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# Long Hours, Uneasy Feelings: Parliamentary Work in Denmark, Finland and Sweden

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Politicians' work pressure is gaining more attention in parliamentary studies. To participate in the discussion about governing under pressure, this article offers an interdisciplinary approach to investigate how representatives navigate within a flexible, limitless work culture. This article presents a new inquiry to re-examine contemporary political agency by combining cultural studies theories with empirical insights in Nordic countries. By analysing 52 semi-structured interviews with MPs in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, the study finds that politics attracts people who want to change the world, but these attributes may initiate a vicious cycle, taking the form of psychological strain.

**Keywords:** Emotional Labour, Members of Parliament, Parliaments, Political Stressors, Representation, Work Ethic

In their work on the connectionist world, sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) describe how the Weberian work ethic of toil has transformed into promoting activity in all spheres of life. As these new virtues of flexibility, networks and availability obscure the limits between private and professional life, the limitless work culture offers new opportunities to be 'the fittest', while others are cast aside. In recent decades, this societal change, accelerated by technological development, has been scrutinised in research focusing on the increased psychological pressure on white-collar workers who struggle with work that invades spaces and places that were once less susceptible to its presence (Gregg, 2011).

Despite widespread attention to exhaustive labour conditions in professional work cultures, there is a very little research on the wellbeing of politicians as a professional group (Flinders *et al.*, 2020), although their wellbeing turned into

representative capabilities is a democratic concern (Weinberg, 2012). This article fills the significant gap in the research by exploring how Nordic Members of Parliament (MPs) perceive the increasing pressures of always-on work cultures and how they deal with increasingly 'public relations-ized (PR-ized) politics' (Louw, 2010). The analysis draws on 52 semi-structured research interviews with elected Danish, Finnish and Swedish representatives. Sharing many similarities regarding social models and political systems, the Nordic countries provide a setting that makes it possible to theorise how political work is affected by the growing pressures caused by personalised politics and social media in contemporary liberal democracies.

In PR-ized politics, the USA is the trendsetter, but Nordic countries follow the lead with personalised campaigns and ways to utilise social media as a cost-effective way of reaching citizens (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018). The demands and expectations in the age of social media have been found to produce new mechanisms of control with varying democratic values (Rosanvall, 2008), yet these changes have rarely been analysed from the politicians' point of view. How do politicians mediate and adapt to the change from Weberian 'calling' to the connectionist work cultures where the status of persons is measured by activity (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) and not solely by dedication and modesty?

To scrutinise these dynamics in political work, we answer the call of interdisciplinary analysis that draws on cultural studies and research on emotions in organisations (Crewe and Sarra, 2019). To do so, we analyse the politics of affect, which we consider not only an individual affair or rational politics, but also a set of practices, emotions and drives that modulate political infrastructures (Karppi *et al.*, 2016). Yet, how does it *feel* to affect, be affected and transform affective encounters into political action? To answer this question, we update the political analysis to touch upon everyday representative practices where competing emotions and ideas meet, enmesh and clash. Consequently, we participate in the emerging discussion in parliamentary studies that focus on how MPs cope with psychological pressures in contemporary mediated liberal democracies (Weinberg, 2012; Flinders *et al.*, 2020; Mannevu, 2020).

In this article, we seek to elaborate on the discussion on political stressors by exploring how MPs experience societal changes in the institutional settings of contemporary representative democracy. By analysing MPs' experiences related to institutional settings, we dispense with the misperception of politicians as agents in democratic governing. We argue that somewhat analogously to the common misperception of the 'survival of the fittest' mechanism in natural selection referring to physical fitness, politicians' adaptation to work-life stress ought to be considered in relation to political institutions.

The article begins by explaining the research design and clarifying why there is a need for a re-examination of politics as a Weberian vocation. Then, we move to analysis where we present three ways of conceptualising the mechanisms of pressure perceived by MPs amidst societal megatrends shaping political work. First, we analyse the idea of politics as a game and the reasons that cause uneasy feelings for MPs. Secondly, we scrutinise politics as ‘a lovable job’ with long hours: MPs live *for* their work but also live *off* their work. Finally, the analysis concludes by proposing that the current political landscape is a rhizomatic network filled with conflicting demands where the key to survival is the ability to decide which meetings to attend and which ‘work packages’ to pursue.

## 1. Research design

### 1.1. *Revising Weberian virtues*

In comparison to other forms of work, the position of the MP is a position of trust. Politicians often need to present themselves as trustworthy in the realm of public distrust; they fight against the presupposition that representative duties revolve around mere interest-aggregation and electoral competition—features that make governing dubious and therefore worthy of monitoring (Rosanvallon, 2008). Politicians may also be considered unpredictable by officials; they struggle with multiple pressures and may shift blame onto others (Crewe and Sarra, 2019). These pressures may emerge especially when MPs communicate about the results of political compromises to the public and voters. Pressures also arise from the allocation of time, which is ‘one of the scarcest resources of an MP’ (Skjæveland and Christiansen, 2018, p. 8). Whereas MP’s time traditionally was consumed by expectations to represent on both national and sub-national levels of administration (Damgaard, 1977), the expansion of the bureaucracy on local level in the wake of the development of the welfare state has redirected the focus of politicians to the national level (Damgaard, 1979), filling the MP’s schedule with fragmented tasks (Skjæveland and Christiansen, 2018). There are also indications about divergence in representative style of MP’s based on party ideology and government or opposition mandate (Damgaard, 1997). Implications of these macro-level democratic contingencies are felt by MPs in terms of accountability and responsiveness-induced pressure.

All these points about the compromise were noted by Weber (2009 [1921]) in his volume ‘Politics as Vocation’, which distinguished the franchise of politicians to mediate between objectives of having strong morals and responsibility and getting things done. In democratic theory, this proposal resonates with politicians acquiring Aristotelian ‘practical wisdom’ to foster virtues of prudence, judgement and vision (Cameron, 2018). Not surprisingly, a persistent conflict is embedded

in these two expectations, and resolving the conflict requires the ability to find resonance with voters' sentiments, as well as make cold-blooded political decisions. The collision of representative duties ('what to do') and capacities ('what is doable') can be confined to taxonomic stressors (Flinders *et al.*, 2020). The Weberian vision of politics relies on both passion and perspective, but in contemporary cultures of productivity, these Protestant virtues require revision. As the new virtues of productivity emphasise 'activity *in and of itself*' (Gregg, 2018, p. 9), the aspiring politician may focus on signalling how things are 'getting done' to ensure popularity.

### 1.2. Institutional settings

Politicians' work is affected primarily by two democratic institutions: the electoral system and the parliament. The electoral system is an important determinant for the party system, which affects the tradition of government and thus the political culture. The electoral system conditions the individual politician by providing different incentives. The institutional characteristics of the parliament are crucial for the power of the assembly and can affect the work of individual MPs (Persson *et al.*, 2017). This study takes stock of these institutional aspects of the politico-administrative systems and acknowledges that they condition the work-related stress of politicians by selecting Finland, Sweden and Denmark as cases for the study (Table 1.).

There are many similarities among Finland, Sweden and Denmark that, from a global democracy perspective, merit grouping the countries as 'the Nordic countries' (Knutsen, 2017; Wivel and Nedergaard, 2017). PR electoral systems have been introduced in all three states, which have yielded multi-party systems according to societal cleavage structures (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The system sets inter-party and government-opposition negotiations and compromises

**Table 1.** Institutional aspects of politico-administrative systems in Finland, Sweden and Denmark (based on Arter, 2009; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2017; Lijphart, 1999).

Country	Electoral system	Party system	Parliament authority	Government form	Parliament size
Finland	Open-list PR	Multi-party	Working parliament	Consensual democracy	200
Sweden	Flexible-list PR	Multi-party	Working parliament	Consensual democracy	349
Denmark	Open-list PR with quotas	Multi-party	Working parliament	Consensual democracy	179

readiness as a necessary condition for a successful government, prompting the famous labelling of the Nordic countries as consensual democracies (Lijphart, 1999). Furthermore, Nordic parliaments give priority to the legislative work done in the standing committees of the parliaments, so they are working parliaments (Mattson and Strøm, 1995) entailing greater influence over legislation and policy compared with debating parliaments (Arter, 2009). Finally, when it comes to the substance of legislative work in Nordic assemblies, an analytical impetus on the individual approach (similar to US Congress) over the party-collectivist in task definition can be defended—therefore, lending a look to how MPs can ‘act in a range of capacities’ (Esaïsson, 2000, p. 52). More recently, the Nordic context of MPs’ work was visited through an exploration of constituency work (Raunio and Arter, 2018), where the corresponding special issue authors assume a party-collectivist take on engaging with constituencies.

Despite the similarities, there are also differences between the countries’ electoral systems that affect MPs’ work. In Sweden, the electoral system is that of flexible-list (or semi-open) PR with a modified version of the Sainte-Laguë method of seat allocation. The party decides the ranking of the candidates on their list, but voters can cast a preference vote for a specific candidate to influence the ranking. The Danish electoral system is an open-list PR system with the Sainte-Laguë method modified with Hare quotas for 135 seats, 40 allocated to ensure national proportionality of vote share. The political parties can choose to use closed or open lists where the ranking is decided by the personal preference votes received by the candidates in the respective parties.

Finland uses the D’Hondt method in combination with multi-member districts, fully open lists and mandatory preferential voting. The system of open-list PR (OLPR) generates inter- and intra-party competition for the candidates (von Schoultz, 2018), of which the latter is a distinctive characteristic of the Finnish system in comparison to Sweden and Denmark. On the basis of the electoral systems, Finnish MPs can perceive more pressure and perhaps loneliness from the double competition created by the OLPR system compared with their Swedish colleagues in a semi-open PR list system. Intra-party competition has been found to be prevalent also in Denmark, where most of the parties in the Folktinget choose open lists in national elections (Skjæveland and Christiansen, 2018). The source of pressure on MPs are, however, often highly complex (Damgaard, 1997) and necessitate in-depth analysis for generating knowledge of the manifold pattern that constitutes both of institutional systems, culture and other factors.

### 1.3. *The interviews*

Elected MPs’ perceptions of and reactions to expectations in fast-paced society have, surprisingly, been scarcely acknowledged. Studies contributing to the

burgeoning research on the topic have shown that the *demand-side pressures* of politics have grown and *supply-side dimensions* have diminished (Flinders *et al.*, 2020). Given the highly competitive atmosphere and often high level of ambition, politicians are less likely to be willing to talk about their experiences of psychological strain. Yet, anonymous semi-structured interviews may offer a tool for analysing mundane pressures. While the interviews do not give us pure access to respondents' accounts and lives (Geddes and Rhodes, 2018), they still offer a setting for an interpretative agenda to analyse how the changing work conditions are perceived at the micro-level by Nordic politicians. By 'decentring' interpretations and concepts, a deeper texture for study becomes plausible when 'taking seriously the ways in which political actors interpret the world around them' (Geddes and Rhodes, 2018, p. 94). The ways in which MPs interpret the expectations and demands they *believe* to be embedded in the parliamentary conduct and practices give analytical currency for more in-depth understanding of the life in legislatures.

Our analysis draws on a total of 52 semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with MPs in Finnish Eduskunta (20), Swedish Riksdag (21) and Danish Folketinget (11) between 2018 and 2019. All Finnish interviews were conducted face-to-face. Most of interviews in Sweden were also conducted in person but two were conducted over the phone. In the case Denmark, six interviews took place over the phone and the rest were face-to-face interviews. The atmosphere in the interviews was relaxed, possibly because the themes focussed on the MPs' everyday lives: working hours, the struggle to maintain work-life balance, relationships within the parliament, and online and offline interactions with citizens, voters and the media. The Finnish (F) and Swedish (S) MPs were interviewed in their respective native languages; the Danish (D) MPs were interviewed in English. In the analysis, the interviews are referred to with letters to address the nationality of the interviewee, followed by a number referring to the interview.

All interviewees were granted full anonymity, which was essential when approaching themes that can be considered sensitive, such as competition and work-related stress. As we follow abductive research logic (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012), we do not propose formal hypotheses based on the relevant theoretical assumptions but consider ourselves informed by their possible effect on the MPs' perception of their work as legislators—something which can bear democratic implications. By combining an interpretative approach (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; Crewe, 2018; Geddes and Rhodes, 2018) with an institutional focus, this article describes the complex and messy everyday life in the Nordic parliaments. In the field of legislative studies, these contradictory, uncertain and affective elements are often neglected.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. *Anxieties about politics as a game*

Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) describe the business culture in a connectionist world as shallow; it is filled with compulsory friendships that mix private and professional lives. As you never know which networks are important in the future, instrumental relationships are also crucial in politics. Thus, our interviewees described politics as a ‘game without a clear guidebook’ (F-15) or as a very abstract form of work: ‘you don’t learn politics in school *that way* . . . I think there are very few people who realise that’ (S-2). Nonetheless, friendships in politics do not have value unless they *feel* sincere, authentic and trustworthy.

The need to control, sustain and foster relationships within and outside parliament requires communication and openness to others. It is not enough to just be present; effectiveness within a legislature requires discretion and judgement—a practised eye of knowing what to do when, where and with whom. As noted by Maxwell Cameron, in politics, ‘effectiveness is a matter of converting capabilities . . . into functionings’ (Cameron, 2018, p. 153). The instrumentality of affective relationships makes the work insatiable—if you are a too conscientious person, and you do not learn how to play the game, ‘you can kill yourself over work’ (F-9). In a connectionist work culture, it is difficult to identify ‘the origin of the threat’ and make ‘plans to control it’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007, p. 420), so fostering and keeping relationships may cause anxiety.

At the same time, the idea of politics as a game is filled with myths and misconceptions that were frequently brought up in the interviews. Politicians may consider politics a game, but they do not consider *themselves as players*. Thus, the pejorative image of politicians and the distrust felt within the representative legislature can stick to the representatives. Unlike the expectation that other MPs as colleagues turn out cunning and untrustworthy, many interviewed MPs brought up the collegial atmosphere among representatives in parliament—something that contradicts general assumptions made about parliaments. One MP reminisced stepping into the office and having been surprised about ‘how nice people were’ (D-7), and almost all Finnish MPs mentioned that friendships often form over party limits. Kinship among politicians was also described in recent ethnographic research by Finnish MP Anna Kontula (2018). However, several Swedish MPs also noted that although they have a friendly relationship with their colleagues, they distinguish them from ‘true friends’. After all, friendships in politics are constantly re-evaluated.

The image of politics as a game seemed to cause uneasy feelings for the MPs; they highlighted that their motivation for politics was politics itself, not networks, money or fame. One interviewee stated that ‘we’re not here for our own game . . . We would literally be somewhere else if it was for our game because we are not



that well paid' (D-3). Identical reflections were made by Swedish and Finnish MPs, drawing on their high levels of education, vast networks and social skills that would make them effective employees in private business as consultants, spokespersons and managers. To show the commitment and devotion that politics calls for, MPs distinguished themselves from elite networks by cherishing the Weberian ideal of a parliamentarian who shares the characteristics of distinctiveness and devotedness and who is committed to ideals of social solidarity.

The Nordic politicians share the Lutheran roots of Nordic social democracy, which makes these countries unique in success stories of quality of governance and politicians dedicated to the idea of working hard without clear personal economic gain (Nelson, 2017). The cherished idea of a modest politician, however, clashes with the new image of a careerist politician, supported by the rhizomatic 'flex nets' (Wedel, 2017, p. 164) between think tanks, politics, strategic communications agencies, lobbyists and business consultants. The expansion of the Scandinavian Public relations sector in politics is a somewhat new phenomenon, but it has raised critical discussion about revolving door phenomena (Palm and Sandström, 2014). The porous boundaries between the fields of media, politics and PR are expected to affect democratic decision-making processes (Lounasmeri, 2018). Thus, Nordics are following the US lead with PR-ized politics where actors move elegantly from one position to another by diminishing the importance of 'party hacks' (Lown, 2010, p. 82) with a Weberian calling for politics.

Despite changes in Nordic political cultures, the Weberian idea of a calling shone through in the interviews when the MPs described politics as an extraordinary job that requires passion and dedication. However, these Weberian ideals clashed with the constant management of public expectations, related sentiments of distrust and the harsh reality of politics as non-glamorous work. In contrast to fast-paced business cultures, politics is filled with bizarre, time-wasting and unpredictable processes that seem to cause frustration for the interviewees (Weinberg, 2012). Mediatized politics are quick, while democratic processes are slow because they are set by the internal tension in political compromise; they 'require politicians to resist compromise and to embrace it' (Gutmann and Thompson, 2012, p. 22). Unlike tech start-ups filled with hype and buzzwords, democratic politics is about endless sitting, discussing and waiting. An MP described what daily representative activities entail within a legislature without much notice from the public:

[It] is sitting with laws that you have to figure out. Do you have to change this sentence? Do you have to make questions to a minister about this because you know this could be an issue? *All kinds of desk things that are actually quite boring.* The 'daily bread'. Legwork and handwork. Something that you just have to do. It takes a lot of hours. It takes a lot of time.

Preparing . . . Asking boring questions that are necessary and important, but it's boring. It's not something like being a celebrity. It's not being somebody who has crazy ideas. It's just doing your work. Doing your job for democracy and for the parliament. People don't see that. (D-1)

The quote above paints a picture of the ubiquity and ambiguity between the 'boring' stuff in comparison with the grandeur of the image of the political elite or with the public image of representatives who only care about their interests. For MPs, this ambivalent scenario is filled with mixed feelings and management of those feelings, as discussed in the following.

## 2.2. *Long hours, mixed feelings*

In the interviews, MPs often portrayed how rewarding it is to be able to make a difference, especially for the electoral district. Consequently, MPs pointed out that politics can be very addictive because one can make a difference and be part of the action: 'once you get a taste of it . . . you simply want to have more of it' (S-1). But there is a dark side to the thrill of being at the centre of things. Politicians have reported physical symptoms of strain, a negative toll on family life and sleeping problems (Weinberg, 2012). The Finnish MPs, in particular, pondered that right at the beginning of a political career, you need to learn to set limits: 'One reason [for burnout] is that you cannot delve deeply into all things' (F-2). In other words, the reality bites you hard when the illusion of a calling merges with the fact of not being able to do *everything* promised or deemed important.

Coping with others' needs, personal aspirations and multiple conflicting pressures require management of feelings, that is, *emotional labour*. Arlie Russell Hochschild's (2003 [1983]) pioneering work on the exhaustiveness of emotion work focussed on the service industry, where employees must provide service with a smile, no matter what they are feeling. Compared with low-paid service jobs, politics can be considered a privileged vocation. Nevertheless, politics is also filled with emotional and performative markers, such as words, scripts and speeches, as well as bodily performances 'embedded in social relations' (Rai, 2015, p. 5). Performative markers also affect the politician's body, especially in moments when there *should* be an authentic affect accompanying an encounter and action. As the illusion of authenticity is part of the relationships and how activities are carried out, these encounters require 'deep acting' (Hochschild, 2003, p. 33). Politicians are expected to embody the idea of authenticity and professionalism 24/7 and, thus, as one interviewee formulated, 'you can never let your guard down' (F-15).

Our interviews support the idea that one stress factor in politics is the difficulty of balancing party loyalties and voters' demands (Flinders *et al.*, 2020). Balancing not only requires deep acting but also *long hours despite personal feelings*. For the MPs, the long hours are a natural part of the job that they said they had signed up for: 'Today I woke up at six and saw a request for some information . . . I gathered the files and sent them immediately after having woken up, and this is something you live with, working from the moment you wake up until you fall asleep' (S-5). In general, when the MPs were asked to give an estimate of the hours they worked per week, they often chuckled. The reaction shows the difficulty of even defining MPs' tasks. Most of the interviewees said bluntly that they do not count the work hours, but one offered, 'it would be interesting to have a stopwatch, really' (S-1).

Despite the speculative number of work hours, our interviews indicate that Nordic MPs work an average of 50–80 h a week. These statistics align with the view that over 90% of British MPs work more than 50 h per week (Weinberg, 2015). Work hours also often depend on where your electorate is located. MPs who live outside the capitals where the parliaments are located seem to work extensive hours when they are 'in town'. Nevertheless, the distinction between work and free time is blurred because 'it depends on the definition [of working]: You're working with it all the time' (D-2). For the MPs, politics is a way of life: 'When I sit on the scaffold and paint a wall, I think of politics' (S-1). A few interviewees confessed that they regard themselves as workaholics. It is not a surprise, then, that balancing family life and a political career is something that MPs acknowledged as difficult; being torn between two conflicting demands creates a 'time bind' (Hochschild, 2000) where one develops fantasies about oneself as a more attentive and caring person if only one had the time.

Our interviews indicate that MPs are not *acting* when they say that they love their job, and they do love the idea of changing the world through politics. Thus, MPs thought that they should not complain about their work because it is 'super-challenging, super-interesting and super-important work through which you can actually make an impact on society' (F-2). A romance with work may nevertheless create a golden cage, as research on 'lovable jobs' has suggested; the romance with work nurtures patience towards structures that are not working (Mannevu and Valovirta, 2019). This vicious cycle of love seems to exist in politics, because the responsibility for setting the limits lies on an individual's shoulders, which is a difficult task in a hyper-competitive work culture that endorses activity, enthusiasm and flexibility.

In Finland, because of top politicians' sick leaves, the stress-related exhaustion of politicians has been under public discussion (Yle News, 2018). Although in the interviews, Finnish MPs were more open about work-related exhaustion than Swedish and Danish MPs, none considered talking about it publicly to be a good

idea because it may make them vulnerable to increased public criticism (Mannevu, 2020). Nevertheless, it is worth pondering whether there should be more discussion about political burnouts because, for instance, former Finnish Minister Jari Lindström has publicly confessed that exhaustion affected his ability to make decisions (Yle News, 2019). The silence about the exhaustive side of political processes may turn the political elite inwards, as a misunderstood elite whose work is not understood by the ‘political outsiders’ (Lown, 2013, p. 13). This may offer a new platform for semi-insiders, such as communication agencies who advise politicians, for instance, on which work should be prioritised.

Rhizomatic and networked work culture is volatile, fluid and chaotic, so it *modulates* the actors to work on the self in the form of self-discipline and time management. As it takes time to learn how to navigate in the parliament and to create alliances, our research indicates that the first years are often rough. An interviewee recalled thinking in the first months that ‘I’ll be dead by Christmas’ (F-7). After the first shock, the key for survival is to learn a somewhat militant approach for reasserting control and taking back ownership of one’s time and attention to determine *which* things are important and with *whom*.

### 2.3. *Relationships in a connectionist world*

Thus far, we have analysed the current political landscape as a connectionist network filled with conflicting demands. Next, we turn to the affective dynamics of connections. As the daily life in legislature is based on relationships and legislative practices that maintain them, MPs are bound to meet and associate with numerous people, including cross-party collaboration, meeting with lobbyists, interacting and hosting constituencies and making public appearances. For a politician, relationships are crucial, but they also create anxious feelings; encounters are not solely about acting, but also adaptability and ‘the ability to treat one’s own person in the manner of a text that can be translated into different languages’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007, p. 461). At the same time, competitive environments require skills to *remove* oneself ‘from the demands of the social’ (Glegg, 2018, p. 96) and make constant evaluations about the most profitable connections.

Time devoted to others is a resource for an aspiring politician. Yet, the competitive nature of politics makes relationships volatile. MPs often explained how they have close colleagues and good allies to advance interests and push political matters forward, but the people who ‘actually’ care about their wellbeing are outside the walls of the parliament. Therefore, life in politics is not only about networking, but it is also marked by solitude, even loneliness. Alliances exist, but they are shallow: ‘Power is a bit, it’s a kind of poison that destroys all relationships’ (D-7). Trust is the foundation of political relationships, but politics were described as a lonely vocation where trust is negotiated ‘case by case’ (F-10).

Politicians need to tell secrets to get power, so mutual concessions exist, but the grim maxim is that you can put your trust in a friend but not necessarily in another politician, especially in your party.

Uncertain liaisons in one's own party were mentioned specifically by Finnish MPs, which speak directly to the differences in the electoral systems. In the Finnish system, the fiercest competitor is often a co-partisan candidate running in the same electoral district (Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018). In contrast, Swedish MPs hailing from the closed-list system had difficulties relating to the question of competition. One MP, for instance, pondered that there are not any competitors or that it depends on what you mean. In specific questions, competitors may come from different parties: 'But I don't think of them as competitors either ... but more as pursuing what they think is right and having different means for it' (S-3). Some even had a hard time understanding the question: 'How do you mean? I don't really see it ... No, I don't think I have any' (S-4).

Personalised politics and campaigns to which Finland demonstrates the strongest indications within the Nordic countries (Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018) may enforce the competition within the parties. Parliamentary practices distinguish between 'workhorses' (representatives concentrating on legislative work) and 'show horses' (Payne, 1980), while in mediatised politics, there is a robust reputational effect with parliamentary activities and voters' competence for recalling MPs' names (François and Navarro, 2020). The decline of party-based voting and the rise of the personal vote lures parties to market politicians as products. Surprisingly, personalised politics do not necessarily collide with the consensual nature of Nordic politics, because it is not about manufacturing consent but *maintaining it* by 'avoiding the emergence of real controversy' (Louw, 2010, p. 84). Politics driven towards the centre of the spectrum fit especially in the Danish and Swedish minority-government-induced systems but also in Finland, where large coalition governments must maintain internal compromises (Pekonen, 2011).

The two 'mindsets' of compromising and uncompromising are derived from the pivotal democratic practices of campaigning and governing. Compromising consists of adapting one's principles in favour of reaching a compromise, while an uncompromising mindset highlights the feature of tenacity and holding on to principles (Gutmann and Thompson, 2012). In particular, illusions of evidence-based politics and 'best solutions' constantly collide in processes that are filled with conflicts of interest, contested evidence and volatile networks and alliances (Crewe, 2018). Not surprisingly, the expectation of forming an opinion within a few seconds or minutes and communicating that to their audiences is a stress factor for the MPs. On a larger scale, however, intra-party coordination and work distribution elevate a sense of duty of being 'on-call' all the time, as party colleagues might inquire about a specific subject matter that an MP handles.

Stemming from previous research, the interviews indicate not only that politicians feel increasingly compelled to engage with social media (Flinders *et al.*, 2020), but also that social media presence is a component of the parties' communication strategies (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). Social media is time-consuming, but MPs are also keen to use their social media accounts to communicate directly with their networks (Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018; Mannevu, 2020). Even though some got help in managing their social media accounts, they are still responsible for the content themselves, and thus assistants will not share the strain that social media visibility brings: 'It's like a bicycle race: You can get help up on the mountain, but you still need to finish it yourself.' (D-4).

Nevertheless, for politicians, social media is an essential tool for connections and encounters necessary in a connectionist world. Whereas MPs in all three countries regarded Twitter as an elite-centred 'necessary evil', Facebook was considered an important tool for communication that may modulate the politician and encourage political action:

To me, social media is very stressful because I am very popular there . . . , but at the same time, I think that democracy and progressive movements that want to take this society further in terms of enlightenment and progress need politicians who can put themselves on the line in social media. Otherwise, trolls and extremists will do that . . . The way I see it is that you can manage your time in there, which is also very empowering. (F-3)

Notwithstanding the empowering nature of communication, harassment and hate speech have become common experiences among politicians as a by-product of social media stalking (James *et al.*, 2016). A recent Finnish study found that hate speech is at least partially a gendered phenomenon deliberately used for political pressuring (Knuutila *et al.*, 2019). MPs were reluctant to admit that hate speech has any effect on them, which is understandable from an individual perspective but not as a new megatrend that would induce politicians as servants of the public who are open prey for harassment and threats (Flinders *et al.*, 2020, p. 258). Thus, societal megatrends, such as rising individualism, personalised politics and their connections to technological development, are not only a matter of academic interest. They are also a question for liberal democracy—are only the fittest ones suitable for political work?

### 3. Conclusion

This study has shown how MPs experience acting as politicians in the face of challenges from contemporary society in terms of work-life stress. The results stem from previous research that indicated that the growing pressures from social

media and personalised representation have increased the *demand-side* pressures of the job without improvements in *supply-side* dimensions (Flinders *et al.*, 2020). To elaborate on the discussion on governing under pressure, a theme loaded with democratic importance, we have used an interdisciplinary theoretical approach to investigate how representatives navigate within a connectionist work culture also available in political institutions such as parliaments. The theoretical framework draws from an interdisciplinary approach to parliamentary studies and was utilised in a recursive and re-iterative manner on a set of semi-structured interviews of 52 parliamentarians from Finland, Sweden and Denmark.

The research departs from many legislative studies that often take a quantitative approach to study representative agency or approach the study with traditional frameworks of political representation. Nevertheless, the research shows that the affective side of contemporary political work in the three Nordic countries is not radically different. First, the study showed how work-life stress arises from the same societal megatrends that shape white-collar work. Secondly, Nordic MPs work long hours, but defining exactly how many is an open-ended question, even to the MPs themselves due to the indefinite nature of representative work. Thirdly, based on our findings regarding the overt emphasis of work-related stress in Finland compared in particular to Sweden, we theorise that the extent to which an MP experiences stress from intra-party competition in a PR election system is dependent on the election system's rules for party lists allowing preferential voting for individual candidates. In the future, personalised politics may be a potent source of increasing work-life stress for politicians. The hypothetical mechanism of the electoral system generating or conditioning work-related stress ought to be tested empirically with research designed to give evidence for or against our assumption.

What we suggest is that future research should be more open to politicians' experiences and the affective dynamics of parliament: the politicians love and live *for* their work, but also live *off* their well-reimbursed work. Politics, in Weberian terms, is a passionate sport not meant for the faint-hearted, and politics attracts people who want to change the world, but these attributes also cause a vicious cycle of calling and emotional labour in a limitless work culture. Time being a scarce resource it is important to identify how MPs' reason in allocating it, which can help understanding why modern politics function as it does. The theoretical concepts that, since the early 20th century, have served for analytical purposes of politics are in need of revision to meet the requirements of contemporary democratic politics. With new interdisciplinary concepts translated from related research fields, such as connectionist capitalism, rhizomatic flex nets and affect theory, to political science frameworks, such as institutional theories of electoral systems, we may have a more profound understanding of how politicians deal

with work pressures and what the effects of the emotional side of politics are on democratic decision-making.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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