

# Is the ideal political leader still a man? Gendered conceptions of political leadership in the contemporary political elite in Western European democracies

Political leadership has long been associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, toughness, and task-orientation. Contemporary politics challenges and reproduces this model. The growing presence of women in leadership and crises that highlight the value of cooperation and care foster more gender-balanced understandings of leadership. Yet, the rise of radical right parties and anti-gender movements reinforces masculinized leadership ideals. Against this backdrop, this article examines how political elites currently define the relationship between gender and good leadership. We conducted interviews with 31 Members of Parliament in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Spain in 2023/2024, asking: “What do you think are the most important attributes of a good minister?”. Qualitative content analysis shows that many MPs in our sample favor integrative leadership styles—cooperative, inclusive, attentive, interpersonally sensitive, and oriented toward the common good. By contrast, aggregative notions of leadership appear largely limited to assertiveness, while traits such as being forceful, controlling, or individualistic are viewed as detrimental to good leadership by many respondents. These findings suggest that many Western European elites embrace leadership ideals consistent with traits ascribed to women, even in societies far from gender parity and raise questions about the reasons behind persistent inequalities in political leadership.

**Keywords:** Gender, political leadership, stereotypes, parliament, government

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the development of this paper. We are particularly grateful to Lena Stephan and Camila Montero, who conducted a majority of the interviews. Moreover, we are thankful to Dominik Duell and Marcelo Jenny for providing feedback to our interview guidelines. We are also deeply grateful to our student assistants – Joanna Hüffelmann, Dzaneta Kaunaite, Jonas Ruben Lück and Valentina Chesi – for their invaluable research support when developing this project and transcribing the interviews.

This research was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (Aktenzeichen: 10.21.1.006PO)

## 1. Introduction

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, political elites assess women leaders less favorably than men leaders (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; Dingler & Kroeber, 2022; Erikson & Josefsson, 2023; O'Brien, 2015). To give an example, MPs valued former German Minister of Economy and Energy Sigmar Gabriel more than Brigitte

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Zypries, who succeeded him in this position in 2017 – although both brought comparable levels of substantial expertise and long-standing political experience to the job. In interviews, MPs describe Zypries as lacking the manipulateness and the assertiveness displayed by Gabriel. Even more so, MPs show appreciation for Gabriel's tactics: "What happened with Gabriel was that he also played dirty. You have to admire him. He understood our way of working, so to speak, and then [he] developed his own tools to catch us out, which meant we had to think along with Gabriel" (Interview GER01). To understand such unequal assessment of men and women political leaders, the literature builds on role (in)congruency theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Accordingly, elites assess the degree to which the traits they ascribe to an individual based on their gender corresponds to what they expect from an ideal leader (Berger et al, 1985; Foschi et al, 1994). Women are either perceived as not possessing the masculine traits and leadership style associated with an ideal leader, or if they do are punished since these traits are incongruent with the gender role expected from them (Bruckmüller et al, 2014; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Powell et al, 2002; Schein & Mueller, 1992). Yet, recent research indicates that in the highly gender-progressive case of Sweden, MPs actually depict ideal parliamentary leaders as displaying leadership styles consistent with feminine traits (Erikson & Josefsson, 2023). Following up on this work, the present study puts the basic assumption of a masculinized ideal leader under empirical scrutiny for a more diverse set of countries by asking: How are MPs' conceptions of good ministers gendered in contemporary Western Europe?

Contemporary politics provides reasons to both expect and to doubt that the ideal of a masculinized leader persists in Western European democracies. On the one hand, the region has been experiencing a shift in gender equality attitudes, which first enhanced women's economic inclusion and then led to changes in citizens' attitudes towards women's role in society and politics (Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Moreover, democracies are currently facing multiple crises that demand the ability to transform political structures from ministers to handle democratic backsliding, racist events, or the long-term consequences of the global pandemic. Under these conditions, certain traits typically ascribed to women including, for instance, an empathic communication style, may become valuable assets for ministers (Kroeber & Dingler, 2023). Yet, at the same time, actors promoting the traditional division of labor, critical of women's equal political inclusion, are gaining ground (Jost et al, 2008). Far-right parties and anti-gender movements become increasingly influential in political discourses of mainstream parties (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Bale, 2003; Schain, 2016) and are likely to also shape how mainstream political actors perceive women ministers (Erikson and Josefsson 2024). Putting the persistence of the masculinized leadership ideal under empirical scrutiny in a cross-country study is thus timely.

We investigate MPs' depictions of good ministers using qualitative interviews with 31 MPs in five Western European democracies. We interviewed five to seven MPs

in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Spain and asked them about their conception of a good minister. The selected countries differ in gender progressiveness, the main factor that might arguably shape depictions of good ministers, hence allowing us to get an impression of the variation in leadership ideals found in Western Europe. We focus on gender bias in MPs' perceptions of good ministers as a critical case of political elites at large. First, MPs' assessment of a minister shapes policy outputs, as they will be more willing to wave through proposals by a minister perceived as rather capable and more prone to crucially revise or reject proposals from a minister perceived as less capable (Bäck et al, 2021). Second, whether MPs perceive ministers as suitable to lead shapes elite formation at the highest levels, as MPs' opinions are valued by gatekeepers in the decision of who is promoted to the most prestigious ministerial portfolios or who becomes head of government. Gendered descriptions of good ministers are thus particularly consequential for women political leaders. The qualitative content analysis of the interviews reveals to what extent MPs rely on traits linked to a masculine or feminine leadership style in their depiction of good ministers by using the concepts of aggregative and integrative leadership (Erikson and Josefsson 2023). Examining which of these styles MPs consider an asset of a good minister provides a useful lens for assessing how far contemporary ideals of leadership remain gendered.

Our analysis shows that many MPs depict good ministers as displaying traits linked to integrative rather than aggregative leadership styles. In particular a cooperative decision-making approach, asserting influence by listening to others, is mentioned favorably. Of the traits typically ascribed to aggregative leadership, only assertiveness features high in MPs' descriptions of good ministers, while being forceful, controlling, or individualistic are even mentioned as detrimental traits for good ministers. We observe larger numbers of MPs preferring integrative compared to aggregative leadership in all five countries, for MPs of both gender, across all age groups and belonging to parties with different ideological leanings. Overall, this evidence hints that preferences for a leadership style consistent with traits typically ascribed to men are less common than one might expect, while preferences for a leadership style consistent with traits typically ascribed to women are prominent in Western Europe – even in countries that are still far away from gender equality in society and politics.

These insights have important implications for our understanding of unequal conditions for men and women leaders. First, observing that leadership ideals are not necessarily masculine in contemporary Western Europe at large, indicates that gender parity is not a precondition for the dissolution of role (in)congruencies. At an abstract level, feminine traits are generally perceived as suitable for successful political leadership, despite women's numerical underrepresentation. Second, finding that gendered leadership ideals are not contradictory to feminine traits raises the question as to why women leaders continue to make different real-world experiences than men. Independent of transforming leadership ideals, barriers to

entering and advancing to influential party and government positions remain higher for women compared to men (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016; Kroeber & Hüffelmann, 2022; Krook & O'Brien, 2012), and women who reach these posts are particularly vulnerable to failure, standing on "quick sand" (Aldrich and Somer-Topcu, 2025, 53).

## 2. Literature engaging with perceptions of women political leaders

Women are still less likely than men to become political leaders including positions such as party leader (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; O'Brien, 2015), head of government (Jalalzai, 2018), or minister (e.g., Claveria, 2014; Goddard, 2021; Kroeber & Hüffelmann, 2022; Krook & O'Brien, 2012). Existing research has identified a multitude of factors explaining variation in the opportunities and constraints presented to women leaders. Most importantly, a gender progressive environment, both within the party, but also in the society at large, increase women's chances for reaching top political offices (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; Annesley et al, 2019; Dingler & Helms, 2023; Goddard, 2019). Additionally, women's access to leadership roles depends on substantial nature of the position. For instance during ministerial selection, women are most frequently selected to lead 'feminine' portfolios linked to women's traditional area of responsibility such as family, education, or health, but seldomly to 'masculine' portfolios such as security, finance, or the economy (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Goddard, 2019).

While research can explain – at least partly – under which conditions women become political leaders, substantially less is known about gendered working conditions in office. Descriptive evidence provides inconclusive evidence as to whether tenure length differs systematically for men and women political leaders. Some studies find that women are in office for shorter periods than men (Bright et al, 2015; Saaka, 2025), while others demonstrate that this effect is context-dependent (O'Brien, 2015; O'Neill et al, 2019) or absent altogether (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; Armstrong et al, 2024). More consistently, previous research finds that women's careers proceed less successfully than men's after entering cabinets. Women are less likely to be promoted to prestigious portfolios (Curtin et al, 2023) and need to prove themselves in leading less prestigious portfolios for longer durations before advancing into more prestigious ones compared to men (Kroeber and Hüffelmann 2022).

Role (in)congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) offers explanations for this pattern: In short, the theory suggests that women face prejudice so that they will not be perceived as good leaders, no matter which traits they display. This prejudice stems from the lack of congruity between expectations about how women should act and how leaders should act and materialize in two ways. First, women are less likely to be perceived as possessing the traits required for successful (political) leadership which align with traditionally masculine characteristics (Bruckmüller

et al, 2014; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Powell et al, 2002; Schein & Mueller, 1992). Men are typically associated with traits that are usually perceived as making a competent leader, these include, for instance, assertiveness, confidence, competitiveness, or ambition (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly et al, 2020; Rosenwasser & Dean, 1989; Thomas, 1994). By contrast, women are often ascribed traits such as affection, helpfulness, kindness, and sympathy, which do not align with conventional notions of competent leadership. Even if not all stereotypes linked to women equally apply to women politicians, Schneider & Bos (2019) indicate that women politicians fail to possess the strengths associated with being women (e.g., sensitive or compassionate), while they also lack leadership, competence, and other masculine traits in comparison to men politicians. Thus, overall, men possess “patriarchal resources” (Bjarnegård, 2018), a set of attributes that enhance their perceived competence as political leader, and they are largely inaccessible to women. Second, role (in)congruity theory proposes that, even when women exhibit the desired leadership traits, they will be given less favorable evaluation than men (Eagly & Karau, 2002) because these women fail to conform to gender role expectations (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Rudman et al, 2012). Given this double-bind, women in leadership positions frequently encounter skepticism about their leadership skills (Biernat & Fügen, 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Other prominent explanations for women’s unequal chances to enter political leadership positions and their unequal working conditions once in such posts refer to gendered networks and a hostile political culture decreasing ambition. First, the participation in elite networks tends to be gendered as they advantage men. Women legislators are less prone to have occupied the prestigious posts or follow party trajectories (Ohmura et al, 2018) that are often needed to launch high-profile national careers (Bjarnegård, 2015; Murray, 2010). Women are thus less likely to become “political power brokers” (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2013, 89). At the same time, resources like having a larger network benefit more than women as they are mostly valued in men candidates for prestigious positions in legislatures and governments (Verge & Claveria, 2016). Second, women increasingly experience a hostile political environment which depresses their political ambition. For instance, women policy makers are confronted with more hostility than men ranging from incivility to harassment, threats, and assault (Collignon & Rüdiger, 2020; Håkansson, 2020; Herrick & Franklin, 2019; Mechkova & Wilson, 2021; Rheault et al, 2019). In particular, powerful and visible women are at a heightened risk of violence compared to their men counterparts (Håkansson, 2020; Rheault et al, 2019). Depressed ambition (Herrick & Franklin, 2019; Höhmann et al, 2025) and disrupted campaign activities (Collignon & Rüdiger, 2021) among women are one result of violence in politics.

This paper investigates the theoretical assumption on which the first explanation for women’s unequal chances to enter and succeed in political leadership positions

stands, by asking whether political leadership ideals are indeed still gendered in contemporary Western European democracies as proposed by role (in)congruency theory. A recent study by Erikson & Josefsson (2023) sheds light on MPs' perceptions of committee and parliamentary party group leaders in contemporary Sweden. Based on a survey with MPs, the study shows that MPs' perceptions of ideal parliamentary leaders prominently feature characteristics of integrative leadership, typically ascribed to women. Characteristics of aggregative leadership, usually ascribed to men are considered less important by MPs. Hence, this research indicates that leadership ideals in highly gender progressive countries nowadays match a leadership style more consistent with feminine than masculine traits (Erikson and Josefsson, 2023). Based on these insights, we provide a first comparative investigation of this issue in Western Europe, shedding light on the traits that make a good political leader in the eyes of the political elite.

### **3. Theoretical expectations about the gendered nature of leadership styles in contemporary Western Europe**

The multitude of leadership styles present in politics can be roughly clustered into two broader sets (Erikson and Josefsson, 2023):

- (1) Integrative leadership emphasizes cooperation, consensus, listening, and caring for others. It seeks to resolve common problems and promote the collective good (see also Silvia & McGuire, 2010). This includes, for instance, what is commonly labeled participatory or democratic leadership, transformational leadership, or servant leadership.
- (2) Aggregative leadership emphasizes conflict management through assertiveness, control, and the exercise of power over others to achieve goals (see also Rosenthal, 1998). This includes concepts such as directive or autocratic leadership, transactional leadership, or agentic or commanding leadership.

Leadership styles are gendered as they align with traits ascribed to men and women. Community-orientation, cooperativeness, and social responsibility describe women (Braun et al, 2017; Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eckel & Grossman, 1998), who are stereotypically depicted as displaying traits linked to integrative leadership (Erikson & Josefsson, 2023; Rosenthal, 1998). Men are perceived as assertive, controlling, and individualistic (Braun et al, 2017; Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eckel & Grossman, 1998) and, thus, should display traits linked to aggregative leadership (Erikson & Josefsson, 2023; Rosenthal, 1998).

MPs should traditionally favor aggregative compared to integrative leadership styles. This preference follows from the historical linkage between masculinity and political institutions (Krook & Mackay, 2010; Mackay et al, 2010). Men have made up the vast majority of ministers while women were mostly absent from politics. In consequence, masculinity shapes desirable traits (Franceschet et al, 2012) and MPs

should have internalized the traits linked to aggregative leadership, traditionally associated with men, as typical for a good minister. This rationale also finds support in research on industrial organizations which demonstrates that women in leading positions (e.g. as managers) more frequently face prejudices about their leadership competences than men (see Eagly & Carli, 2003) and that ‘masculine’ characteristics are more commonly ascribed to successful leaders (see e.g., Powell et al, 2002; Schein & Mueller, 1992)

A good example for this idea provides the seemingly functional depictions of the link between parliament and government (Miller, 2005; Strøm, 2000) which envision a good minister as balancing the needs for ministerial autonomy and parliamentary accountability. In this understanding, ministers’ main task is to work towards policies in the interest of the parliamentary majority avoiding agency slack, making use of the ministerial staff as resource towards this aim. Additionally, ministers ought to be responsive to the parliamentary majority. This depiction implies a hierarchical way of thinking about the minister’s sphere of influence and authority typical for aggregative leadership. In this logic, a good minister leads the ministerial organization effectively, indicating a goal-orientation that is more output than process based and assertive and controlling rather an affectionate and cooperative collaboration.

With the high value ascribed to aggregative leadership skills, the benefits of integrative leadership are traditionally overlooked by political elites. Interpersonal and contextual sensitivity, developed also through enhanced care responsibilities and the need to balance a multitude of private and professional tasks, are not perceived as beneficial traits by political elites (Murray, 2014, 528). Based on these considerations, we expect that MPs emphasize the importance of aggregative leadership when describing ideal leaders, while they neglect integrative leadership.

*Hypothesis 1: MPs are more likely to positively mention traits associated with aggregative than integrative leadership when depicting a good minister.*

Ascriptions of gender stereotypes and of feminine and masculine leadership qualities are generally flexible (Eagly et al, 2020; Erikson & Josefsson, 2023; Scott, 1986), even though they have been remarkably stable in the past (Burgess & Borgida, 1999). Contemporary developments in the political sphere provide at least two reasons to expect the transformation of gendered conceptions of good ministers in Western European democracies towards increasingly positive perceptions of integrative leadership styles.

First, generational value change has altered what individuals expect in good leaders as well as prejudice about women’s ability to govern. Inglehart (1990, 1997) proposes that economic and social developments create a process of cultural modernization, according to which younger generations increasingly value post-materialist values over materialist values, including preferences for individual freedom, subject-

tive well-being and quality of life, as well as gender equality. For one, this process results in stronger preferences for leadership based on cooperation rather than control (Anderson et al, 2017; Yeganeh, 2017). For another, the higher importance of gender equality transforms ideas about women as political actors (Inglehart & Norris, 2000) and opens the door to a less gender biased conception of who constitutes a good minister. These transformations might be self-reinforcing since they result in an increasing number of women leading. In turn, observing successful women leaders might shake the foundation of rule (in)congruency theory which is based on the idea that men define leadership ideals due to their dominance in these positions (see e.g., Krook, 2006).

Second, democracies are currently experiencing multiple crises that demand the ability to transform political structures from leaders – a trait typically ascribed to integrative leadership styles (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001). During crises, political actors lack information, face time pressure and complex decision-making situations (Rosenthal et al. 2001: 6–7). Under this condition of uncertainty, basic political and social structures and norms may be disrupted, altered, and even replaced (see e.g. Strolovitch, 2013, 2021). If addressing a crisis involves fundamental changes in the political system, political elites and citizens may start to prefer a feminine over a masculine leadership style (Kroeber and Dingler 2023, Davidson-Schmich et al. 2023). Typical examples for crises that may alter leadership ideals towards support for integrative leadership styles are the later phase of a pandemic (when leaders need to build trust for policy responses and recovery measures), democratic backsliding (as political leaders need to regain trust in the light of increasing support for non-democratic political actors), or racist events that emerge into larger protests (when leaders need to show empathy towards the victims while moderating conflict between communities). In these situations, a leadership style that includes, for instance, an affectionate communication strategy or inclusive decision-making, might become assets for ministers (Kroeber & Dingler, 2023) and political elites might value the traits linked to integrative leadership when thinking of an ideal minister. Based on these considerations, we expect that MPs nowadays value integrative rather than aggregative leadership styles in ministers.

*Hypotheses 2: MPs are more likely to positively mention traits associated with integrative than aggregative leadership when depicting a good minister.*

Current challenges, however, might also reinforce negative perceptions of integrative leadership. Actors promoting the traditional division of labor, critical to women's equal political inclusion, are gaining grounds. Far-right parties and anti-gender movements become increasingly influential in political discourses and are likely to also shape how mainstream political actors perceive women ministers (Erikson & Josefsson, 2024). As radical right parties shape electoral strategies on both sides of the ideological spectrum (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Bale, 2003; Schain, 2016), their success might also reinforce the idea that successful min-

isters display assertive leadership styles. Simultaneously, in a new political landscape in which conservative ideals are promoted by radical right parties and anti-gender movements, opponents of gender equal values in mainstream parties may become empowered (Erikson & Josefsson, 2024). In turn, the idea of women's inability to govern might be fueled by this trend, possibly leading to a particularly critical perception of integrative leadership. In other words, MPs might not just prefer aggregative leadership, but openly reject integrative leadership.

*Hypotheses 3: MPs are more likely to negatively mention traits associated with integrative than aggregative leadership when depicting a good minister.*

#### 4. Research design

We study depictions of ideal ministers in Western European democracies. For that purpose, we ran interviews with 31 MPs in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Spain between September 2023 and July 2024 (see Appendix 1.1 for the documentation of the interview process). The selection of the five countries balances concerns about similarity necessary for a meaningful interpretation and diversity necessary for generalizable results. Leadership styles vary substantially across the globe with differences occurring also between developed industrial democracies in Asia, Europe, or Northern America (Montaudon-Tomas et al, 2020; Taleghani et al, 2010). We therefore focus our analysis solely on Western European democracies. Within that region, we observe substantial deviation in the degree to which gender equality is realized in politics and beyond. Table 1 highlights this variation by showing regional minima and maxima as well as values for the five cases under study for women in government, women in parliament, and the gender equality index of the European Institute for Gender Equality (2025). The sample includes not only cases that perform consistently rather low (Austria) or consistently rather high in Western European comparison (Spain and Belgium), but also cases that display varying success across these different components of gender equality (Denmark and Germany). Beyond mirroring the larger pattern of gender equality in the region, all five cases under study have been experiencing the kind of crisis that, as argued in Hypothesis 2, might provoke a change in the depiction of good ministers (as have most countries in the region). The countries were affected by the pandemic and experienced substantial political conflict about appropriate policy solutions. Moreover, in all countries, radical right parties occupy substantial seat shares in parliament, indicating that many voters show support for non-democratic actors and that democracy is backsliding. The cases are thus well suited to explore which leadership ideals predominate nowadays in Western Europe within the political elite.

The present analysis draws on MPs' responses to the open-ended question: "What do you think are the most important attributes of a good minister?" The open wording closely follows prior research on leadership characteristics (e.g. Nichols

2016) and avoids priming respondents toward explicitly feminine or masculine leadership styles. This design choice allows respondents to articulate evaluative criteria without being cued toward gendered frames.

**Table 1: Overview of gender quality in Europe and in our sample**

|                                           | Austria     | Belgium     | Denmark     | Germany     | Spain       | Regional max. | Regional min. |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|
| % women in government (global ranking)    | 25.0 % (75) | 42.9 % (19) | 30.4 % (60) | 46.2 % (14) | 50.0 % (6)  | 61.1 %        | 12.5 %        |
| % women in parliament (global ranking)    | 36.1 % (43) | 41.3 % (24) | 43.6 % (20) | 32.4 % (57) | 44.3 % (19) | 46.0 %        | 14.3 %        |
| Gender equality index (EU ranking)        | 71.7 (11)   | 76.1 (5)    | 78.8 (2)    | 72.0 (10)   | 76.7 (4)    | 82.0          | 68.6          |
| Power, Gender equality index (EU ranking) | 39.9 (11)   | 49.9 (8)    | 57.3 (6)    | 47.5 (10)   | 66.6 (3)    | 80.3          | 13.6          |

Annotations: Data on women ministers is from the UN/IPU Parline and refers to January 2025; Data on women in parliament is from IPU Parline and refers to September 2025 (Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline, 2025); the gender equality index from the European Institute for Gender Equality (2025). The gender equality index ranges from 1 (full inequality) to 100 (full equality)

The question was embedded in semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a broader project on gender bias in MPs’ interactions with men and women in government. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and primarily focused on legislative oversight activities and MPs’ assessments of the performance of specific men and women ministers. The question on the attributes of a good minister was asked at the very end of the interview (see Appendix 9.2). Placing this question last was intended to encourage a more reflective, abstract assessment.

Still, asking the question after a series of evaluations of real-world ministers raises potential concerns about halo effects or priming. We therefore implemented several measures to mitigate such risks. First, interviewers explicitly signaled a shift in topic by introducing the question as “a different kind of question”, inviting respondents to move away from concrete cases of ministers discussed earlier in the interviews. Second, while the preceding questions referred to past performance of specific ministers, the inquiry on the good minister was posed in the present tense, clarifying that it did not directly pertain to earlier evaluations. Third, throughout the interview, respondents were not primed toward particularly successful or unsuccessful men or women ministers. The men and women ministers discussed in the main body of the interview were carefully matched within countries by party affiliation, portfolio, timing in office, and levels of political experience (see Appendix 1.3). Fourth, variation in the ministerial cases was deliberately introduced

across countries, including ministers holding more and less prestigious portfolios, portfolios commonly perceived as feminine or masculine, and membership in left- and right-wing parties. This reduces the likelihood that depictions of a “good minister” across the five countries reflect idiosyncratic characteristics of the specific cases discussed earlier.

Interviewees were selected based on two criteria: variation in gender, party affiliation, government membership, and demonstrated knowledge of government oversight in relation to the ministers included in the case studies (see Appendix 1.4). While this sampling strategy was not designed specifically for the present analysis, there is no indication that it systematically selected MPs with particular views on ministerial leadership. The sample is not nationally representative, but it captures substantial variation in gender, ideological positioning, and age, allowing us to identify a broad range of leadership depictions across Western European democracies. Descriptive characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Overview of interviewees per country.**

|         | N Interviews | Of these are...<br>Women MPs | MPs from<br>leftist parties | opposition<br>MPs | Aged <50 | Aged 50–70 | Aged >70 |
|---------|--------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------|------------|----------|
| Austria | 7            | 2                            | 3                           | 4                 | 0        | 6          | 1        |
| Belgium | 6            | 3                            | 0                           | 3                 | 3        | 3          | 0        |
| Denmark | 5            | 2                            | 5                           | 5                 | 0        | 1          | 4        |
| Germany | 7            | 3                            | 7                           | 6                 | 1        | 5          | 1        |
| Spain   | 6            | 4                            | 4                           | 3                 | 1        | 4          | 1        |

Annotations: Left-wing parties include SPÖ and Greens for Austria, Groen and Ecolo for Belgium, Endeslisten, SF and S for Denmark, Greens, Left and SPD for Germany, PSOE and ERC for Spain. Right-wing parties include ÖVP and FPÖ for Austria, CDV, N-VA and Open Vld for Belgium, CDC and CiU for Spain

Finally, we conducted several post-hoc checks to assess whether the broader interview context may nonetheless have shaped responses. First, if respondents had been strongly primed by their oversight role, one would expect frequent references to accountability, responsiveness, or transparency when describing good ministers. However, such attributes were largely absent from responses to this question (see Research Question 5 in the Qualitative Content Analysis). Second, we find no systematic correspondence between the specific ministers discussed earlier in the interview and the leadership attributes emphasized at the end. No cross-national differences emerge that could plausibly be attributed to priming emerging from the ministerial cases discussed. While we cannot entirely rule out subtle contextual influences, the available evidence suggests that the interview design successfully elicited abstract and relatively unprimed depictions of good ministerial leadership.

MPs' responses to the question inquiring about their depiction of good ministers were coded using Qualitative Content Analysis (see Appendix 1.5 for a description of the transcription strategy). The content analysis responds to five research questions:

1. Which traits linked to **aggregative** leadership do MPs mention **positively** when describing a good minister?
2. Which traits linked to **integrative** leadership do MPs mention **positively** when describing a good minister?
3. Which traits linked to **aggregative** leadership do MPs mention **negatively** when describing a good minister?
4. Which traits linked to **integrative** leadership do MPs mention **negatively** when describing a good minister?
5. Which other characteristics do MPs mention when describing a good minister?

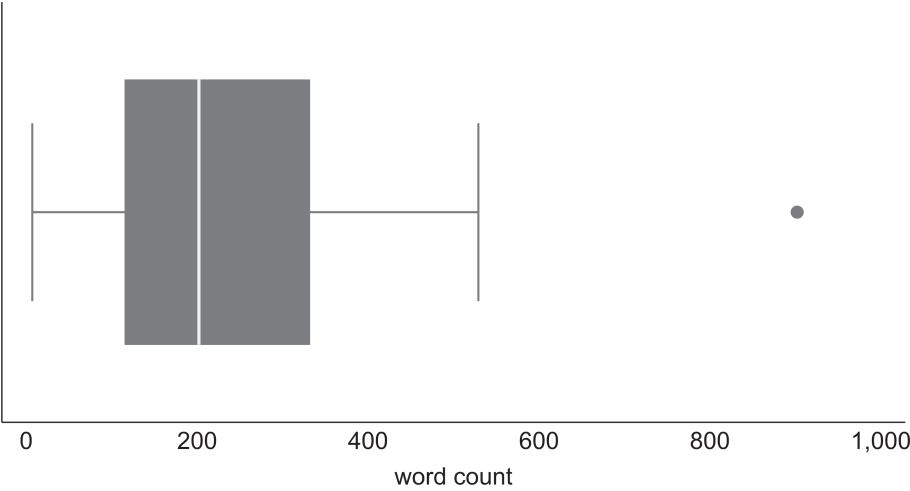
For the first four questions, we relied on the existing coding scheme of aggregative and integrative leadership traits provided by Erikson and Josefsson (2023). While we used the categories developed by the authors, we added category descriptions and anchor examples based on our material after 20 % of the material had been coded. Table 3 provides an overview of the coding scheme. Just like Erikson and Josefsson (2023), we identify a depiction as aggregative or integrative, if the majority of traits mentioned by a respondent link to this leadership ideal. For the fifth question, we developed an inductive coding scheme, aiming to capture rather nuanced aspects of the additional mentions of traits and characteristics of a good minister depiction. The software QCA Map (<https://www.qcamap.org/>) was used for the coding. All interviews were coded by two independent researchers. The inter-coder reliability measured as Gwet's AC1 is higher than 0.8 for all categories leading to confidence in the reliability of the assessment. Details on the Qualitative Content Analysis are provided in Appendix 2.

Table 3: Coding of aggregative and integrative leadership styles

| Leadership Dimension               | Aggregative Leadership                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Integrative Leadership                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Communication Style                | <b>Assertive</b><br>Expresses views clearly and firmly, prioritizing clarity and direction<br><i>e.g.</i> decisive, confident, outspoken, firm                                                                                                    | <b>Affectionate</b><br>Communicates with warmth, empathy, and personal connection<br><i>e.g.</i> caring, compassionate, supportive, personable                              |
| Decision-Making Approach           | <b>Controlling</b><br>Directs and manages process and outcomes, enforces boundaries to avoid deadlock<br><i>e.g.</i> strong, authoritative, directive, determined                                                                                 | <b>Cooperative</b><br>Facilitates dialogue, seeks shared solutions and consensus<br><i>e.g.</i> collaborative, consensus-seeking, unifying, team-oriented                   |
| Orientation Toward Self vs. Others | <b>Individualistic</b><br>Relies on self-direction, independence, and personal drive<br><i>e.g.</i> autonomous, self-reliant, ambitious, independent-minded                                                                                       | <b>Interpersonally Sensitive</b><br>Attuned to others’ perspectives and emotions, responsive in relationships<br><i>e.g.</i> empathetic, considerate, respectful, attentive |
| Conflict & Influence Style         | <b>Forceful</b><br>Pushes decisions through with authority, emphasizes strength and resolve.<br><i>e.g.</i> strong-willed, commanding, determined, tough                                                                                          | <b>Listening</b><br>Gives space for diverse voices, values input before deciding<br><i>e.g.</i> open-minded, attentive, thoughtful, responsive                              |
| Process Priority                   | <b>Efficient</b><br>Focuses on productivity, speed, and getting results; values decisiveness.<br><i>e.g.</i> pragmatic, results-driven, effective, action-oriented                                                                                | <b>Inclusive</b><br>Prioritizes participation, ensuring all voices are represented even if slower<br><i>e.g.</i> fair, democratic, open, participatory                      |
| Motivation                         | <b>Power-Seeking</b><br>Motivated by influence, authority, and status; aims to consolidate leadership strength.<br><i>e.g.</i> ambitious, influential, commanding, authoritative<br><i>neg.: seeking re-election, clientelistic policy-making</i> | <b>Striving for the Common Good</b><br>Motivated by collective well-being and shared benefits<br><i>e.g.</i> principled, ethical, service-oriented                          |
| Structural Orientation             | <b>Hierarchical / Formalistic</b><br>Relies on authority, rules, and rank to guide processes<br><i>e.g.</i> orderly, structured, disciplined, traditional                                                                                         | <b>Context-Sensitive / Receptive</b><br>Flexible and adaptive, receptive to situational needs and diverse input<br><i>e.g.</i> adaptive, flexible, open, responsive         |

Annotation: Key traits of the leadership styles, displayed in **bold and italic writing**, as in Erikson and Josefsson (2023)

Figure 1: Word count of responses



Source: Own source

Overall, respondents give rather detailed information on how they imagine good ministers to be. To some extent, this is visible in the length of the responses, visualized in Figure 1. On average, responses have a length of 240 words (median=202). But even the shortest response of 7 words – “It’s big ideas and a small ego” – still revealed meaningful information for our research question (BE01). This short response was coded as a negative reference to several traits typical for aggregative leadership (controlling, forceful, and individualistic), and a notion of the urge for good ministers to have a vision, coded as an additional demand outside the leadership styles (Research Question 5).

Moreover, MPs actually think of the traits linked to aggregative and integrative leadership when depicting good ministers, as all respondents make either positive or negative mentions of at least one relevant trait. Overall, we coded 53 statements linked to one of the styles traits. This stresses the importance of leadership traits for what makes a good minister, as we did not provide further information on our interest in the two sets of leadership traits to respondents, but asked the question on the qualities of a good minister in a very general manner.

The other aspects of a good minister that MPs mentioned (Research Question 5) fall into the following categories (with share of interviews mentioning this category in parentheses):

1. Portfolio-related expertise (categories emphasize the importance [or lacking importance] of portfolio-related knowledge) (51.6 %)

2. Cognitive and leadership capacities (categories reflect skills and capacities associated with leading and inspiring others, including vision, intelligence, and the ability to organize and guide a team) (45.2 %)
3. Work ethics (categories focus on work-related qualities such as being diligent and morally upright) (19.4 %)
4. Political competence (categories highlight the importance of political skill, experience, and knowledge) (12.9 %)
5. Personal qualities and character (categories capture how leaders are perceived in terms of their personality and authenticity and emphasizes traits related to being genuine, likable, and free from negative characteristics) (12.9 %)

## 5. Analysis

In this section, we provide an overview of the leadership traits that MPs state in their depictions of good ministers. First, we show that MPs frequently and extensively mention traits linked to integrative rather than aggregative leadership. We demonstrate that this pattern holds for all five countries, across ideological leanings and for respondents of both genders. Second, we provide evidence that negative references to certain leadership traits of ministers are limited to aggregative rather than an integrative leadership. We interpret these findings in the light of our theory in the subsequent section “Interpretation and critical reflection”.

The ranking of traits that MPs ascribe to good ministers illustrates their preference for integrative leadership. Table 4 shows an overview of the frequency of the categories for aggregative and integrative leadership in the interviews, the countries in which each category occurred, and exemplary quotes. Traits linked to integrative leadership are mentioned as five of the six most prominent traits that MPs seek in a good minister. Most frequently mentioned is a cooperative decision-making approach (mentioned by 32 % of all respondents), that facilitates dialogue, seeks shared solutions and consensus. This trait is prominent in all five countries, with MPs saying a good minister needs to “be a good mediator” (BE02) or should have the “capacity for agreement, the capacity for dialogue” (ES07). In the words of a German MP, “To come to a reasonable solution, one also needs the ability to compromise” (GER03). Some MPs explicitly justify the importance of this trait with the need to cooperate across parties (AT01, BE02, DK05), with committee members (DK04), or with other ministers (BE05). As an Austrian MP states it, good ministers “[...]need to be capable of bringing along all factions, including not only those of the governing partner but also the opposition” (AT01).

Nearly as many MPs emphasize that good ministers should be able to listen when handling conflict and influencing others (29 %) and should be striving for the common good as a process orientation (26 %). Still every fifth MP mentions the need to be interpersonally sensitive when interacting with others (23 %) and to show in-

clusiveness in processes (19 %). These traits are stated across either all countries (co-operative, interpersonally sensitive) or in four of the five countries (listening except Germany, integrative except Denmark, inclusive except Belgium). Interviewees speak only selectively about context-sensitivity or receptiveness (6 %), while no respondent referred to affectionateness as being a desirable trait in a good minister.

Assertiveness is also among the most frequently mentioned traits, but other traits linked to aggregative leadership are generally less common in MPs’ depictions of good ministers. Interviewees emphasize that good ministers should have an assertive communication style, that involves expressing their views clearly and firmly, providing directions and prioritizing. We find references to assertiveness in MPs’ depictions of good ministers across the five countries in our sample. For instance, a Belgian MP notes that “a really good minister would be able to do both. You know, you can function at the high levels among peers, but you can also kind of dumb it down [...]. Often in politics, people are willing to make sacrifices if they know what they’re for, if they know how long the sacrifice will last and when it will end. People are willing to do that if you can explain it to them” (BE03). Or, as a Danish colleague put it “[...] which is also very important is that you can communicate the decisions afterwards, which is often a special challenge [...]. [...] come out and explain to the general population, to the media what you have actually done” (DK03). All other characteristics ascribed to aggregative leaders are referenced substantially less frequently by MPs as making a good minister, including hierarchical or formalistic structural orientation (16 %), a forceful conflict style (13 %), and efficiency-orientation in processes (10 %). Other traits linked to aggregative leadership are either mentioned by few interviewees (controlling [6 %], individualistic [3 %]) or not at all (power-seeking).

**Table 4: Frequency of notions of leadership traits in MPs’ depictions of good ministers**

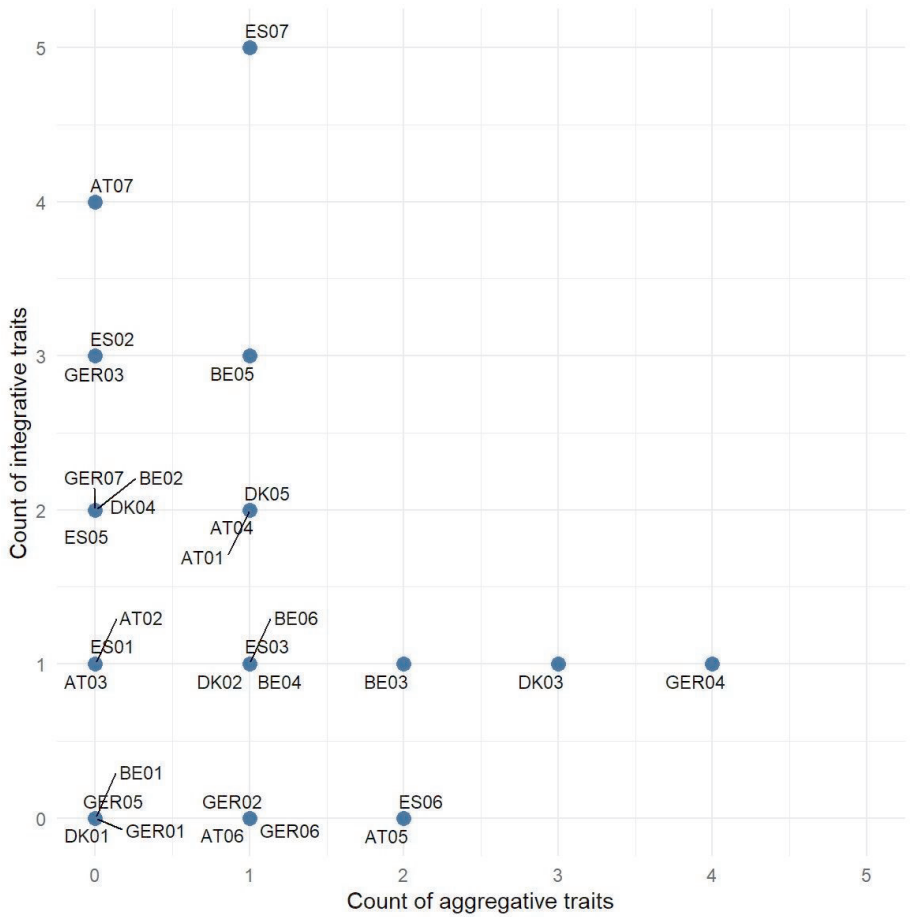
| Leadership trait                            | Mean | Countries       | Exemplary quote                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------------------------|------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aggregative 1- Assertive                    | 0.32 | all             | “So, you need to be able to come across as winning and able to hold the team together.” (GER06)                                                                                                        |
| Integrative 2- Cooperative                  | 0.32 | all             | „And it's difficult because you have to be in the cooperation. I believe in cooperation.” (BE05)                                                                                                       |
| Integrative 4- Listening                    | 0.29 | AT, BE, DK, ES  | „So, bringing the factions together, talking with them, meeting them at eye level — I believe that is a very essential aspect that a minister should have” (AT01)                                      |
| Integrative 6- Striving for the Common Good | 0.26 | AT, BE, ES, GER | “[...] is very aware that their main function is to serve the citizens. That is the concept of public service and common good.” (ES05)                                                                 |
| Integrative 3- Interpersonally Sensitive    | 0.23 | BE, DK, ES, GER | „[...] knowing what is living between people, knowing what is going on in your region, in the country and being able to play in on those wishes of your region” (BE02)                                 |
| Integrative 5- Inclusive                    | 0.19 | AT, DK, ES, GER | „In Denmark we have ten parties and I think a good minister will try to make more political parties involved in an agreement about a new law, then only the parties that are in the government” (DK05) |

| Leadership trait                             | Mean | Countries       | Exemplary quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------|------|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aggregative 7 – Hierarchical / Formalistic   | 0.16 | AT, DK, ES, GER | „You need to be able to delegate” (GER04)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Aggregative 4- Forceful                      | 0.13 | BE, DK, GER     | „And sometimes you have to be able to say: “No, I don't agree. [...] Or sometimes, “I don't agree because you didn't agree about my topic. If you change your mind, perhaps I can change my mind”. Yeah, it's the reality. It's something very hard to do [...], but sometimes you have to be out against your colleague.” (BE05) |
| Aggregative 5- Efficient                     | 0.10 | BE, DK, ES      | „Then, I think there's something important, which is the ability to make decisions and to carry forward the policies with which you presented yourself in the election and which won the election” (ES07)                                                                                                                         |
| Aggregative 2- Controlling                   | 0.06 | GER             | „I would really emphasize management skills. Management doesn't mean personally understanding every problem in detail, but making sure that, given the complexity of the tasks facing any ministry — and especially the Ministry of Economic Affairs — things are kept well organized.” (GER02)                                   |
| Integrative 7- Context-Sensitive / Receptive | 0.06 | BE, GER         | “[...] you have to have a good balance between coming up for your case, for your ministry, but also taking care of other problems or other things that are important.” (BE06)                                                                                                                                                     |
| Aggregative 3- Individualistic               | 0.03 | ES              | „You have to demonstrate political loyalty.” (ES03)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Aggregative 6- Power-Seeking                 | 0.00 |                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Integrative 1- Affectionate                  | 0.00 |                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

Source: Own source

Beyond the explicitly positive mentions of integrative leadership traits, MPs' preference for integrative over aggregative leadership is visible in the combination of traits they emphasize. Figure 2 displays a scatter plot displaying a count of the leadership traits positively mentioned per interviewee, separated by aggregative leadership traits on the x-axis and integrative leadership traits on the y-axis. In their depiction of good ministers, less than one third of MPs make no reference to any trait linked to integrative leadership (29 %), one third mentions exactly one of these traits (32 %), and somewhat more than one third mentions two or more of these traits (39 %). The strongest depiction of integrative leadership stems from a Spanish MP, saying that good ministers have “[...] to have a great capacity to learn and to have that capacity to learn [they] have to have a great capacity to listen to the sector [they] work with. [...] [it's important to have] sensitivity, the ability to create agreement, the ability to create dialogue. [...] you have to have a commitment to the citizens” (ESP07). 32 % of MPs, spanning respondents from all five countries, provide descriptions that include only traits of integrative leadership styles and not a single mention of a trait typical for aggregative leadership. 48 % of responding MPs provide depictions of good ministers that are mainly emphasizing integrative leadership.

**Figure 2: Scatter plot showing the count of the aggregative and integrative leadership traits mentioned by MPs.**



Source: Own source

By contrast, positive mentions of aggregative leadership traits are absent in roughly half of the responses (45 %), while one third of the respondents mention only one of these traits - assertiveness (32 %). Only five respondents rely on two or more traits linked to aggregative leadership in their depictions of a good minister. The most pronounced portrayal of aggregative leadership is provided by a German MP, saying that a good minister “[...] must be able to deal with many people and be able to delegate, but also be capable of teamwork. I think that’s important. Making a selection of the people who support you is also important. Then I think you also need a certain public competence. That is, you have to be able to represent things

in public. You have to be able to answer questions and not look foolish [...], what is called leadership strength, I think that's also an important qualification" (GER04). Only 13 % of all respondents refer exclusively to the desirability of aggregative leadership in a good minister, including respondents in Austria, Spain, and Germany, but not a single MP from Belgium and Denmark. 35 % of respondents (from all five countries) describe a minister predominantly with traits linked to aggregative leadership as ideal.

Regarding the distribution of respondent characteristics, our (numerically small) sample shows no systematic variation in how MPs from parties with different ideological placements imagine good ministers. MPs from both left- and right-wing parties are equally likely to depict good ministers as those displaying integrative leadership (left=43 %, right=38 %), and equally unlikely to depict good ministers as those displaying aggregative leadership (left = 26 %, right = 25 %). Concerning MPs' gender, men seem to be equally likely to provide depictions of good ministers that are consistent with aggregative and integrative leadership styles (35 % each), while women are more likely to provide a depiction of integrative rather than aggregative leadership (integrative=64 %, aggregative=17 %). We also find support for integrative leadership across all age groups in our study. Within the small number of respondents below fifty (N=5, integrative 50 %, aggregative 50 %) and above seventy (N=7, integrative 40 %, aggregative 60 %), support for the two leadership styles is evenly distributed. Respondents aged fifty to seventy (N=19) show more support for integrative than aggregative leadership (integrative 29 %, aggregative 21 %).

Turning to negative notions, we observe only a single individual making a negative reference to integrative leadership. The Belgian respondent states that "[...] to listen to people and to the civil society, to have the capacity to cooperate with other ministers, but not being, naïve. I have to defend the party ideas in government." (BE05). With this notion, the respondent points out the limitations of prioritizing inclusiveness in decision-making processes. The MP seems to suggest that following a fully inclusive strategy indicates a lack of experience, wisdom, or judgment, is overly idealistic or simplistic and is generally incompatible with ministers' role as party player. Despite this negative notion of inclusiveness, the interviewee also emphasizes the importance of many integrative leadership traits, including to be cooperative, listen, and strive for the common good.

In stark contrast to the near absence of negative references to the traits linked to integrative leadership, negative notions of the traits linked to aggregative leadership are found in a substantial share of the interviews (42 %), spread over all five countries. Table 5 provides an overview of the frequency of the categories, the countries in which they occurred, as well as exemplary quotes. Every fifth respondent said that good ministers should not lead in a forceful manner (19 %). Some respondents also negatively mentioned being controlling, individualistic, and power-seeking (13 % each). Single mentions also occurred for assertiveness and efficiency. Most of

these individuals working with negative depictions of aggregative leadership generally depict good ministers as displaying traits linked to integrative leadership (46 %), making use of negative references to traits linked to aggregative leadership to further tease out certain aspects valuable in integrative leadership styles. So, for instance, an Austrian respondent argues “I think it’s very important to bring the administrative apparatus along. Some ministers come into the ministry and think they can just ignore it. But that doesn’t work. You have to draw on the knowledge and experience of the staff and involve them” (AT03). The respondent thus uses a negative notion of self-orientation to highlight the importance of listening to others for a good minister.

**Table 5: Frequency of negative notions of aggregative leadership traits in MPs’ depictions of good ministers with exemplary quotes**

| Leadership trait    | Mean | Countries       | Exemplary quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------|------|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 – Forceful        | 0.19 | AT, BE, DK, GER | “On a more practical level – after all, most legislation is not just conflict but something that has to work – it is crucial that a minister can understand the arguments of others and is open to achieving a result rather than just sticking to the starting point” (DK02) |
| 2 – Controlling     | 0.13 | BE, ES, GER     | “Don’t think that you know everything, some ministers think they are the smartest people in the world.” (BE04)                                                                                                                                                                |
| 3 – Individualistic | 0.13 | AT, BE, DK, GER | “The most important thing is no vanity, or as little vanity as possible, because I believe vanity is what is most disruptive in politics. If you put yourself in the foreground or see only your own charisma as the criterion for your work, then it goes wrong.” (GER03)    |
| 6 – Power-seeking   | 0.13 | AT, ES, GER     | “The power you hold here should be experienced as responsibility, not as power in the usual sense.” (AT02)                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 1 – Assertive       | 0.03 | BE              | “some [...] communicate too fast. Sometimes you should wait a day. (BE04)                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 5 – Efficient       | 0.03 | GER             | “So is it a matter for ministers to do their work as well as possible, or to consolidate their political agenda and their position of power?” (GER05)                                                                                                                         |
| 7 – Hierarchical    | 0    |                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

Source: Own source

Regarding the distribution of respondent characteristics, MPs from right-wing parties are somewhat more likely to negatively reference aggregative leadership (5 of 8) than those from left-wing parties (8 of 23). Men MPs are somewhat less likely to make negative references to traits linked to aggregative leadership (6 of 17) than women MPs (7 of 14). This insight speaks directly to the observation above that men are more likely than women to positively mention aggregative leadership.

## 6. Interpretation and critical reflection

As the analysis of the interview material demonstrates, the vast majority of the traits that MPs expect from a good minister are those that link to integrative leadership styles. All attributes typical for this kind of leadership except context-sensitivity and affectionateness are frequently mentioned by MPs when depicting a good minister. By contrast, from the traits describing aggregative leadership, MPs only mentioned assertiveness as desirable for a good minister. Based on these observations, it is only consequential that roughly every second respondent seems to prefer integrative leadership, while only every third respondent desires aggregative leadership.

While we generally find a preference for integrative leadership, most frequently, MPs depict a good minister as someone who displays both integrative and aggregative leadership traits. MPs think of good ministers as someone with certain leadership traits, but they usually do not limit their ideal depictions to one or the other leadership style. This insight is consistent with the literature on leadership at large, which suggests that good leaders may switch between leadership styles depending on the situation at hand (see e.g., Meyer & Meijers, 2018). For instance, MPs may expect ministers to combine aggregative leadership for situations in which political actions need to occur ad hoc but integrative leadership in routine policymaking.

We observe respondents preferring integrative over aggregative leadership in all countries. In sum, individuals with preference for integrative over aggregative leadership occur all over Western Europe. This evidence lends support to Hypothesis 2, which argues that, nowadays, integrative leadership is favored over aggregative leadership, due to generational value change (Inglehart 1990, 1997) transforming both what individuals expect in good leaders as well as prejudice about women's ability to govern (Anderson et al, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Yeganeh, 2017), and due to the multiple crises currently experienced by democracies that might, from MPs view, be best handled with integrative leadership styles (Kroeber & Dingler, 2023). Interestingly, this shift in preferences is also visible in the negative notions of aggregative leadership. Our material suggests MPs explicitly refer to what used to be the norm for a political leader to define what, nowadays, they do not expect from a good minister. Aggregative leadership styles thus remain the point of reference against which desirable leadership is defined.

Our evidence also suggests that the transformation in preferred ministerial leadership styles goes beyond those political actors usually perceived as most gender progressive. While our sample of MPs is skewed to the left, interview partners belonging to right-wing parties generally also show support for traits linked to integrative leadership and frequently reject traits linked to aggregative leadership. Similarly, men in all five countries display support for integrative leadership styles – albeit to a smaller degree than their women colleagues. Variation between different actors warrants further investigation based on larger numbers. Nonetheless, our sample provides no indication that only MPs from left-wing parties or only women

display support for integrative leadership styles, while right-wing party members or men MPs continue to support aggregative leadership at large.

It appears consistent with these insights that our sample provides no supportive evidence at all for the idea that gender backlash motivates MPs to depict good ministers as not displaying integrative leadership (as proposed by Hypothesis 3). The only negative reference to integrative leadership styles was embedded in a positive description of this type of leader. This implies that the MPs sampled for the purpose of this project do not display such regressive perceptions of leading women politicians. Yet, notably, the sample contains only two politicians from far-right parties, meaning that those most likely to engage in gender backlash are not appropriately captured in our sample. Still, as three of the five countries in our sample have far-right parties that have been in parliament for decades (Austria, Belgium, Denmark) and two experienced recent entrance of such a party into parliament (Germany, Spain), the absence of backlash evidence suggests that hostile attitudes from far-right actors did not spill-over to mainstream political actors so far.

## 7. Conclusion

This study investigates the degree to which MPs' depictions of good ministers in Western Europe in the 2020s are gendered. We build our analysis on the distinction between aggregative leadership styles, characterized by traits typically ascribed to men, and integrative leadership styles, characterized by traits typically ascribed to women (Erikson and Josefsson 2023). Previous scholarly work has shown that Swedish MPs, operating in a highly gender-equal environment, display a strong preference for integrative over aggregative leadership in their parliamentary leaders (Erikson and Josefsson 2023). Based on interviews with 31 MPs from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Spain, this study finds that support for integrative leadership is not limited to gender-progressive contexts but occurs over a range of countries with broad variation in shares of women in parliament, in government, and levels of gender equality at large. The main contribution of this study lies in showing that leadership ideals that are largely consistent with traits typically ascribed to women occur at large in Western Europe. Also, in countries where women are still far away from parity both in politics but also in the society at large, we observe that many political elites depict good leaders as displaying integrative leadership. We argue that this pattern can be the consequence of value change and crisis experience. During the last decades, generational value change (Inglehart 1990, Inglehart & Norris, 2000) has been transforming both what individuals expect in good leaders as well as prejudice about women's ability to govern across the globe (Inglehart & Norris, 2000, 10–11; Yeganeh, 2017). Simultaneously, democracies currently face multiple crises that, from MPs' views, might be best handled through integrative leadership styles (Kroeber & Dingler, 2023). We find

no indication that MPs from mainstream parties reject integrative leadership as a consequence of the increasing discursive power of political actors hostile to women's political leadership.

While this study can show the existence of support for feminine leadership styles in Western Europe, the sample size per country is certainly too small to provide a representative picture of endorsement of different leadership styles in each country, different party families, or gender groups. Future research might want to develop a more complete picture, in particular of the degree of preference for integrative leadership by men and women MPs in countries with different levels of gender equality. Moreover, all countries in our sample are parliamentary democracies with proportional representation and coalition governments, which are arguably most likely cases for political elites to believe that political leaders should show traits such as the ability to compromise and to cooperate. Masculine leadership styles might remain prominent in more confrontational settings such as presidential systems or majoritarian democracies with single-party governments. Exploring such variation in gendered patterns of political leadership ideals across institutional contexts deserves further attention.

The finding of this study that many and diverse MPs depict good ministers as displaying integrative leadership, puts spotlight on an interesting puzzle: Why do we still observe an unequal treatment of women in political leadership positions by political elites? In the past, when women were mostly absent from political leadership positions, masculine traits were equivalent to political leadership (Bruckmüller et al, 2014; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Powell et al, 2002; Schein & Mueller, 1992) and this was used by scholars to explain barriers for women to enter and perform in high-profile political offices (e.g., Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; Bjarnegård, 2018; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016; Kroeber et al, Forthcoming; Krook & O'Brien, 2012). If elites envisage good political leaders to display traits that are largely consistent with traits generally ascribed to women, we would expect them to give women leaders a fair chance to also proof their leadership skills. Yet, scholarly work indicates that women political leaders are still perceived more negatively than their men colleagues, are judged harsher when loosing elections (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; O'Brien, 2015), are perceived as less competent (Dingler & Kroeber, 2022), are scrutinized more carefully than their men colleagues (Kroeber et al, 2026), and, experience "gendered practices" at large (Erikson and Josefsson 2023, 2). Hence, while this study sheds light on MPs depictions of good ministers, we need new explanations as to why women are perceived as less capable to govern in contemporary Western Europe and how actual practices in political institutions remain gendered.

Particular attention should be paid by future research to the question as to whether displaying integrative leadership is equally valued for men and women leaders. Management studies indicate that men leaders are appreciated more for displaying

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## Appendix

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