 6-item version, reflects a theoretical model arguing

that the narcissistic goal to maintain a grandiose self-concept is achieved via two strategies: assertive self-enhancement (called “narcissistic admiration”) and antagonistic self-protection (called “narcissistic rivalry”). Narcissistic admiration assumes striving for uniqueness, charmingness, and grandiose fantasizing, all aimed at boosting the ego. Narcissistic rivalry assumes devaluing others, aggression, and striving for supremacy, all aimed at managing ego threats. While the two aspects of narcissism tend to reinforce each other over time, they show relative independence of self-esteem when it comes to within-person dynamics (Cichocka et al., 2019).

All of the conceptualizations described above aim to capture so-called grandiose narcissism. However, researchers also sometimes distinguish vulnerable narcissism—defensiveness and insecure grandiosity linked to feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and low self-esteem (e.g., Miller et al., 2011; Pincus et al., 2014). The two dimensions of narcissism have a common core of antagonism, rivalry, and entitlement, which is combined with narcissistic neuroticism in the case of vulnerable narcissism, or narcissistic extraversion in the case of grandiose narcissism (Miller et al., 2017, 2021). The Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory (FFNI) measures 15 narcissistic traits corresponding to vulnerable (i.e., reactive anger, shame, need for admiration, and distrust) and grandiose narcissism (i.e., indifference, exhibitionism, authoritative, grandiose fantasies, manipulativeness, exploitativeness, entitlement, lack of empathy, arrogance, acclaim seeking, and thrill seeking; Glover et al., 2012). Although research on grandiose and vulnerable types of narcissism (Miller et al., 2021) is gaining traction in political psychology (see e.g., Cichocka, Marchlewska et al., 2022; Hatemi & Fazekas, 2022), the latter seems to be studied less frequently than the former. Accordingly, most of the studies referred to in this review focus on grandiose narcissism. Where relevant, we note the few examples of studies that considered vulnerable forms of narcissism.

The Dark Triad

In this review, we compare self-esteem and narcissism as two distinct types of self-evaluation. However, in personality research narcissism is sometimes studied in the context of the so-called “dark personality traits.” Dark traits manifest via undesirable attitudes and behaviors that could be considered immoral, unethical, or otherwise socially problematic (Marcus & Zeigler-Hill, 2015; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The three most frequently studied dark traits, or the Dark Triad, include narcissism, alongside psychopathy (characterized by high impulsivity and thrill seeking mixed with low empathy and anxiety) and Machiavellianism (characterized by cynicism and manipulativeness; see Furnham et al., 2013 for a review). Although the Dark Triad research originally sought to integrate studies on three independent constructs (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002), some argue that the different measures of these traits contribute to the same latent construct (e.g., Jonason et al., 2009), characterized by callousness and manipulativeness (e.g., Jones & Figueredo, 2013). Accordingly, concise measures that capture all three traits have been proposed. One example is the Dirty Dozen by Jonason and Webster (2010; Webster & Jonason, 2013). Because dark traits are linked to a specific social strategy, based on short-term gains, exploitativeness, and aggressiveness, researchers have wondered about the political outcomes and preferences they might translate to. Thus, a separate line of inquiry often examines the role of narcissism in politics in the context of dark personality traits, rather than in comparison with self-esteem. We seek to incorporate the results of this research in the current review.

The Unique Effects of Narcissism and Self-Esteem

While narcissism is often linked to defensiveness and problematic social relations (Baumeister et al., 2000; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Donnellan et al., 2005; Krizan & Herlache, 2018), those with high self-esteem are more likely to be more psychologically secure (Kernis, 2003). This psychological security as a core feature of self-esteem becomes especially apparent once we account for the variance shared between measures of narcissism and self-esteem. In this case, we can observe pure secure self-evaluation that is nonnarcissistic and resilient to threats. This secure self-evaluation (also sometimes referred to as mature, genuine, or optimal) captures unassuming pride in the self without the need for external validation (Locke, 2009; Marchlewska & Cichocka, 2017). In contrast, covarying out self-esteem from narcissism likely means accounting for extravertive tendencies and emotional stability (e.g., Robins et al., 2001), meaning we can observe the effects of narcissistic core, namely antagonism characterized by traits such as arrogance, cynicism, exploitativeness, and entitlement (see Miller et al., 2021).

To illustrate, Paulhus et al. (2004) found that antisocial behavior was positively correlated with narcissism but showed inconsistent correlations with self-esteem (ranging from negative to positive). However, when narcissism and self-esteem were included in the same models that covaried out their overlap, what became a secure self-evaluation was consistently *negatively* associated with antisocial behavior (see also Donnellan et al., 2005; Webster, 2006). At the same time, the effect of narcissism strengthened. Thus, narcissism and self-esteem can often act as mutual suppressors (MacKinnon et al., 2000)—although they are positively correlated, controlling for their shared variance reveals or augments their different predictive validity (e.g., Marchlewska & Cichocka, 2017; Paulhus et al., 2004; Tracy et al., 2009; see also Lynam et al., 2006).

Self-Evaluation and Political Ideology

One major question in the study of political beliefs was whether low self-esteem would foster attraction to certain political ideologies. Sniderman and Citrin (1971) wrote:

Convinced that men live in an unmanageable environment, the ... conservative calls on tradition and social order to protect society from the vagaries of fate, nature, and character ... Classical conservatism, then, holds great appeal for individuals who have little confidence in their capacity to cope with their own inner needs or with the demands of the external environment. For its part, an elitist ideology provides the person who has low self-esteem with an opportunity to attribute weakness and incompetence to others, thereby relieving his own sense of unworthiness. (p. 410)

In other words, it was thought that conservatism might hold greater appeal for those with low self-esteem. This should be especially true for social-cultural conservatism, as compared to economic political orientations. As further argued by Sniderman and Citrin (1971), “broad evaluations of general economic policy, the capitalist system, businessmen, and trade unions ... neither express a negative image of human nature nor promise to diminish the characteristic anxieties of the person with low self-esteem” (p. 410).

In an early study on this topic, conducted with a small student sample, Boshier (1969) indeed reported moderate to large negative correlations between political conservatism and

self-evaluation (referred to as self-concept in the study). The finding was replicated by Hicks (1974) in a larger sample of college students albeit yielding a smaller effect. Yet, subsequent studies offered less support for this idea. For example, Houston and colleagues (Houston, 1984; Houston & Springer, 1980) found no significant correlations between self-esteem and conservatism. In their classic review of psychological factors motivating political conservatism, Jost et al. (2003) meta-analyzed 17 similar studies (total $N = 1,558$) and showed that the association between self-esteem and conservative ideology was negative and significant, but relatively small ($r = -.09$). In fact, it turned out to be the weakest of all the nine predictors of political conservatism tested by Jost et al. (2003). Another meta-analysis conducted 10 years later by Onraet et al. (2013) included a larger number of samples ($k = 51$ studies, total $N = 11,704$) and revealed that this association was closer to zero ($r = -.02$) and nonsignificant.¹

Still, these past overviews have not considered that the association between feelings of self-worth might be more complex and depend, at least in part, on whether self-evaluation is narcissistic or not. Below, we review the more recent findings on the association between self-esteem and narcissism and three forms of ideological beliefs: (1) ideological self-placement on the left-right or liberal-conservative continuum, (2) social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), and (3) populist attitudes.

Political Conservatism or Left-Right Self-Placement

As we alluded to in the introduction to this section, it is often thought that early theorizing in political psychology linked political conservatism to low self-esteem—which also implies liberalism should be linked to high feelings of self-worth. Yet a closer look at the literature suggests that conservatism might have rather been associated with psychological defensiveness. For example, Wilson (1973) wrote that the “the conservative attitude syndrome serves an ego-defensive function, arising as a response to feelings of insecurity and inferiority” (p. 265). Similarly, McClosky (1958) argued that “[c]onservatism, in our society at least, appears to be far more characteristic of social isolates, of people who think poorly of themselves,” and that conservatives “tend to be aggressively critical of the shortcomings of others” and “unusually defensive and armored in the protection of their own ego needs” (p. 37). At the same time, Adorno et al. (1950/2010) have suggested that “genuine liberals” are “rarely narcissistic” (p. 781). Taken together, this theorizing suggests that political conservatism might be appealing to those scoring high on narcissism (rather than low on self-esteem).

Indeed, some researchers have linked narcissistic, defensive self-evaluation to right-wing ideological attitudes. For example, van Hiel and Brebels (2011) examined the associations between self-esteem (measured with Tafariodi & Swann’s, 2001 self-liking and self-competence scale), narcissism (measured with a scale adapted by van Kampen, 2002), and cultural and social conservatism (De Witte, 1990) among Belgian seniors (60+). They found that conservatism was positively correlated both with narcissism and self-esteem, but the correlation for narcissism was significantly stronger. Cichocka (2013) also found a positive correlation between narcissism (measured with the NPI) and social (but not economic) conservatism in Poland. These correlational analyses showed no associations between self-esteem and political orientation, but once the overlap between narcissism and self-esteem was accounted for, self-esteem without the narcissistic component was negatively associated with social conservatism.

¹Moderation analyses suggested that the effect might depend on demographic factors such as age: the association between conservatism and self-esteem was nonsignificant among adolescents, negative among adults, but positive among the elderly (see also van Hiel & Brebels, 2011; Soenens & Duriez, 2012).

In another study conducted in Belgium, Soenens and Duriez (2012) showed that social conservatism was positively associated with contingent self-esteem—a type of self-evaluation that is, similarly to narcissism, associated with psychological defensiveness (Kernis et al., 2008; Kernis & Paradise, 2002) but unrelated to noncontingent self-esteem. Furthermore, contingent self-esteem mediated between conservatism and indices of poor psychological adjustment. These studies support the assertion that psychological defensiveness is linked to conservative ideology. Similarly, in a U.S. sample, Jonason (2014; Study 1) found an association between narcissism and conservatism, but this effect did not replicate in his second study. However, his studies relied on short measures of narcissism from the Dark Triad scale, and the effects were observed only after controlling for other basic personality traits (the Big Five; Benet-Martínez & John, 1998, in Study 1 and HEXACO; Ashton & Lee, 2009; in Study 2) as well as the other Dark Triad traits (Jones & Paulhus, 2014), making the unique effects of narcissism somewhat difficult to interpret. Duspara and Greitemeyer (2017) examined dark personality traits in the context of the 2016 presidential elections in Austria. They found only some indication that narcissism might be associated with political orientation. While narcissism correlated positively with self-reported right-wing political orientation and with voting for a right-wing (Hofer) versus more left-leaning/centrist (van der Bellen) presidential candidate, once the overlap with other dark traits and demographics was accounted for, narcissism was more predictive of political extremism, rather than of being right-leaning.

Overall, research suggests that the links between narcissism and political ideology might be most apparent when researchers distinguish the social and economic dimensions of political conservatism, with clearer effects of narcissism being observed for the former than the latter (see also Sniderman & Citrin, 1971). Bardeen and Michel (2019) examined these possibilities further and found that narcissism was highest among those U.S. participants who showed a combination of high social conservatism with low economic conservatism. Specifically, for those with more left-wing (i.e., less conservative) economic views, the higher their social conservatism the more narcissistic they were (while there was no such relationship for those high in right-wing/conservative economic political orientation). However, studies considering economic beliefs are still scarce, and more research is needed to fully understand the role of personality in this dimension of ideology.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that narcissism is a complex construct, encompassing different components. Thus, different facets of narcissism might have different relations with political orientation. When Hatemi and Fazekas (2018) accounted for the variance shared between different components of narcissism, they found that narcissistic entitlement (i.e., the belief that one is inherently deserving of special treatment; Raskin & Terry, 1988) was related to more conservative social and economic positions, especially with respect to policy preferences related to intergroup relations (e.g., acceptance of immigrants and refugees). However, another facet of narcissism, namely exhibitionism (which captures one's need to feel unique and be in the center of attention, even at others' expense; Raskin & Terry, 1988), was related to more liberal positions. This result is consistent with past work showing that liberals are motivated to view themselves as unique and tend to underestimate the extent of their similarity to other liberals (Stern et al., 2014). Work by Hatemi and Fazekas (2018) might also have implications for how narcissism and self-esteem map onto different aspects of political ideology captured by SDO and RWA.

Social Dominance Orientation and Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Right-wing belief systems can be understood as being underlined by two dimensions: acceptance of inequality and resistance to changing social arrangements (Jost et al., 2003). According to the dual-process motivational model of ideology and prejudice (Duckitt &

Sibley, 2017), acceptance of inequality corresponds to SDO, that is, “the degree to which individuals desire and support group-based hierarchy and the domination of ‘inferior’ groups by ‘superior’ groups” (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 48). The second dimension corresponds to RWA—a personality predisposition comprising submission to authorities, general aggressiveness, and adherence to conventional moral values (Altemeyer, 1981, 1998; see also Adorno et al., 1950). SDO and RWA likely have different psychological appeal to those high in narcissism (vs. self-esteem).

Narcissism is inherently associated with a hierarchical and comparative outlook (Grapsas et al., 2020; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008). Those high in grandiose narcissism tend to self-enhance by exerting power and dominance over others (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Leckelt et al., 2015; Raskin et al., 1991), especially on traits reflecting agency (rather than morality; Campbell et al., 2002).² Overall, narcissism can be considered “a system of psychological processes and behaviors aimed at fulfilling individuals’ fundamental motive for social status” (Grapsas et al., 2020, p. 165). This suggests that the ideological values and beliefs characteristic for SDO should be appealing to those scoring high in narcissism, and especially so when they feel they can be at the top of the pecking order (Zitek & Jordan, 2016).

A different set of predictions can be made for RWA. While general aggressiveness is robustly associated with narcissism (Kjærviik & Bushman, 2021), submission to authorities and adherence to conventional norms, traditions, and guidelines (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) are less likely to appeal to those high in narcissism. Narcissism is characterized by a sense of uniqueness and superiority over others, as well as viewing oneself as rebellious and nonconforming (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Thus, RWA should hold a weaker psychological appeal for those scoring high in narcissism, especially after we account for the more confrontational aspects RWA shares with SDO.

Several studies are consistent with this theorizing. In an investigation of personality traits that might have been associated with self-selection to the (in)famous Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney et al., 1973), Carnahan and McFarland (2007) found that those who were more likely to sign up to a study on “prison life,” compared to a regular psychological study, reported higher narcissism. They also discovered that narcissism was correlated with SDO, but not RWA (see Hodson et al., 2009 for similar findings in Canada). Narcissism likely generally predisposes people to develop social worldviews that translate to higher SDO. Like any other personality trait, narcissism creates biases in information processing in a way that makes people adopt specific motives and goals which translate into political attitudes and behaviors (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2020). In line with this reasoning, Zeigler-Hill et al. (2020) found some evidence that a competitive social worldview statistically mediates between narcissism and high SDO (although this relationship did not replicate consistently). Zitek and Jordan (2016) found narcissism to be linked not only to SDO but also to readiness to justify and legitimize an unequal distribution of wealth (so called economic system justification; Jost & Thompson, 2000).

Nevertheless, SDO has not always been uniquely linked to narcissism. Several researchers observed that narcissism was positively related both to SDO and RWA (e.g., Hart & Stekler, 2021, Moor et al., 2019, Zeigler-Hill et al., 2020 in the United States; Jonason, 2015 in Australia) or that certain aspects of narcissism were not predictive of SDO (e.g., Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021; see also Mayer et al., 2020). However, these studies typically did not account for

²Some researchers suggest that people can also satisfy self-motives of grandiosity, esteem, entitlement, and power in communal domains. Such tendencies are captured by the concept of communal narcissism (Gebauer et al., 2012). As research on communal narcissism in politics is still scarce (cf., Kesenheimer & Greitemeyer, 2021), we do not focus on this trait in this review.

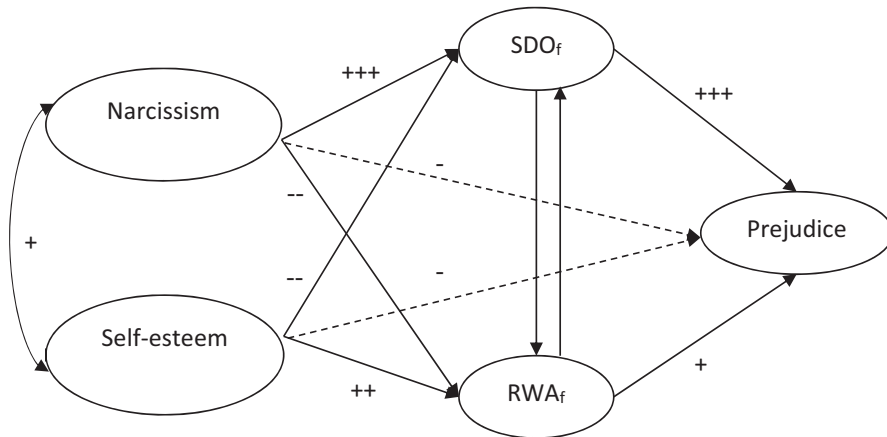


Figure 1. Simplified Model Showing Associations Between Self-Evaluation, Ideology, And Prejudice (Adapted from Cichocka et al., 2017; Study 3). The effects are observed controlling for the variance shared between narcissism and self-esteem, reflecting narcissistic and secure self-evaluation respectively. The figure represents two separate models that estimate the associations for $SDO_f = SDO$ accounting for RWA (i.e., including the path from RWA to SDO) and for $RWA_f = RWA$ accounting for SDO (i.e., including the path from SDO to RWA). Entries reflect the strength of the standardized coefficients, with $+/-$ =small effect, $++/--$ =medium effect, and $+++/-$ =large effects. Broken lines indicate nonsignificant paths.

the overlap between SDO and RWA, or for the overlap between narcissism and self-esteem. Cichocka et al. (2017) sought to address these limitations (see Figure 1). Accounting for the variance shared between the constructs, they were able to observe the effects of narcissistic and secure (nonnarcissistic) self-evaluation as well as of “pure” SDO and RWA, covarying out their shared variance which most likely captures acceptance of intergroup aggressiveness (e.g., Asbrock et al., 2010; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Ekehammar et al., 2004; Kandler et al., 2016). Across three countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Poland), they found that narcissism was associated with higher SDO (accounting for its overlap with RWA) but lower RWA (accounting for its overlap with SDO).

What about self-esteem? Past research has shown weak associations between self-esteem and SDO. In a series of studies by Pratto et al. (1994), SDO was largely uncorrelated with self-esteem. A meta-analysis by Onraet et al. (2013) has similarly shown that the negative association between self-esteem and SDO was weak ($-.08$) albeit significant, while the effects for RWA or overall conservative ideology were closer to zero. A recent longitudinal study following a large sample of Norwegians over 28 years found that low levels of self-esteem in adolescence as well as a depressed self-esteem development over one’s life course were (weakly) related to higher SDO as well as higher opposition to gender equality in midlife (Fluit et al., 2022). Unfortunately, none of these studies considered narcissism. Although Cichocka et al. (2017) sought to address this limitation, the evidence was still far from clear: Secure (nonnarcissistic) self-evaluation was linked to lower SDO (net of RWA) in some samples, but not in others. Another possibility is that the nature of these relationships depends on the status of the groups people belong to (Jost & Thompson, 2000). We return to this idea in the future directions section.

As with the study of ideological self-placement, SDO and RWA might also have more nuanced associations with different components of narcissism. For example, supplementary analyses by Cichocka et al. (2017) showed that all aspects of grandiose narcissism were moderately

related to SDO (free of RWA). Similarly, Jones and Figueredo (2013) found that all facets of narcissism were correlated with SDO, although the correlations between the need for dominance and the entitlement and leadership facets were stronger than those for narcissistic grandiosity. With respect to RWA, in the supplementary analyses of Cichocka et al. (2017), exhibitionism was the facet of narcissism most consistently *negatively* linked to RWA (free of SDO), while the associations between other facets of narcissism and RWA were less consistent. Taken together, these findings are in line with the idea that the exhibitionistic aspects of narcissism, linked to being unique and in the center of attention, are more strongly associated with low authoritarianism (see Hatemi & Fazekas, 2018).³

Overall, research seems to indicate that narcissism is likely to be a better predictor of dominant tendencies rather than authoritarian ones (cf. Mayer et al., 2020). This seems to be true at least for grandiose narcissism. In a rare examination of the role of vulnerable narcissism, Zeigler-Hill et al. (2021) found that vulnerable narcissism was linked to a rejection of right-wing ideological attitudes, but greater *left*-wing authoritarianism, that is submission to left-wing revolutionary movements and justification of aggressive actions of such movements (van Hiel et al., 2006).

Populism and Extremism

Some authors speculate that narcissism might play an especially important role in predicting support for extremism and/or populism (e.g., Hatemi & Fazekas, 2018), rather than right-left political orientation. Indeed, there is evidence that narcissism is related to support for right-wing populist politicians, such as Hofer in Austria (Duspara & Greitemeyer, 2017) or Donald Trump in the United States (Hart & Stekler, 2021). For example, Yalch (2021) found that intentions to vote for Trump were predicted by narcissism, but especially by the self-centered antagonism and indifference to other people, rather than by narcissistic grandiosity, vulnerability, or distrust. Mayer et al. (2020) examined the associations between narcissism and support for the Alternative for Germany (AfG)—a radical right-wing populist party, linked to nativist and exclusionary policies. They theorized that narcissistic rivalry should predict higher support for radical populist parties. However, as these parties call for nativist and often traditional society, they might be less attractive to those scoring high in narcissistic admiration, linked to striving for uniqueness (Back et al., 2013). Indeed, in a 2016 survey, Mayer et al. (2020) found that voting for AfG was positively associated with narcissistic rivalry, but negatively with narcissistic admiration.

Yet in a Canadian study by Pruyzers (2021), narcissism was generally *negatively* associated with support for populism measured with Akkerman et al.'s (2014) statements such as “The politicians in the Canadian parliament need to follow the will of the people” or “The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.” In fact, support for populism was positively predicted by greater honesty-humility. As suggested by Pruyzers (2021), “those scoring higher on the trait of narcissism are characterised by an exaggerated sense of self, arrogance, and entitlement. These individuals are not particularly drawn to a populist ideology that villainizes political elites and praises ordinary citizens. The self-importance and feeling of superiority that comes with higher levels of narcissism likely

³Note that more recent conceptualizations of the NPI typically do not treat exhibitionism separately from the more adaptive aspects of narcissistic admiration/grandiosity (Ackerman et al., 2011), such as superiority or self-sufficiency (which were largely unrelated to political ideology in the Hatemi & Fazekas, 2018, study).

prevents these individuals from identifying as a common citizen and therefore buying into populist rhetoric” (p. 118).

It is then plausible that those high in narcissism would find national populist or the extreme-right parties and politicians more appealing than populist ideas understood as a “thin-cantered ideology” linked to a belief that “politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2007, p. 23). The results of the study conducted in the context of the Austrian 2016 presidential elections could also be interpreted in a similar vein (Duspara & Greitemeyer, 2017). Given that Hofer was a candidate from the Freedom Party of Austria, he could be considered extremist, at least in comparison to the other candidate. Furthermore, there is evidence that strong populist and autocratic leaders are more likely to be perceived by experts as narcissistic (as well as high in other dark traits; e.g., Nai, 2019a; Nai & Maier, 2018; Nai & Toros, 2020). Former U.S. president Trump is probably the starkest example, being rated sky-high in narcissism, even compared to other populist leaders (Nai et al., 2019). Although such candidates might be less appealing to the general public, they tend to appeal to voters who themselves have dark personalities (Nai et al., 2021).⁴

Self-Evaluation and Political Ideology: Conclusion

Taken together, these studies shed light on the classic problem of the role of self-worth in political orientation. They suggest that feelings of superiority (rather than of unworthiness, as was initially suspected; McClosky, 1958; Sniderman & Citrin, 1971) may attract people to right-wing ideologies, at least those characterized by power strivings and dominance. Social conservatism as well as extremist right-wing populism, especially its flavors that call for superiority of certain social groups over others, tend to be especially appealing to those scoring high in narcissism. Narcissism, however, is not universally related to conservatism or populism. Their desires for uniqueness and special treatment mean that those high in narcissism will be less attracted to ideologies that promote traditionalism or give power to “ordinary” citizens.

Self-Evaluation and Being a “Good Citizen”

While ideological beliefs are important in determining people’s political preferences, they do not automatically translate into people’s engagement in politics or democratic processes. Conceptions of what it means to be a “good citizen” usually emphasize the importance of moral obligation to pursue the common good and engage in different forms of political activism (Denters et al., 2006). In other words, to become a good citizen, one needs to care about the society, be well informed, and active in social and political domains (Dalton, 2016; Denters et al., 2006; Michalski et al., 2021).

Researchers tend to agree that civic and political engagement are not only driven by sociodemographic factors, but also by psychological variables such as self-evaluation (Chen et al., 2021). For example, in early work on this topic, Goldhamer (1950) suggested that individuals experiencing self-esteem problems might be too exhausted by their inner conflicts to invest energy into civic or political engagement. Similarly, Horney (1950) proposed a concept of “neurotic egocentricity,” which refers to those suffering from emotional problems, who are

⁴Another possibility is that the association between narcissism and populism is simply different: Nai (2022) found that populist attitudes were associated with a preference for politicians characterized by dark traits, including narcissism.

wrapped up in their inner world, having no psychological resources to become interested in greater things, such as the world of politics. In line with this logic, it is high self-esteem that should go hand in hand with being politically engaged.

In contrast, Fromm (1941) and Lasswell (1956) suggested that those who feel rejected by others or insufficiently recognized may be prone to engage in politics due to compensatory mechanisms. For example, they might participate in mass political movements to gain a sense of strength and belongingness through becoming a part of a strong collective (Fromm, 1941) or strive for power (Lasswell, 1956) to compensate for deprivation or feelings of inadequacy. Although the original theorizing would have attributed these processes to compensation for low self-esteem, we argue that they are more likely to correspond to the defensiveness characteristic for narcissism. This would suggest that increased civic and political participation may be associated both with high secure and defensive (i.e., narcissistic) self-evaluation. Yet, the motivation standing behind political activity undertaken by more secure versus more defensive individuals might be different, and, thus, the way they participate in many domains of civic life should differ as well.

Those high in secure self-evaluation hold positive attitudes towards other people (Cichocka et al., 2016) and, thus, could be interested in working on behalf of their local or national ingroups as so-called “good citizens.” In contrast, feelings of entitlement, superiority, and self-importance (Campbell et al., 2002; Campbell & Foster, 2007; Horvath & Morf, 2009) combined with the exhibitionistic tendencies and the need for external validation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001; Byrne & O’Brien, 2014; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Reynolds & Lejuez, 2011) mean that those high in narcissism may use civic or political engagement to boost their narcissistic egos by gaining attention and admiration from others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Furthermore, those high in narcissism are aggressive towards anyone who undermines their infallibility (Baumeister et al., 1996) and tend to perceive others’ actions as intentionally malicious (Cichocka et al., 2016). Thus, their political engagement may take nonnormative or even violent forms (Lambe et al., 2018) which could be far from the practices of a “good citizen.”

In this section, we examine how the two types of self-evaluation contribute to (1) political interest and knowledge, (2) political engagement, and (3) support for democracy. First, we elaborate on the differences between narcissism and self-esteem in terms of their associations with political interest and political knowledge as both these variables play an important role in political engagement and seem crucial for its quality (Chen et al., 2021). We also link the two forms of self-evaluation to such types of engagement as civic participation, formal participation, and activism. Finally, we focus on support for democracy—a political system based on citizens’ willingness to express their political judgments in the public sphere via different types of engagement (Magalhães, 2014).

Political Interest and Political Knowledge

Research shows that informed citizens who score high on political knowledge are more likely to take part in different types of political activities (Arnold, 2012; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Michalski et al., 2021). In fact, political knowledge serves as a personal resource that allows citizens to make accurate judgments about current political issues and helps them translate this information into meaningful forms of participation (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). This type of participation probably draws its source from a genuine interest in politics and concern for one’s own country and thus might be

characteristic of people scoring high on secure self-evaluation. In some cases, however, interest in politics does not go hand in hand with political knowledge but still may boost civic and political engagement (Chen et al., 2021). This might be especially true for those high in narcissism.

Indeed, Rosenberg (1962) found that people with high self-esteem are more likely to say that they are interested in political matters. They were more likely to report that they follow news related to political issues or participate in discussions of public affairs. Moreover, they scored higher on an objective test of knowledge of current political figures. Similarly, a classic study of adolescents by Carmines (1978) demonstrated that their self-esteem was positively linked to political knowledge and comprehension of political concepts (such as democracy), especially if it was paired with interest in politics.

Chen et al. (2021) found a slightly different pattern for those high in narcissism. Narcissism was also associated with higher levels of political interest but, unlike self-esteem, it was linked to lower levels of political knowledge. This implies that those scoring high in narcissism may be eager to participate in civic and political actions even if they seem not to be well-equipped to do so. This might be one way for them to rise to the top of the social hierarchy (see Zitek & Jordan, 2016). Thus, it seems crucial to further explore their participatory motivations and the way they take part in different civic, but especially, political activities.

Different Forms of Political Engagement

A wide repertoire of citizen activities has inspired social and political scientists to create typologies of participatory behaviors. These typically distinguish the following manifestations of engagement: formal participation, civic participation, and activism (Ekman & Amna, 2012; Talò & Mannarini, 2015; see also Adler & Goggin, 2005). This taxonomy considers all actions, either individual or collective, normative or nonnormative, taken by the citizens (Talò & Mannarini, 2015; see also Ekman & Amna, 2012). Below we briefly describe each of these forms of political engagement and elaborate on their relations to self-evaluation.

Formal Participation

Formal participation refers to actions aimed at influencing government decisions and political outcomes, such as voting in elections or referenda, running for public office, writing to politicians, or membership in political parties (Talò & Mannarini, 2015). This type of engagement has been linked to narcissism (e.g., in Polish and British samples: Rogoza et al., 2022; or in U.S. and Danish samples: Fazekas & Hatemi, 2021). In the study by Fazekas and Hatemi (2021), the leadership and authority aspect of narcissism predicted participation in activities such as attending political meetings or contacting politicians, but these effects did not extend to election turnout. In contrast, the entitlement and exploitativeness components sometimes even dampened political participation and turnout (although this relationship was less consistent; Fazekas & Hatemi, 2021).

Given the narcissistic belief in one's leadership skills and superiority over others, those high in narcissism also believe themselves to be qualified for office (Peterson & Palmer, 2022). They are in fact more likely to win elections (Blais & Pruyers, 2017). Watts et al. (2013) showed that American presidents are higher in narcissism than the general public which suggests that those higher in narcissism may indeed seek a career in politics more readily than those scoring lower in narcissism. These conclusions are far from surprising: Formal participation has a great potential to fulfill such narcissistic needs as desire for attention, admiration, and praise (Brunell

et al., 2008; Twenge, 2006). Furthermore, those high in narcissism are not only more eager to be involved in politics, but they may also be more likely to support candidates who share the same traits (see Nai et al., 2021).

This, however, does not necessarily mean that individuals high in narcissism make good or effective politicians. As suggested by the Chen et al.'s (2021) study on political knowledge, political decisions taken by those high in narcissism may be ill informed and, thus, problematic for the wider society. Further studies assessing personalities of political elites suggest that narcissism in politicians might be a double-edged sword (Watts et al., 2013). On the one hand, narcissism, understood as a mix of exhibitionism, leadership/grandiosity, and entitlement (Jones & Paulhus, 2014), is positively related to public persuasiveness, crisis management or agenda setting, and to several objective indicators of performance, such as winning the popular vote and initiating legislation (Watts et al., 2013; see also Fazekas & Hatemi, 2021). Narcissism is also associated with better electoral results (especially for candidates on the right-hand side of the ideological spectrum; Nai, 2019b). On the other hand, narcissism has been linked with problematic outcomes, including congressional impeachment resolutions as well unethical behaviors (Watts et al., 2013; see also Blair et al., 2017; O'Boyle Jr. et al., 2012). Candidates with darker personality traits, including narcissism, were also more likely to run aggressive and uncivil campaigns (Nai & Maier, 2020) or show autocratic tendencies (Nai & Toros, 2020).

Watts et al. (2013) also found that after controlling for extraversion (i.e., a correlate of grandiose narcissism), the relations between narcissism and the previously aforementioned positive outcomes became nonsignificant. At the same time, after accounting for the shared variance between narcissism and extraversion, the relationship between narcissism and negative outcomes became even more pronounced. These results suggest that high extraversion characteristic for those high in narcissism may be responsible for the positive associations between narcissism and adaptive correlates (Watts et al., 2013; but see Nai, 2019b, who shows that this might depend on candidate demographics). Thus, to better understand the link between narcissism and formal participation, one should take into account the variance shared between narcissism and other psychological variables. A clear candidate is, of course, self-esteem, but research on the role of self-esteem in formal participation is surprisingly scarce. Higher self-esteem in young U.S. adults was associated with a greater likelihood of adopting a partisan identity in a study by Wolak and Stapleton (2020). However, the adolescents' study by Carmines (1978) found no evidence for self-esteem being predictive of conventional formal participation. Still, studies differentiating the role of secure (nonnarcissistic) versus narcissistic self-evaluation are lacking. We return to this problem when we discuss future directions.

Civic Participation

Civic participation refers to the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community to shape its future (Adler & Goggin, 2005). It describes activities such as volunteering in social/civic or religious organizations, donating money to charity, or adopting a lifestyle with a clear social orientation (e.g., vegetarianism, anticonsumerism, etc.). Although no research has explicitly compared the relationships between secure versus narcissistic self-evaluation and civic participation, certain conclusions can be drawn from studies analyzing the two forms of self-evaluation and civic participation separately.

For example, as we suggested above, those high in grandiose narcissism are especially motivated by rewards from agentic experiences which involve power (e.g., becoming a politician; Konrath & Tian, 2018; see also Campbell & Foster, 2007). However, they seem to be less motivated by rewards from communal services, such as developing deep caring social relationships (Campbell & Foster, 2007; cf. Gebauer et al., 2012). Even though there is evidence that those high in narcissism generally believe it is important to engage in activities associated with good citizenship (Pruysers et al., 2019), actual civic participation usually requires prosocial behavior (Giner & Sarasa, 1996) and actions intended to benefit others. Thus, one may assume that those high in narcissism should be less interested in being personally engaged in these activities.

Still, according to Konrath and Tian (2018), there are situations when people high in narcissism may perform such acts strategically—to improve their reputation or receive something in return. This has been, for example, shown in studies on volunteering for nonprofit organizations. Those high in narcissism may volunteer for two reasons: first, to enhance their career (Brunell et al., 2014); second, to boost their narcissistic egos via getting attention and admiration (Konrath & Tian, 2018). Indeed, research by Konrath et al. (2016) exploring the links between narcissism and charitable donations found that those high in narcissism were only partially willing to take part in a campaign aimed to raise funds for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS; the “ice bucket challenge”): They were more likely to post a video of themselves pouring ice water on their heads and, at the same time, less likely to actually donate to the cause. This illustrates what may stand behind their “willingness to help” others and suggests that the link between narcissism and civic participation is complex. On the one hand, due to lower levels of empathy (e.g., Watson & Morris, 1991), those scoring high in narcissism should have less altruistic reasons for volunteering, donating money to the charity, or adopting a lifestyle with a clear social orientation. On the other hand, they may do so for a self-serving reason, after adjusting the cost–benefit ratio of such actions by lowering the cost side of the equation (Konrath & Tian, 2018). Thus, if an action assures fame or any other benefit, narcissistic engagement is almost a must. In other cases, they may perceive it as a waste of time and a useless effort.

This should, however, not be the case among people high in secure self-evaluation who are not looking for constant validation or admiration and are generally more ready to trust (Marchlewska et al., 2019) or help (McMillen et al., 1977) others. The results of previous research showed that self-esteem correlates with lower cynicism but higher levels of volunteerism and helping behavior (Baumeister et al., 2003; Bernard et al., 1996; Carmines, 1978; Dawson, 1988). Thus, it seems at least plausible that individuals with high self-esteem would be more willing to take part in civic activities (especially to the extent that their self-evaluation is nonnarcissistic). Moreover, in contrast to those high in narcissism, they could be more focused on doing so to benefit others rather than for their own profits.

Activism

The last type of engagement proposed by Ekman and Amna (2012) considers political activism that is often called “nonconventional,” such as participation in demonstrations, strikes, or, at the individual level, signing petitions, distributing flyers, and boycotting or buying certain products for ethical, ideological, or environmental issues. Activism can also involve nonnormative forms of political engagement, for example illegal, violent manifestations, unauthorized demonstrations, or riots triggered by ideological reasons (i.e., racist or extremist groups; Talò &

Mannarini, 2015). Here, we will briefly describe what we know from studies that at least partially considered self-esteem and narcissism.

It seems clear that some types of nonconventional participation have the potential to address narcissistic needs. For example, recent research linked narcissism to the so-called “slacktivism” (Konrath et al., 2016)—an online form of self-aggrandising, low-cost activism linked to sharing messages, liking posts on social media, signing online petitions, or joining a community organization without contributing to its efforts (Cabrera et al., 2017). These results are in line with the findings we summarized in the previous section: Those high in narcissism use participation to gain recognition, and they may be especially prone to engage in such actions that do not require much effort (Konrath & Tian, 2018).

However, narcissism was also linked to taking part in normative (e.g., legal demonstrations; Chen et al., 2021; Fazekas & Hatemi, 2021) as well as nonnormative (e.g., blocking the streets or destroying property; Feddes et al., 2015) types of collective action which, in fact, do require a certain degree of effort. For example, Morgades-Bamba et al. (2020) found that women who scored higher on narcissism were more willing to damage the belongings of people of another religion. As violence is usually used as a means of protecting against feelings of threat by restoring a sense of pride (Baumeister et al., 2000; Lambe et al., 2018), it seems that nonnormative collective action may play an important role in boosting narcissistic egos (Lambe et al., 2018). Indeed, recent research conducted by Rogoza et al. (2022) showed that those scoring high in narcissism engage in different types of political behaviors to boost their egos (i.e., they feel that they personally change the world for the better or can take control over the course of things) but also to evoke chaos (i.e., settle the scores with their opponents or spread confusion in their country). These results provide additional evidence that those scoring high in narcissism might use certain forms of civic or political activities mainly to address their personal needs or issues.

Secure self-evaluation—a negative predictor of aggression (Locke, 2009), which serves as a buffer against psychological threats (Paulhus et al., 2004)—should not be linked to violent or nonnormative forms of activism. In line with this reasoning, Carmines (1978) found a negative association between self-esteem and willingness to engage in protest activity (measured as a mix of violent and nonviolent actions). Instead, self-esteem might be linked to normative forms of activism as it is positively correlated with its predictors, namely self-efficacy (i.e., a belief that one can accomplish a designated course of action; Bandura, 1977, 1994) and political efficacy (i.e., a belief that one can be politically effective or that the authorities are responsive to citizens’ demands; Carmines, 1978). For example, as hypothesized and found by Schatz (1991), efficacy boosts environmental and antinuclear war activism and increases the perceived effectiveness of performing activist behaviors in general. Of course, we do not claim that individuals high in secure self-evaluation will always avoid engaging in nonnormative collective action. Still, they are more likely to do this in extreme cases and to benefit others rather than the self.

Support for Democracy

Good citizenship is usually linked to embracing and promoting democratic values—such as freedom of speech, liberty, pluralism, and civic participation in its numerous forms (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). According to Westheimer and Kahne (2004), in order to deserve the name of a good citizen in a democratic state, an individual should: (a) be responsible (i.e., act responsibly in their community: work and pay taxes, obey laws, volunteer to lend a hand in times of crisis),

(b) take part in civic activities (e.g., be an active member of community organizations and organize community efforts to care for those in need), and (c) focus on justice-oriented actions (i.e., seek out and address areas of injustice, know about democratic social movements and how to effect systematic change). What makes people support all these democratic principles? Is it possible that feelings of self-worth could be at least partially related to being enthusiastic versus skeptical of democracy?

Sniderman (1975) suggested that support for democracy should be associated with psychological security which promotes an ability to respect the views and opinion of others, even in one disagrees with them. Sullivan and Transue (1999) also noted that support for democracy should be especially strong among those who participate in civic and political activities and, at the same time, support others' efforts to do so. As democracy is based on promoting equity, justice, and inclusion by integrating multiple perspectives, those in favor of democratic values need to be considerate of people with dissimilar opinions and psychologically secure in admitting that they could hold incorrect information (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Kinder & Sears, 1985; Uslaner, 1999). Those who are unable to alter their opinions for the sake of compromise or are easily threatened by political heterogeneity would rather oppose democratic norms that accommodate diverse sets of opinions (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003). These issues were aptly summarized by Lane (1962) who argued that "the democratic machinery can be operated only by men who estimate their own worth, as well as the worth of others, as significantly high" (p. 242).

This theorizing also found its reflection in empirical findings showing that individuals with high secure versus narcissistic self-evaluation have different attitudes towards the democratic system. For example, Sniderman (1975) showed that high self-esteem was related to support for democratic principles, alongside political engagement, and political knowledge. In the same vein, Sullivan et al. (1981) showed that high self-esteem correlated with political tolerance and general support for democratic norms (cf., Miklikowska, 2012). In more recent research, Marchlewska et al. (2019) replicated and extended these findings, showing opposite relationships between secure versus narcissistic self-evaluation and support for democracy (see Figure 2). Specifically, in two studies conducted in the United States and Poland, they demonstrated that whereas secure self-evaluation was positively related to support for democracy, narcissism was negatively related to this outcome. Moreover, the relationship

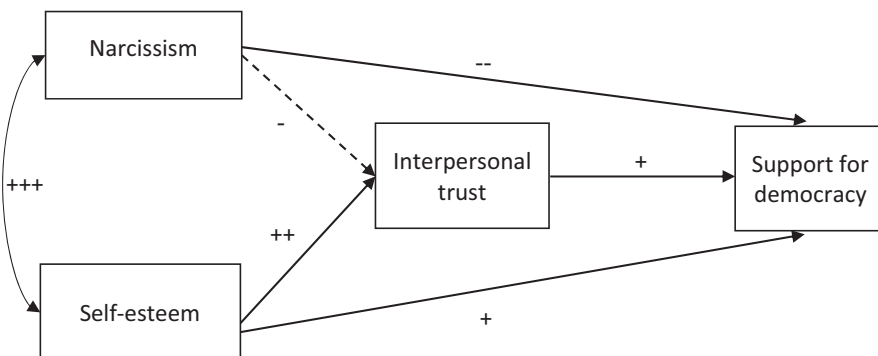


Figure 2. Simplified model showing the effects of narcissism and self-esteem on support for democracy via interpersonal trust (Adapted from Marchlewska et al., 2019; Study 2). The effects were observed controlling for the variance shared between narcissism and self-esteem, reflecting narcissistic and secure self-evaluation respectively. Entries reflect the strength of the standardized coefficients, with +/- = small effect, ++/-- = medium effect, and +++/-- = large effects. Broken lines indicate nonsignificant paths.

between secure self-evaluation and support for democracy was mediated by interpersonal trust. Thus, Marchlewska et al. (2019) explained how a positive, nondefensive, self-view might be operating to bring about approval of democratic values: It might be at least partly due to the fact that people with secure self-evaluation develop better social networks which help foster mutual respect and lower suspicion to other's intentions. The link between narcissistic self-evaluation and support for democracy was not significantly mediated by interpersonal trust (Marchlewska et al., 2019; Study 2).

So why are people high in narcissism less supportive of democracy? The authors claim that it is probably due to increased feelings of competitiveness and threat related to criticism or disagreement with their own beliefs. Indeed, supplementary analyses by Marchlewska et al. (2019) demonstrated that the negative effect on support for democracy was higher for narcissistic rivalry than for narcissistic admiration. This is also consistent with the work we summarized above, showing that narcissism is especially strongly linked to political ideologies characterized by power strivings and dominance (e.g., Cichočka et al., 2017). Another perspective is offered by work pointing to the negative consequences of the overrepresentation of those high in narcissism among active politicians (Watts et al., 2013). Given that those high in narcissism are more likely to support political candidates with narcissistic traits (Hart et al., 2018; Nai et al., 2021), they might do so regardless of whether these candidates respect democratic norms and values or not (Marchlewska et al., 2019).

Self-Evaluation and Being a “Good Citizen”: Conclusion

Overall, our review suggests that although those high in narcissism tend to engage in various forms of political activity, they do so mainly for their own benefits or as a response to a psychological threat. They are interested in a political career without necessarily possessing political knowledge—in the end, what they seek is self-aggrandizement. They are ready to take part in some civic activities if this means getting attention or getting something from others. They are also willing to engage in violent collective actions probably due to their aggressive tendencies driven by a need to protect themselves against feeling threatened (Back et al., 2013; Baumeister et al., 2000; Lambe et al., 2018). Finally, those high in narcissism seem hesitant to respect the views of others or to, support democracy and, as we outlined in the previous section, might even be comfortable supporting extremist populist political parties. All these findings point to the fact that narcissistic engagement is superficial and potentially maladaptive and, thus, cannot be interpreted in terms of good citizenship. In fact, narcissistic participation, whether as part of the mass public or political elite, might be destructive, especially from the perspective of their compatriots.

Yet, good citizenship seems to go hand in hand with high secure self-evaluation. Individuals high in secure self-evaluation are willing to engage in different forms of collective action and political activism for the common good and seem better politically informed. They trust their in-group members and support democratic values which often means respecting people's different viewpoints on what the country should look like.

Self-Evaluation and Intergroup Relations

Vast literature has also probed the role of self-esteem and narcissism in predicting attitudes towards various social groups. Early insights from social identity theory (SIT) linked feelings of self-worth to intra- and intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

According to this classic theorizing, individuals derive their self-worth partly from group belongingness and intergroup comparisons. Social comparisons that let people positively distinguish ingroup from outgroups are thought to result in positive social identification—the emotional significance one attaches to the ingroup and its members (Leach et al., 2008; Tajfel, 1978). Consequently, by and large, people show ingroup favoritism: They prefer members of their ingroups over members of other social groups. This effect can be observed not only in the case of established group memberships (e.g., based on nationality or ethnicity) but also in a so-called minimal group context, where people are allocated to groups based on arbitrary criteria (Tajfel et al., 1971).

Abrams and Hogg (1988) derived two corollaries from SIT. According to the first corollary, intergroup discrimination should elevate self-esteem. According to the second corollary, low self-esteem should predict intergroup discrimination. However, empirical evidence for these hypotheses has been mixed—with more evidence supporting Corollary 1 than Corollary 2 (e.g., Brown, 2000; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Yet, as the latter is more relevant to the current review, we will provide an overview of the somewhat complex findings of the studies testing this idea in more detail.

Keeping with the theme of this article, we also argue that to understand the interplay between feelings of self-worth and intergroup attitudes, it is again useful to distinguish self-esteem from narcissism. As we explained, although both self-esteem and narcissism capture positive beliefs about the self (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Paulhus et al., 2004), they reveal distinct nomological networks (Hyatt et al., 2018). While self-esteem is negatively related to antagonism, hostility, and callousness as well as demeaning attitudes towards others, narcissism is positively related to these outcomes. This implies self-esteem and narcissism might be differently related to intergroup attitudes. Below, we review research that offers support for these ideas, focusing on (1) outgroup and (2) ingroup attitudes separately.

Attitudes Towards Outgroups

In trying to understand the role of narcissism versus self-esteem in predicting outgroup attitudes, we zoom in on two types of socially relevant outcomes. The first one is expressions of prejudice and overt hostility towards outgroups. The second one is belief in conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories can be defined as “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4). The actors accused of conspiring can be governments, but also any other groups that are seen as powerful and malevolent (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Kofta & Sedek, 2005). Thus, we review evidence for the associations between self-evaluation and the tendency to buy into such theories about outgroups.

Prejudice and Outgroup Hostility

Most of the work on the role of self-esteem in intergroup relations was grounded in the SIT tradition, testing the idea that low self-esteem should be predictive of intergroup discrimination. Some researchers indeed found that threatened self-worth was related to outgroup derogation. Both chronically low self-esteem (Stephan & Rosenfield, 1978) and temporary threats to self-esteem resulted in outgroup hostility (Fein & Spencer, 1997), even in the minimal intergroup contexts (Hogg & Sunderland, 1991). The 28-year study of Norwegians by Fluit et al. (2022)

found that low self-esteem was associated not only with higher opposition to social equality but also with more negative views of immigration later in life.

Aberson et al. (2000) meta-analyzed studies on the associations between self-esteem and intergroup bias—that is, favoritism towards the ingroup over the outgroup. These authors found it was higher, rather than lower, self-esteem which predicted direct ingroup bias. However, this effect was not observed for indices of indirect bias, that is, ingroup favoritism expressed when participants were asked to evaluate groups on tasks they themselves did not participate in (Brown et al., 1988). Such indirect ingroup bias was found also among those with low self-esteem. Thus, Aberson et al. (2000) concluded that situational constraints might shape the expression of ingroup bias among those with low, but not high, self-esteem. In other words, those with high self-esteem were thought to be less constrained in revealing their biases. Petersen and Blank (2003), who tested the effects of lower versus higher self-esteem using an experimental approach, reached somewhat similar conclusions. While they found that groups with low *state* self-esteem showed significantly larger ingroup bias in their decisions than high *state* self-esteem groups, they observed greater variability following threats, rather than boosts, to self-esteem.

One explanation for this variability might be that responses to esteem threats depend on people's predispositions. For example, Florack et al. (2005) found that threats to self-image resulted in derogation of an outgroup member only among those who already possessed negative outgroup attitudes. Other investigations focused on the interplay between trait and state self-esteem (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). For example, in a study by Crocker et al. (1987), lower self-esteem was linked to more negative attitudes towards both the ingroup and the outgroup. However, participants who were high in self-esteem were more likely to respond to situational threats to the self by showing the highest ingroup favoritism.

Overall, this research found that biases and prejudice can serve as tools of self-worth management (Kunda & Sinclair, 1999; Sinclair & Kunda, 1999), thus linking intergroup attitudes with attitudes towards self. However, the findings offer a rather complicated picture with respect to whether low or high self-esteem (especially chronic one) should be related to intergroup bias. Furthermore, few studies directly compared the effects of self-worth in ingroup favoritism versus outgroup derogation, although these outcomes do not necessarily go hand in hand (Brewer, 1999; Golec de Zavala et al., 2013). Importantly, these empirical studies and theoretical reviews rarely considered the role of narcissism.

Narcissism has been more typically included in studies considering dark traits as predictors of outgroup hostility. The Dark Triad has been linked to prejudice, racism, and anti-immigrant or antirefugee attitudes (e.g., Anderson & Cheers, 2018; Colledani et al., 2018; Hodson et al., 2009; Hodson et al., 2013; Jonason, 2015; Jonason, Underhill et al., 2020; Koehn et al., 2019; Pruyssers, 2020), as well as sexism (e.g., Gluck et al., 2020; Navas et al., 2020). As we already alluded to in the section on political ideologies, while SDO and RWA are both predictive of prejudice, it is SDO that is more likely to link to the dark personality factor to intergroup hostility (Hodson et al., 2009; see also Jonason, Underhill et al., 2020; Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2020). Other studies examined the unique effects of each of the dark personality traits on intergroup attitudes. The pattern of results was mixed. In some studies, narcissism was unrelated (Anderson & Cheers, 2018) or even negatively related (Colledani et al., 2018) to prejudice when controlling for other dark traits, while in others it emerged as the strongest predictor (Moor et al., 2019). One possibility is that due to its dominant tendencies, narcissism might predict prejudice especially towards low-status groups. Keiller (2010) found that men's narcissism was robustly related to hostility towards

women, but it was associated with favorable attitudes towards lesbian women and was unrelated to attitudes towards gay men. The author suggested that narcissism is characterized by the investment in a gender hierarchy more so than in conservative ideology or nonspecific disdain towards all outgroups. Similar conclusions can be derived from a study by Jonason (2015), who focused on racism towards Anglo-Australians and Middle-Easterners, that is, mutual prejudice of advantaged and disadvantaged ethnic groups in Australia. While psychopathy predicted prejudice positively in both cases, narcissism (and Machiavellianism) was related only to prejudice of the advantaged group (Anglo-Australians) towards the disadvantaged one (Middle-Easterners).

While most of the studies on intergroup attitudes we reviewed so far examined narcissism in the context of other dark personality traits, few of them considered the role of self-esteem. The studies by Cichocka et al. (2017) examined whether prejudice was predicted by narcissism and, crucially, differentiated it from self-esteem. They found that after accounting for self-esteem, narcissism was positively associated with measures of ethnic prejudice (such as feeling thermometers, social distance, or subtle prejudice). Importantly, these studies also examined the role of SDO and RWA in driving the associations between narcissism and prejudice. In line with the results showing the key role of dominant tendencies in explaining the intergroup effects of narcissism (and dark personalities more broadly), in this research the effect of narcissism on ethnic prejudice was explained by enhanced SDO. However, narcissism was negatively related to RWA, which meant that via the (low) authoritarian pathway, narcissism was simultaneously linked to *lower* ethnic prejudice (see Figure 1).

Another explanation for the mixed effects of narcissism and intergroup attitudes can be situational factors. Perhaps the most compelling difference between those who are highly narcissistic and those who are not is their response to ego-threatening situations. Those who are narcissistic are more easily threatened than others, which in turn translates into increased aggressiveness (Baumeister et al., 1996; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). If the source of an ego threat is an individual, then aggressive tendencies are manifested on the individual level (e.g., Kernis & Sun, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993), but if the source of this threat is a group (or its representative), then narcissistic reactance (Baumeister et al., 2002) translates into prejudice towards outgroups (such as immigrants; Schnieders & Gore, 2011). Personal self-worth regulation strategies such as ego defense of those high in narcissism may thereby affect intergroup relations. This might shed light on the findings of Petersen and Blank (2003), which showed substantial variability in reactions to low state self-esteem, and of Crocker et al. (1987), who showed that those with high self-esteem were most likely to respond to ego threats with ingroup favoritism. Intergroup hostility following a threat to self-worth might be higher among those predisposed to be defensive, that is, those high in narcissism.

Finally, it is key to recall that narcissism is a multidimensional construct with different dimensions reflecting different transactional processes between individuals and their social environments (Back et al., 2013; Krizan & Herlache, 2018). These different strategies reflect narcissistic admiration and rivalry (Back et al., 2013). In the research conducted in Germany by Mayer et al. (2020), anti-immigrant attitudes (and, as we explained in the section on ideology, the support for German radical right-wing party AfD) were predicted mostly by narcissistic rivalry. Somewhat surprisingly though, these authors found that this effect was explained by enhanced RWA, rather than SDO. Even though anti-immigrant sentiments were positively predicted by SDO, this variable was neither related to narcissistic rivalry nor to narcissistic admiration.

Conspiracy Beliefs

Another way by which self-evaluation can contribute to intergroup attitudes is its association with conspiracy beliefs. Some authors have theorized that a conviction that others are conspiring against us can serve to protect feelings of self-worth (Robins & Post, 1997). Accordingly, Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) argued that conspiracy beliefs might be associated with lower self-esteem. Yet evidence linking conspiracy beliefs to (low) self-esteem has been mixed. In fact, Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999) found that self-esteem was only marginally negatively related to conspiracy beliefs. Other studies also yielded conflicting results: Low self-esteem was correlated with beliefs in conspiracy theories concerning the London bombings of July 7, 2005 (Swami et al., 2011), but not others concerning conspiratorial actions of outgroups (e.g., Jews; Swami, 2012; see also Crocker et al., 1999; Stieger et al., 2013). Reflecting these inconsistent findings, recent meta-analytical reviews of motives associated with conspiracy beliefs showed rather weak effects of low self-esteem of conspiracy beliefs (from $r=.06$ in Stasielowicz, 2022, to $r=.07$; Biddlestone et al., 2022).

However, as we already highlighted in this review, psychological defensiveness that places blame for one's shortcoming on others is more typical for high narcissism than for low self-esteem. Indeed, those high in narcissism believe that they are unique and special compared to others. They also tend to be convinced that other people have malevolent intentions (Reynolds & Lejuez, 2011). This makes those high in narcissism more likely to buy into conspiracy theories. Indeed, in three studies conducted in the United States, Cichocka et al. (2016) found that narcissism was a robust predictor of general conspiracy ideation as well as of beliefs in several specific conspiracy theories. It predicted the endorsement of conspiracy theories about outgroup members, but also about other members of one's ingroup. Similar effects were observed by Siem et al. (2021). These authors directly replicated Cichocka et al.'s (2016) Study 3 in a German sample. Furthermore, Siem et al. (2021) as well as Sternisko et al. (2023) observed effects of individual narcissism on belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories specifically. Consistent evidence comes from research considering narcissism as part of the Dark Triad (see, for instance, Ahadzadeh et al., 2021; cf. March & Springer, 2019). Overall, a meta-analytic summary showed a small to moderate effect of narcissism on conspiracy beliefs (from $r=.22$ in Biddlestone et al., 2022, to $r=.26$ in Stasielowicz, 2022).

The robustness of this effect might be due to the fact that narcissism seems to predispose people to embrace conspiracy theories via several psychological mechanisms (see Cichocka, Marchlewska et al., 2022; Kay, 2021). First, as argued by Cichocka and colleagues (2016; see Figure 3), narcissism is linked to paranoid tendencies which are associated with a greater likelihood to believe that others are conspiring against us (cf. Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018). Second, narcissism might be linked to conspiracy beliefs due to higher gullibility—insensitivity to cues of untrustworthiness and propensity for being manipulated. For example, Hart et al. (2021) found that those scoring high in narcissistic rivalry (although not admiration) were more likely to be gullible. Gullibility and paranoia might link especially the antagonistic aspect of grandiose as well as vulnerable narcissism to conspiracy beliefs (see Cichocka, Marchlewska et al., 2022; Kay, 2021). Grandiose forms of narcissism might also drive conspiracy beliefs via other motives. For example, there is evidence pointing to the role of dominance motives, which seem to predict conspiracy beliefs especially in contexts when one expects defeat (Suessenbach & Moore, 2020). Another factor is need for uniqueness, often associated with the admiration/agentive extraversion aspect of grandiose narcissism. High need for uniqueness might predispose people to believe in conspiracy

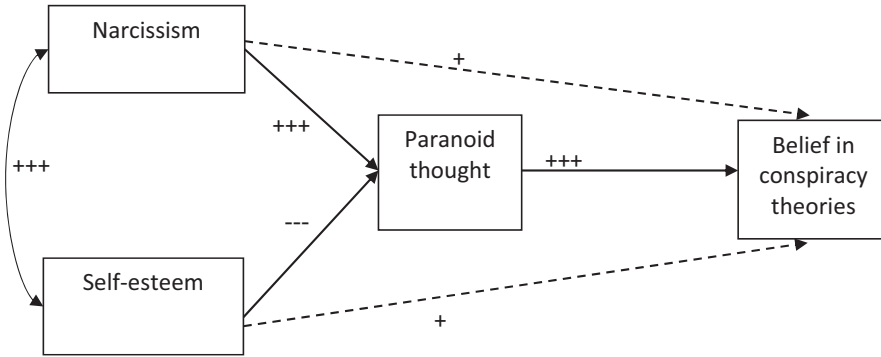


Figure 3. Simplified model showing the effects of narcissism and self-esteem on conspiracy beliefs via paranoid thought (Adapted from Cichocka et al., 2016; Study 2). The effects are observed controlling for the variance shared between narcissism and self-esteem, reflecting narcissistic and secure self-evaluation respectively. Entries reflect the strength of the standardized coefficients, with +/- = small effect, ++/-- = medium effect, and +++/-- = large effects. Broken lines indicate nonsignificant paths.

theories to the extent they offer access to privileged information (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017; Lantian et al., 2017).

Crucially, in the studies which considered both self-esteem and narcissism, self-esteem alone was either uncorrelated (Cichocka et al., 2016) or weakly correlated (Siem et al., 2021) with conspiracy beliefs. However, when the overlap between narcissism and self-esteem was controlled for, self-esteem became a stronger negative predictor of conspiracy beliefs, suggesting that conspiracy theories might be questioned by those scoring high in secure self-evaluation.

Attitudes Towards the Ingroup

So far, we have reviewed work focusing on outgroup attitudes. However, research suggests that self-evaluation can also play a role in people's attitudes towards their own social groups. The self may serve as an evaluative base in shaping social identity. Individuals with high self-esteem reveal predilection even towards novel ingroups, which to those with lower self-esteem are equivalent to outgroups and evaluated as such (Gramzow & Gaertner, 2005). But studies show that a grandiose view of the self can also translate into a grandiose view of the social groups one belongs to (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2008; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). For example, Bizumic and Duckitt (2008) found that narcissism was linked to intergroup ethnocentrism, that is, a belief that one's own ethnic or cultural group is more important than other groups, but it was unrelated to intragroup ethnocentrism, that is, a belief that one's ethnic or cultural group is more important than its individual members. This suggests that intergroup ethnocentrism might stem from personal self-aggrandizement. Interestingly, the effects were more pronounced for the vulnerable than for the grandiose form of narcissism.

Similar evidence is offered by research on collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009)—a belief that one's group is great and entitled to special treatment but underappreciated by others. Collective narcissism is inspired by the concept of individual narcissism. However, collective narcissism captures one's feelings about one's social groups, rather than the self. In a meta-analytic review, collective narcissism showed a small association ($r = .13$) with

grandiose narcissism and a small to medium association ($r = .24$) with vulnerable narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). Overall, these studies suggest that group-aggrandizing tendencies, be it captured by ethnocentrism or collective narcissism, might be linked to a defensive and insecure grandiosity that compensates for feelings of inadequacy of those high in vulnerable narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019).

Indeed, it has been theorized that investment in a grandiose image of a group can be seen as a compensation for individual shortcomings (Fromm, 1964). Cichocka (2016) argued that when basic psychological needs are frustrated, people might seek to derive feelings of autonomy or self-worth from a strong and respected ingroup. In this, they hope that their group will reflect well on them, managing some of their frustrations. There is evidence consistent with this theorizing: low personal control (Cichocka et al., 2018; see also Bertin et al., 2022) and low self-esteem (Golec de Zavala et al., 2020; cf. Cichocka et al., 2023; Marchlewska et al., 2022) have both been linked to higher collective narcissism. These effects tend to be especially pronounced after controlling for ingroup identification or mere satisfaction with ingroup membership, suggesting that it is only the defensive, narcissistic ingroup identity that serves a compensatory function. More secure forms of ingroup identity tend to be associated with needs satisfaction (Cichocka et al., 2018).

These lines of inquiry have implications for understanding the role of self-evaluation in outgroup attitudes. As we explained in the previous section, the second corollary of the self-esteem hypothesis, arguing that low self-esteem might predict intergroup discrimination, has received limited support (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). However, low self-esteem might be linked to intergroup hostility via collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2020). Empirical research consistently shows that collective narcissism is predictive of increased prejudice (Bertin et al., 2022; Cichocka et al., 2018; Golec de Zavala et al., 2013), intergroup violence, and extremism (Cichocka, Bocian et al., 2022; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Jasko et al., 2020), belief in outgroup conspiracies (Cichocka et al., 2016; Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Marchlewska et al., 2019; Sternisko et al., 2023) and lower intergroup solidarity (Górska et al., 2020). These effects tend to appear over and above the effects of ideological beliefs such as RWA or SDO, thereby also suggesting a different pathway from individual narcissism to hostile intergroup attitudes—through group aggrandizement rather than dominance (Cichocka & Cislak, 2020; Gronfeldt et al., 2022).

Self-Evaluation and Intergroup Relations: Conclusion

Together, the studies we reviewed show that self-evaluation plays a role in perceptions of the social world and thereby might shape intergroup relations. The preponderance of evidence suggests that narcissism (and to a lesser degree low self-esteem) predicts problematic intergroup attitudes due to the needs for dominance and recognition of one's social groups (Gronfeldt et al., 2022). The associations of grandiose narcissism as one of the dark traits with SDO (as well as its mediating role in predicting intergroup attitudes) have been observed relatively consistently. Those high in narcissism seem to be drawn to hierarchy-enhancing ideologies, which means they are especially sensitive to challenges to intergroup hierarchy (for example, due to assimilation which blurs intergroup status boundaries; e.g., Guimond et al., 2010; Thomsen et al., 2008).

The associations between narcissism (especially in its vulnerable form) with ethnocentrism and collective narcissism, suggest that it might be also associated with prejudice and discrimination of groups that threaten the positive image of the ingroup (e.g., Cichocka, 2016;

Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). Thus, while grandiose narcissism has the potential to foster hostility towards minority groups or those who have lower social standing, vulnerable narcissism might predict greater readiness to show hostility towards outgroups that are seen as powerful, malevolent enemies of the ingroup (Cichocka et al., 2016; Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; see also Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Interestingly, recent evidence suggests that low self-esteem might not universally predict collective narcissism (Cichocka et al., 2023; supplementary analyses by Marchlewska et al., 2022), implying that narcissistic vulnerability might be better suited to explain certain forms of prejudice than the elusive low self-esteem (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). Finally, due to its negative link with RWA, narcissism might be less predictive of hostility towards groups that do not conform to traditional social arrangements (Cichocka et al., 2017).

Practical Implications

Across the three sections, we have sought to demonstrate that distinguishing self-esteem from narcissism is fruitful for elucidating how self-worth might be relevant to political attitudes and behaviors. In real-life, narcissism and self-esteem might be confused because they share a common core—a positive self-evaluation. Yet as we hoped to show in this review, their implications in the political arena are different, thereby highlighting this distinction as vital for understanding current political phenomena.

First, the realms of politics provide a wide range of opportunities to satisfy individual ambitions. While those high in secure self-evaluation might be motivated by opportunities to help others, those high in narcissism may be especially likely to volunteer for political positions that put them in the limelight. Although candidates higher in narcissism have a potential for mobilizing the masses, their postelectoral leadership style might disappoint voters (Watts et al., 2013). Indeed, research shows that the high social skills of those high in narcissism win them friends at the beginning, but their popularity diminishes over time as the effects of narcissistic rivalry tend to unravel (Leckelt et al., 2015). Similarly, as their malevolent tendencies become apparent (Watts et al., 2013), the initial appeal of narcissistic politicians might wane over time. As those in leadership positions exert influence on many others, this finding puts a strong emphasis on the importance of vetting and selection processes within political parties and movements, which promote candidates in the wider political arena.

Second, early work implicated low self-esteem in the readiness to support conservative beliefs and political solutions and, by definition, linked high self-esteem with liberalism. Current research allows for a more nuanced understanding of the interplay of feelings of self-worth and ideological orientation: Narcissistic defensiveness is more strongly linked to social-status motives underlying right-wing ideology and less strongly to social-order motives. This has important implications for political persuasion, including mobilizing popular support for solutions that tackle today's greatest challenges, from climate change to vaccination hesitancy. Appealing to different motives such as maintaining social order versus maintaining social status may reach diverse political audiences, depending on their individual security versus defensiveness. Appealing to social-status motives (e.g., by linking individual access to modern conveniences and maintaining Western lifestyle with the introduction of public policies) is more likely to mobilize support for proenvironmental or provaccination public policies from those high in narcissism than appealing to conformity motives and the need to adhere to authority guidelines which tend to be characteristic for conservative communication (see also Bilewicz & Soral, 2022).

Our review also shows that although narcissism is often analyzed as a part of dark personality syndrome, it cannot be equated with traits such as psychopathy or Machiavellianism in the political context. Narcissism seems to be more strongly linked to maintaining hierarchical privileges than generalized outgroup negativity due to its relationship with SDO and social-status considerations. Considering narcissism's negative relationship with RWA (which in itself might dampen narcissism's link to outgroup prejudice), providing alternative ways to maintain social status may be a unique strategy to promote positive intergroup relations among those high in individual defensiveness.

Outstanding Questions and Future Directions

Defensiveness Versus Security of Self-Worth

In this review, we promised to provide a response to a classic question of whether self-worth matters for politics. Yet even though the focus of early political psychological theorizing has been on self-esteem (e.g., Sniderman, 1975), we seem to get more answers about the role narcissism plays in political attitudes and behaviors. One reason for the sparse or mixed evidence for the role of self-esteem in politics could be that few studies analyze it alongside narcissism. In consequence, most studies do not allow for observing the effects of secure self-evaluation that only becomes apparent once the variance shared with narcissism is controlled for (e.g., Marchlewska & Cichocka, 2017). As illustrated by Marchlewska et al.'s (2019) work on support for democracy, secure self-evaluation might be linked to desirable political outcomes.

Let us elaborate on an example of formal political participation. Few studies to date demonstrated the role of self-esteem in becoming involved in politics. Self-esteem is positively related to extraversion, emotional stability, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience (Robins et al., 2001). These traits seem to play an important role in predicting formal participation (Watts et al., 2013). Mondak and Halperin (2008) found positive links between emotional stability and such behaviors as attending rallies or working for national parties or candidates. Research conducted by Gerber et al. (2011) confirmed these results, indicating that extraversion and emotional stability are indeed associated with higher levels of participation in a broad range of political activities (see also Mondak et al., 2010). Thus, although research comparing the effects of narcissism versus secure self-evaluation on formal participation is lacking, it seems at least plausible that secure self-evaluation could contribute to constructive forms of formal political participation (e.g., Wolak & Stapleton, 2020). Secure (vs. narcissistic) individuals might also prove to be more ethical, empathetic, emotionally intelligent, and, ultimately, more effective political leaders (Rahman & Castelli, 2013). Future research should examine the role of secure self-evaluation in politics in more detail.

Also, this review points to a research gap stemming from a divergence between the current personality and political psychology literature. While the contemporary personality approaches to narcissism often differentiate between its grandiose and vulnerable aspects (e.g., Miller et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021), most of the studies to date investigating political phenomena have focused solely on grandiose narcissism (cf. Cichocka, Marchlewska et al., 2022; Hatemi & Fazekas, 2022; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021). Many of the problematic political outcomes can be traced back to narcissistic antagonism, callousness, and needs for

dominance,⁵ that is, the core features of both forms of narcissism (see Miller et al., 2017, 2021). Still, future work would do well to formulate and test specific patterns of predictions for different dimensions of narcissism. To ensure any effects are unique to (grandiose or vulnerable) narcissism, this work should account for any overlaps with self-esteem and/or basic personality traits.

Explicit Versus Implicit Self-Evaluation

Our focus in this review has been on people's overt self-evaluation. Yet research and theorizing about implicit attitudes suggest that people can also vary with respect to their implicit self-esteem (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). Accordingly, implicit self-esteem might additionally play a role in people's political attitudes and behaviors. There is preliminary evidence that this might be the case. For example, inspired by the classic ideas of political conservatism being a compensation for self-doubt, Cichocka (2013) reasoned that increasing one's implicit self-esteem might decrease the psychological appeal of conservatism and, thus, strengthen liberalism. American students were exposed to an experimental procedure that used subliminal evaluative conditioning to increase implicit self-esteem (Dijksterhuis, 2004). In the experiment, participants who were repeatedly presented with trials in which the word "I" was paired with positive traits (vs. neutral words) reported higher liberalism scores. In a different study by McGregor and Jordan (2007), students with low implicit self-esteem, as assessed by the Implicit Association Test (IAT), reacted to an academic threat with greater zeal about political topics (e.g., with respect to their opinions on capital punishment or the U.S. invasion of Iraq).

Other lines of inquiry considered interactions between implicit and explicit self-esteem in predicting political outcomes. Some researchers argued that those who hide unconscious feelings of self-doubt behind displays of self-confidence might be especially defensive. For example, Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, and Correll (2003) found that the interaction between explicit self-esteem and implicit self-esteem (measured by the IAT) predicted higher narcissism (this is sometimes referred to as the mask model of narcissism; cf., Bosson et al., 2008). In another study by Jordan, Spencer, and Zanna (2003), participants with high explicit but low implicit self-esteem reacted to negative performance feedback with ethnic prejudice. This research would suggest that those with low implicit self-esteem might be especially sensitive to psychological threats, and one way to manage these threats can be political zeal and extremism. A more recent study by Mansell and Gatto (2022) also found that those showing a discrepancy between explicit and implicit self-esteem were more likely to report hostile sexism, prefer men in leadership, and support former U.S. president Trump (and identify as Republican overall).

However, recent developments in the study of implicit attitudes cast doubts on some of the methods used to operationalize or manipulate implicit self-esteem (e.g., Buhrmester et al., 2011; Gawronski et al., 2007; Versluis et al., 2018). For example, Falk and Heine (2015) concluded "the validity evidence for the IAT in measuring ISE [implicit self-esteem] is strikingly weak" (p. 6). This could be one reason why Bosson and Weaver (2011) also found little evidence for narcissism being associated with lower implicit self-esteem. Thus, until the field develops better measures that would offer a window into people's implicit self-evaluations, their role in political attitudes and behaviors might remain unclear.

⁵In fact, some authors argue that ideological factors, such as SDO, are simply political manifestations of the dark traits core of manipulation and callousness (see Jones & Figueredo, 2013).

Causality

The vast majority of studies reported in this review relied on cross-sectional evidence. One of the reasons for this is that both self-esteem and narcissism can be seen as relatively stable basic personality predispositions, which likely predict the more malleable sociopolitical attitudes and behaviors. Yet it is at least plausible that political beliefs and behaviors affect people's levels of self-esteem or narcissism. In fact, Corollary 1 of the SIT self-esteem hypothesis, which stated that intergroup discrimination can elevate self-esteem, received relatively more support than Corollary 2 (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Furthermore, system justification theory suggests that conservative, system-justifying ideologies are associated with higher self-esteem among members of advantaged groups who benefit from the system they support but can depress self-esteem for members of groups disadvantaged by the system (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). In a similar vein, the acceptance of the inequality component of SDO tends to correlate positively with self-esteem among members of advantaged groups, but negatively among members of disadvantaged groups (Jost & Thompson, 2000).

Thus, future work would do well to establish causal evidence for narcissism and self-esteem motivating different political outcomes. Experimental work could manipulate levels of state self-esteem or narcissism, which can be subject to small fluctuations (Giacomin & Jordan, 2014; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991; Webster et al., 2022). Future research can rely on these paradigms and test the causal effects of self-evaluation on politics. It is important to acknowledge, however, that manipulating these states is not straightforward. Although experimental manipulations sometimes successfully shift levels of state self-esteem or state narcissism, these often assume manipulating related constructs rather than narcissism itself. For example, Giacomin and Jordan (2014) decreased state narcissism by manipulating empathy or interdependent self-construal, which could be relevant to political outcomes irrespective of narcissism.

Longitudinal studies, which can rely on direct measures of self-esteem or narcissism, can serve as a viable alternative (see Fluit et al., 2022). Recent developments in cross-lagged panel modeling allow for a more nuanced understanding of the within-person and between-person associations between variables. For example, the random-intercept cross-lagged panel (Hamaker et al., 2015) distinguishes the between-person (i.e., trait-like) associations from the within-person (i.e., time-varying) associations. It would allow us to examine how changes in self-esteem or the distinct components of narcissism can influence political outcomes over time within individuals (see Cichocka et al., 2019). Such models could uncover any mutually reinforcing associations between self-evaluation and political attitudes and behaviors. For example, narcissism might predispose individuals to run for office, but having political power might also increase narcissistic tendencies (see Mead et al., 2018).

Furthermore, general cross-lagged panel models can increase the range of dynamic processes that can be modeled (Zyphur et al., 2020). These models could allow us to examine hypotheses about short-term versus long-term processes. For example, is it possible that narcissism increases keenness for political engagement in the short term, but not in the long term? Likewise, the different effects of politics on self-evaluation can be studied. For example, developmental research has shown that confidence in the sociopolitical system was associated with higher self-esteem in low-income sixth graders but a decrease in self-esteem between sixth to eighth grade, suggesting there may be long-term costs of system justifying beliefs on self-esteem among the disadvantaged (Godfrey et al., 2019).

The Role of Sociopolitical Context

As typical in mainstream political psychological research, most of the studies reviewed here have been conducted in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). The few exceptions include studies comparing Western versus postcommunist Eastern European countries (e.g., Cichocka et al., 2017; Marchlewska et al., 2019), U.S. versus Nigerian context (e.g., Zeigler-Hill et al., 2020), or involving multiple world samples (e.g., Sternisko et al., 2023 tested the links between narcissism and COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs in 56 countries). While we could expect certain psychological processes to play a similar role in determining political attitudes and behaviors regardless of context (e.g., Cichocka & Jost, 2014), there are also reasons to believe that culture can shape the function of self-evaluation. There is a longstanding debate in personality psychology on the extent to which tendencies to view oneself in overly positive terms are universal across cultures (e.g., Heine, 2005; Sedikides et al., 2003, 2005). For example, Sedikides et al. (2003) argued that both individualistic and collectivistic cultures engage in self-enhancement, but on different attributes that tend to be valued in their culture: American individuals self-enhance on individualistic attributes, while Japanese individuals self-enhance on collectivistic attributes. There is also some preliminary evidence that participants from individualistic societies report more (grandiose) narcissism (Foster et al., 2003).

Future studies would do well to examine how more secure versus narcissistic forms of self-evaluation translate into political outcomes in these different contexts. Given strong evidence linking narcissism to politics via dominant, individualistic tendencies, it is at least plausible that inclinations to self-enhance in more collectivistic domains would translate into different political outcomes in collectivistic cultures. Furthermore, it is possible that sociocultural changes across the globe might go hand in hand with changes in self-evaluation. For example, Cai et al. (2012) argued that sociocultural changes might have contributed to an increase in narcissism in China (see also Johnson, 2020; Jonason, Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2020). Thus, it would be interesting to examine how globalization as well as other socioeconomic changes might affect the self and whether that has implications for politics.

Conclusion

The role self-evaluation plays in politics has been one of the fundamental questions in political psychology. Taking inspirations from personality psychology (e.g., Bosson et al., 2008; Brummelman et al., 2016; Paulhus et al., 2004), we have argued that distinguishing narcissism from self-esteem can help elucidate how one's self-worth maps onto political attitudes and behaviors. Those high in narcissism tend to gravitate towards ideologies and systems that can afford them power and dominance. Thus, they may be attracted by certain extremist or populist right-wing political agendas. At the same time, they might find calls to the maintenance of social order and adherence to conventional norms less appealing.

Power and status seeking mean also that those scoring high in narcissism often find political leadership attractive, especially if they feel they would benefit from it personally. However, this does not necessarily go hand in hand with political expertise or respect for democratic standards, and in fact it can be marked by suspicion of others and unethical behaviors. The narcissistic needs for defensive self-protection and dominance have also been linked to group-aggrandizing tendencies and hostile intergroup attitudes. In contrast, those secure in their self-worth were more likely to engage in political activism for the common

good and support democratic values which are for key mutual trust and respect within different fractions of the society.

Thus, separating narcissism from self-esteem is key in understanding the role of self-worth in politics. Although more research is needed to fully understand how these processes play out over time and across different sociocultural contexts, it is clear that narcissism and self-esteem have dramatically different links with political attitudes and behaviors. Narcissism emerges as a potential threat to social cohesion, democratic functioning, and peace. Its consequences might in fact be unfolding in front of our eyes. As Post argued in 2015, “Extreme narcissism is the driving force behind the recent actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Crimea and Ukraine. Predicting the future behaviour of this former KGB operative must be based on his narcissistic personality and strong need for power and control” (p. 220).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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