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Virtues in Political Practice: Insights From an Interview Study With Swedish Parliamentarians

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Abstract

Which virtues, and why these, are most important for politicians? While philosophical discussions on virtues in politics are extensive, empirical investigations into the virtues politicians themselves value remain limited. This article addresses this gap through in-depth interviews with 74 Swedish parliamentarians. Analyzing these interviews using a structured multi-level coding approach, I make three main claims. First, the cardinal virtue in the Swedish parliament is the ability to separate ideas from those who hold them; this principle is seen as vital for fostering political trust within parliament and with the public. Second, virtue pluralism is essential within parliamentary and party groups as the virtues politicians prioritize depend on the broader virtue composition of their group. Third, virtues can be categorized into five key themes—entrepreneurial, social, integrity, wisdom, and craftsman—reflecting the multifaceted nature of parliamentary representative roles and responsibilities. Collectively, these findings underscore the interdependent nature of virtues in political practice, where the value of specific virtues is shaped by group dynamics and the presence or absence of the cardinal virtue. This study provides novel empirical insights into how national political leaders perceive and value virtues in politics, contributing to the literature on political ethics, representation, and leadership.

Keywords

parliaments; political ethics; political virtues; representative democracy; virtue ethics

1. Introduction

The demands of political representation call on elected officials to fulfill their responsibilities with a careful blend of decisiveness, thoughtfulness, and principled decision-making. They are expected to listen attentively to the voices of those they represent while simultaneously exercising independent political judgment.

The virtues they cultivate to meet these challenges are not only critical to their political roles but also deeply connected to the citizens they serve through their democratic mandates. As elected representatives, politicians act on these mandates, making decisions, as Beerbohm (2012) aptly puts it, "in our names." Despite the significant role virtues can play in shaping democratic and political practices, systematic empirical studies of elected officials' understandings of virtues in politics—the character, traits, and qualities they prioritize in their representative roles—remain limited. In this article I seek to address this gap by exploring the following research question: Which virtues, and why these, are most important for politicians?

I address this question by focusing on Sweden's premier legislative body, the Swedish parliament. To explore Swedish parliamentarians' understandings of virtues in their representative roles, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 74 members of the Swedish parliament. I analyzed the data using a two-step thematic coding approach, which allowed me to capture the breadth of virtues discussed, connect these findings to existing literature on virtues in representative politics, and develop new analytical categories for advancing normative, theoretical, and empirical exploration of virtues in political practice.

The findings underline the interdependent nature of virtues in political practice. By examining why certain virtues are considered essential and linking this to the concept of virtue pluralism, the study illustrates how the institutional structure and context of a political system—such as the prominence of party groups in the Swedish parliament—shape the virtues politicians value in themselves and their colleagues. The virtues politicians prioritize may, however, shift not only with changes in political contexts or institutional structures but also with the virtue composition of their primary political group. These findings suggest the need to expand theoretical examinations of virtues in representative politics beyond the voter–representative relationship, which has traditionally been the primary focus, to also encompass the interactions and dynamics between representatives themselves. While politicians' own views neither define the conceptual essence of virtues in politics nor determine which virtues politicians ought to cultivate normatively, grounding theoretical discussions in concepts derived from real-world practice—such as the relational nature of virtues in politics—can, I argue, enhance the practical relevance of these theoretical arguments.

The article proceeds in the following way. First, I present the theoretical departure, research design, and methodology. Next, I discuss what I identify as the cardinal virtue in the Swedish parliament. This is followed by an exploration of the role of virtue pluralism. I then present the variety of virtues mentioned by parliamentarians during the interviews and analyze the five key virtue themes identified. I end with concluding remarks and discuss the broader implications of these findings.

2. Previous Research and Theoretical Departure

The character, traits, and qualities that politicians ought to cultivate have long been central to the theoretical literature on political representation. At its broadest level, this inquiry connects to virtue ethics, a tradition with deep historical roots and diverse perspectives. Its origin can be traced to ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle's (2011) *Nicomachean Ethics*, which emphasizes the virtues of moderation, such as courage, positioned between the vices of cowardice and rashness. Aristotle identifies four cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. The term "cardinal" derives from the Latin *cardo*, meaning "hinge" or "key," signifying that these virtues are foundational—other virtues depend upon, or hinge upon, their exercise.

Although glimmers of virtue ethics appear sporadically throughout intellectual history—such as in the works of Aquinas, Hume, and Smith (Badersten, 2002)—the virtue ethics perspective ceded prominence in moral philosophy to arguably more action-guiding universal frameworks, such as consequentialism and deontology. Its revival during the 1960s, often attributed to Anscombe's (1958) influential paper "Modern Moral Philosophy," marked the return of a wide range of theories and perspectives in virtue ethics, with contributions from philosophers like Williams (1985), Foot (2002), and Murdoch (1971). What combines virtue ethics perspectives, broadly speaking, is the shift in focus from principles and consequences as the primary guide for ethical action towards the development and application of character traits, dispositions, and motivations that characterize a virtuous person (Slote, 1997).

Alasdair MacIntyre, a central figure in virtue ethics, highlighted in his book *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 2007) how *telos*—the purpose or end—is essential for understanding virtue, providing guidance on what to value, how to behave, and what actions to take. Rather than basing *telos* on universal or abstract principles, he situates it within human purpose and specific practices. These practices are coherent, socially established forms of cooperative human activity aimed at realizing intrinsic goods through the pursuit of excellence intrinsic to that activity. Virtues within these practices, according to MacIntyre, are the qualities of mind and character necessary to achieve these intrinsic goods. Viewed through the lens of *telos* and practice, virtues in politics can thus be understood as the traits, characteristics, and qualities essential to fulfilling the intrinsic goods and excellence of politics.

Understanding which virtues are necessary in politics, therefore, requires examining, among other things, how they emerge from the practical demands of political life. Among these demands, the nature and closeness of the relationship between elected officials and their constituents have been central to theoretical discussions (Mill, 1861; Pitkin, 1972; Thompson, 1981). One of the most fundamental distinctions in this literature is between the delegate, whose actions closely reflect the preferences of their constituency, and the trustee, who relies more heavily on personal judgment and intellect—a distinction famously articulated by Edmund Burke in his speech to the electors of Bristol. Each role suggests different virtues: Delegates arguably ought to cultivate virtues of attentiveness, responsiveness, and insightfulness, while trustees ought to emphasize judiciousness, pragmatism, and industriousness. However, the extent to which the trustee–delegate dichotomy of representation aligns with how politicians themselves perceive their roles is contested. For example, US congressmen have historically dismissed such dichotomies as overly simplistic and detached from their lived experiences, comparing questions about the distinction to those a high schooler might ask rather than a researcher (Thompson, 1987, p. 99). More contemporary scholars like Rehfeld (2009) have proposed additional frameworks, arguing for eight distinct categories of representation based on factors such as aims, sources of judgment, and levels of responsiveness.

Beyond the relationship between representatives and their constituencies, the literature has also explored the broader traits and qualities that politicians should cultivate in their representative practice. In her seminal study, *The Good Representative*, Dovi (2007) argued that a good democratic representative ought to possess three key virtues: fair-mindedness, the ability to build critical trust, and good gatekeeping. Similarly, Philp (2007) emphasized the importance of integrity, contextual judgment, and the capacity to balance competing values within the practical realities of political life. Tillyris (2015) highlighted the complex interplay between morality and political necessity, suggesting that navigating the so-called dirty hands dilemma requires a nuanced understanding of both ethical compromise and political responsibility.

Moreover, Tholen (2018) argued for viewing political responsibility as a virtue in itself, emphasizing the fragility of democratic institutions and the need for qualities that sustain justice and the common good.

The previous literature outlined above represents a broad range of approaches to understanding the virtues necessary for political representation, yet the literature is far from exhaustive. As Severs and Dovi (2018) contended in "Why We Need to Return to the Ethics of Political Representation," a promising path forward in research is the further integration of empirical political science and political theory, an area that I believe remains underexplored. Building on this insight, the next section outlines the methodological approach employed in this study, which is designed to bridge theoretical concepts with empirical insights by examining how Swedish parliamentarians understand and articulate virtues in their representative political roles.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Interview Data and the Case of the Swedish Parliament

This study is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with 74 randomly selected Swedish parliamentarians, stratified by party affiliation and gender. Non-participation was primarily due to lack of response; those who responded but did not agree to participate generally cited time constraints as the reason for not participating. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics and compares these to the overall composition of the Swedish parliament.

The interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2021 primarily via Zoom or Skype due to the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure confidentiality, all participating parliamentarians were given pseudonyms randomly selected from a list of the most common Swedish names. This decision to offer pseudonymity was closely tied to the choice to record the interviews as both can influence participants' willingness to speak candidly (Aberbach et al., 1975; Beamer, 2002; Berry, 2002; Lilleker, 2003). It is worth noting that while recording interviews can sometimes hinder participants from speaking freely, this concern is arguably less pronounced in this case because the participants—as Swedish parliamentarians—are used to speaking publicly and on the record. Recording was also essential for the analytical approach of this study as it allowed for detailed attention to the nuances, arguments, and tonal shifts in the interviews, which were conducted in Swedish.

Table 1. Data characteristics.

Label	Parliament (%)	Sample (%)	Difference (%)
Center Party	8.9	9.5	+0.6
Christian Democratic Party	6.3	4.1	−2.2
Green Party	4.6	5.4	+0.8
Left Party	7.7	12.2	+4.5
Liberal Party	5.4	6.8	+1.4
Moderate Party	20.0	17.6	−2.4
Social Democratic Party	28.6	31.1	+2.5
Sweden Democratic Party	17.8	13.5	−4.3
Women	49.0	51.5	−2.5

Notes: These data come from the official records of the Swedish parliament. The records are kept and updated by the secretariat of the chamber. Parliamentarians who were not party group members at the time of selection were excluded.

The interviews were then transcribed, and I translated the quotes into English. The list of interviews quoted in this article is in Table 2.

Table 2. Cited interviews.

Pseudonym	Year and Month	Party Affiliation	Gender
Christer	2020, November	Social Democratic Party	Man
Gunnar	2020, November	Liberal Party	Man
Linnéa	2020, November	Moderate Party	Woman
Birgitta	2020, November	Moderate Party	Woman
Louise	2020, December	Sweden Democrats	Woman
Magnus	2021, January	Center Party	Man
Karin	2021, January	Moderate Party	Woman
Bengt	2021, January	Green Party	Man
Helena	2021, January	Social Democratic Party	Woman
Simon	2021, January	Liberal Party	Man
Nils	2021, January	Center Party	Man
Anna	2021, January	Liberal Party	Woman
Roger	2021, February	Center Party	Man
Mohamad	2021, February	Moderate Party	Man
Fredrik	2021, February	Moderate Party	Man
Karl	2021, February	Social Democratic Party	Man
Henrik	2021, February	Sweden Democrats	Man
Johanna	2021, February	Social Democratic Party	Woman
Margareta	2021, February	Moderate Party	Woman
Kent	2021, February	Sweden Democrats	Man
Helen	2021, February	Left Party	Woman
Gustav	2021, February	Liberal Party	Man
Maria	2021, March	Center Party	Woman
Maja	2021, March	Left Party	Woman
Elin	2021, March	Social Democratic Party	Woman
Olof	2021, March	Social Democratic Party	Man
Monica	2021, March	Social Democratic Party	Woman
Jan	2021, March	Center Party	Man
Elisabeth	2021, March	Christian Democratic Party	Woman
Åke	2021, March	Sweden Democrats	Man
Lena	2021, March	Green Party	Woman
Mats	2021, April	Moderate Party	Man
John	2021, April	Liberal Party	Man
Daniel	2021, April	Social Democratic Party	Man
Leif	2021, September	Christian Democratic Party	Man
Irene	2021, September	Left Party	Woman
Oskar	2021, October	Moderate Party	Man

Moreover, with a unicameral system, the case of the Swedish parliament is characterized by strong party organizations, strict discipline, and dual responsibilities of parliamentarians to both their parties and constituencies (Hagevi, 2022; Öhberg & Naurin, 2016). In my view, the generalization of the results from this article mainly depends on the degree of "fittingness" between Sweden's legislative context and other political systems (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). This includes political institutions with similar proportional systems, disciplined party structures, and collective decision-making processes. My stance on which institutions these might be aligns with how the political ethnographer Fenno views generalization: I recognize that I do not know enough about other similar cases to confidently determine the extent to which the results apply to them, but I simultaneously argue that they might (Fenno, 2000, p. 2).

3.2. Interview Questions and Analytical Approach

The key aspect of any measurement is its validity: the extent to which the empirical measurement accurately reflects the theoretical concept. Maintaining high validity is a challenge when investigating virtue understandings in politics. In Sweden, the term *dygd* (virtue), while etymologically correct, may not effectively capture the meaning of the theoretical concept. *Dygd* is rarely used in everyday language, carries strong religious connotations, and is often employed derogatorily—indeed, being called *dygdig* (virtuous) is more likely meant as sarcasm than praise.

Instead, I used the Swedish term *egenskaper*, which can be translated as "characteristics" or "qualities." The challenge here lies in the fact that parliamentarians may indeed consider specific skills—such as processing large amounts of information—essential to their role, but it could also be that they interpreted *egenskaper* solely in terms of professional competencies. To address this, I asked follow-up questions to clarify whether their answers would change if *egenskaper* were framed more as personal characteristics rather than professional skills. Although this approach likely contributed to parliamentarians understanding the question in a similar way across interviews, I cannot rule out that some understood the question more in terms of professional qualities than personal characteristics, and vice versa. The questions about virtues in politics were the first in a more extensive interview that also covered vices and political dilemmas, which are not the subject of this article. The two questions I asked parliamentarians regarding virtues in politics were the following:

- What characteristics/qualities do you believe a parliamentarian should have?
- In what ways are these characteristics/qualities important in the daily work of parliamentarians?

I analyze parliamentarians' answers to these two questions through a two-step thematic coding structure. Although thematic analysis lacks both an exact definition and a precise description of how it should be used, it is generally seen as a method to identify, analyze, and report patterns within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). I adopt the flexible coding structure outlined by Deterding and Waters (2021), which is a stepwise coding structure where each step serves a particular empirical or theoretical function. In the initial step, I closely adhered to the empirical material, coding parliamentarians' answers into the following two pre-determined nodes: "What virtues a parliamentarian should have" and "Other important theoretical elements." The first node includes all virtues either directly or indirectly mentioned by parliamentarians. The total number of mentioned virtues, or the codes, presented in quantitative terms are those parliamentarians mentioned before any substantial follow-up questions were asked.

In the next stage, I examined these virtues in relation to previous research, such as assessing whether any virtue could be considered cardinal. I also used thematic analysis to construct themes based on similarities in legislators' reasoning about the importance of specific virtues. This methodological process is best described as abductive rather than strictly inductive or deductive. In this article, the abductive approach involves moving iteratively between the empirical material and the theoretical literature outlined above, generating "theoretical hunches" that are then systematically explored and refined through thematic analysis (Earl Rinehart, 2021; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Following the approach commonly adopted by scholars in empirical political theory, this study aims to generate rather than test theory (Floyd, 2022; Herzog & Zacka, 2019; Longo & Zacka, 2019; Martinsson, 2024a; Zacka, 2017). Generating theory at a principal level arguably necessitates focusing on overarching collective views—that is, what is shared across parliamentarians' reasoning—rather than systematically comparing subgroups within the Swedish parliament. While information on party affiliation and gender is included in the results to highlight the diversity within the group, conducting a detailed quantitative or qualitative analysis of subgroup differences would have required a different methodological approach as well as another theoretical aim. Future research with these methods and aims could build on or challenge these findings by examining how factors such as gender and party affiliation, which prior studies suggest influence views on political representation more generally (Barrling Hermansson, 2004; Erikson & Josefsson, 2020; Öhberg et al., 2022), also affect views on cardinal virtues, virtue pluralism, and the five virtue themes identified in this article.

4. Results

4.1. The Cardinal Virtue: Separating Ideas From Those Who Hold Them

The Swedish parliament can be a perplexing place for an outsider. Stepping into the chamber, one will see parliamentarians clashing over political matters. The debates are generally civil and policy-oriented—heavier on substance than theatrics. The debates can, however, still be harsh, particularly about ideological and polarizing topics. Yet when parliamentarians step out of the chamber to the coffee machine outside, it is hard to find any lingering hard feelings: "It's like a tennis match," Gustav from the Liberal Party explained, "when you are on the court, you are competitors. You play hard. You can even get angry. But after the match, you clap each other on the back and talk about something else."

In the Swedish parliament, this practice is known as *skilja på sak och person*, which roughly translates to "separating ideas from those who hold them." Given that this notion was raised repeatedly in the early stages of the interview process, I began to bring it up myself in the follow-up questions. Among the parliamentarians asked to comment on its importance, there was an almost universal endorsement of it as a fundamental virtue in the Swedish parliament. Analyzing parliamentarians' motivations for why it was important, I argue that it takes the form of a cardinal virtue.

Being able to separate ideas from those who hold them was what the Social Democrat Olof described as a *grundförutsättning*, a foundational prerequisite: "I'm happy to go a tough round with a political opponent in the chamber," he explained, "but I can also have a coffee with them right afterwards." Henrik from the Sweden Democrats expressed a similar view, stating that separating ideas from those who hold them is what "makes

it all possible." Johanna from the Social Democratic Party similarly remarked that this separation is "a bit of a badge of honor in national politics."

As these responses indicate, separating ideas from those holding them forms the foundational structure enabling the cultivation and practice of other virtues. The points many parliamentarians raised were that separating ideas from those who hold them "is what makes it all possible" and that it is the "basic prerequisite" for parliamentary work. This sentiment underscores a common belief: Failing to distinguish a political opponent's arguments from their personal identity undermines one's own effectiveness in the Swedish parliament. The ability to do this therefore attains the status of a cardinal virtue as the exercise of other virtues hinges upon it.

Why is it important to separate ideas from those who hold them in the Swedish parliament? The answer, I argue, lies in the inherent nature of parliamentary work. Parliamentarians need to project political conflict outward to foster critical debates on key political differences while simultaneously preserving the possibility of working together within the walls of the parliament. Debates in the chamber constitute one main arena for parliamentarians to project conflict. A confrontational approach is necessary here since it is "very much about clarifying [the differences] for voters, but also for society in general; [clarifying] that there are different actors [in politics] and to make it clear where the political differences are and what questions we are prioritizing," Lena from the Green Party observed. However, the confrontational tone should be dropped once parliamentarians step out of the public eye: "We distinguish between what happens in the chamber so that you can have rather tough political debates…but then you must be able to cooperate so that the work can continue in the committees and in other ways," Maja from the Left Party explained. Bengt of the Green Party summarized the distinction between portraying conflict outwards while maintaining the possibility of working together behind closed doors:

> If I am being honest, I think that cleavages in the public debate are the essence of what politics is. There is no point in having a representative democracy if everyone thinks the same thing. So, [cleavages] are a very, very, very important part. Parallel with that, it is also important to be able to sit down and agree about the political substance.

Given the importance of relationship-building in the Swedish parliament, parliamentarians unable or unwilling to separate ideas from those who hold them risk being isolated and thus becoming ineffective. To separate ideas from those who hold them is "completely decisive," Johanna from the Social Democratic Party explained, noting that it is "pretty clear that the people who don't master that become isolated very, very quickly." One reason for this is the unpredictability of future cooperation: "Relationships mean a lot," Roger from the Center Party remarked, "suddenly you do not know whom to cooperate with and who to be in opposition to, because that can change from election to election."

4.2. Virtue Pluralism

Parliamentarians widely agreed that virtue pluralism is essential for the functionality, drive, and influence of party groups in the Swedish parliament. Party groups need to fill many roles and responsibilities. Parliamentarians may take or be assigned many of these roles, which can change drastically depending on whether their party is part of the government, cooperating with the government, or in opposition: "All in all,

we need members of parliament with slightly different qualities," Fredrik from the Moderate Party noted, underlining how he "think[s] the profile of what qualities you are looking for can probably shift a little depending on what role the member will play." Simon from the Liberal Party likewise observed how "you can be a parliamentarian in many different ways." Henrik from the Sweden Democrats argued along similar lines, saying:

> I think there must be many different qualities [in parliament]. A variety of qualities can generate dynamic work….For me, there is no easy answer to that question [What characteristics/qualities he believed a parliamentarian should have], but I think both the analytical part, the kind of politician you might not often see, a somewhat analytical, non-charismatic person, is essential to have in politics. But there must also be a charismatic element of creativity and cordiality to get a good mix.

The many roles and responsibilities in the Swedish parliament require an almost endless number of virtues. It is unlikely that any single parliamentarian can have them all. This could be one reason why Bengt of the Green Party argued that parliamentary groups need "a mix of different qualities, rather than all people needing all qualities," asserting that this "would become unsustainable in the end." Relatedly, many parliamentarians raised that it is not only important to have virtue plurality in the party group but also that parliamentarians recognize the roles and responsibilities in which these virtues should be exercised. Gunnar from the Liberal Party explained, "It is crucial to understand group dynamics, group development, and all these things," underscoring that parliamentarians cannot think that they have "a mandate just for themselves."

The analysis of parliamentarians' responses clearly indicates that no single set of virtues can encapsulate who one ought to be in politics. The need for virtue pluralism stems from the lack of a single possible approach to the representative mission as individual parliamentarians may take on, or be assigned, different roles and responsibilities. It was a widely shared notion among parliamentarians that party groups need those who are quick and savvy in the media to generate attention, those who are firmly based in their local constituency to galvanize support, those who are great analytical thinkers, and those who know the ins and outs of parliamentary craftsmanship. Helen from the Left Party captured this sentiment as follows: "You need the theorists, you need the one who shoots from the hip, you need the one who says stop, and you need the ones who keep shooting off ideas."

4.3. Five Virtue Themes

Parliamentarians mentioned or alluded to 48 different virtues. To have and act on 48 virtues is undoubtedly a daunting task for any parliamentarian. Luckily, the relevance of most virtues depends on parliamentarians' roles and responsibilities within their party groups. Certain virtues were important for similar reasons. These common features are the basis for what I call *virtue themes*. Conducting a thematic analysis, I identified five such virtue themes: craftsman, entrepreneurial, integrity, social, and wisdom. Figure 1 presents the virtues parliamentarians mentioned or alluded to, their frequency, and their thematic categorization. The cardinal virtue and aspects of virtue pluralism are excluded from the frequency measure as I describe them separately. Figure 2 illustrates the relative size of each theme.

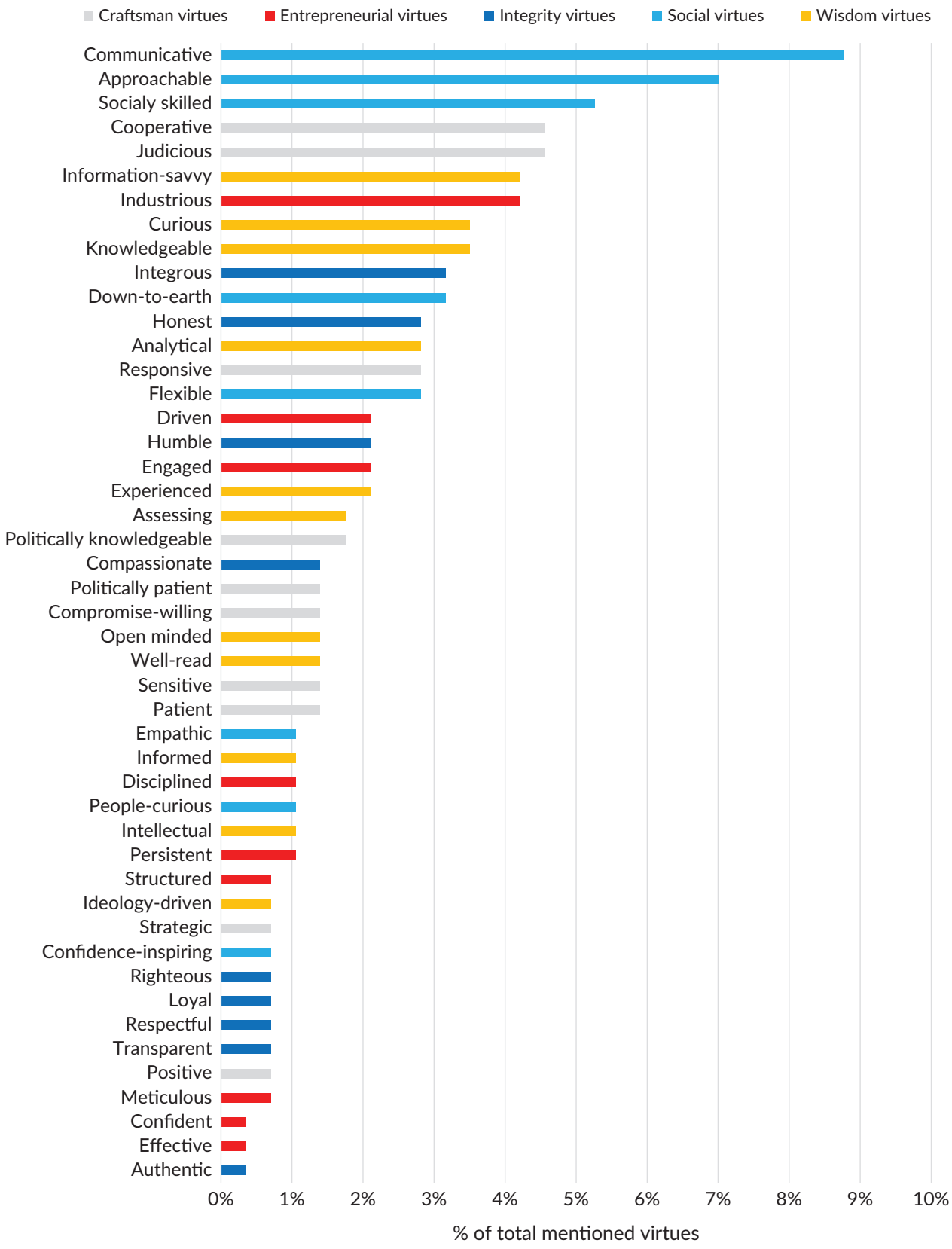

Figure 1. Parliamentary virtues and themes. Notes: Percentage of all virtues divided by themes; total number of mentioned virtues = 277.

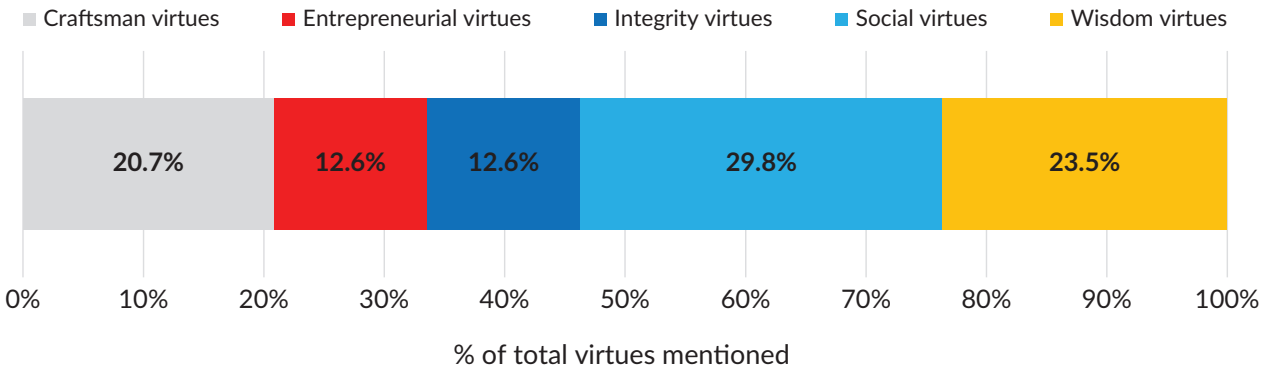

Figure 2. Relative size of virtue themes. Note: Total number of mentioned virtues = 277.

4.3.1. Integrity Virtues

"First and foremost, they should have high integrity," Linnéa from the Moderate Party responded when I asked what virtues she believed were most important for Swedish parliamentarians. Her response largely reflects the views of parliamentarians who emphasized integrity virtues as fundamental virtues all parliamentarians should have or strive to acquire. These virtues represent around 13% of the coded virtues.

Virtues in the integrity theme were underscored as foundational for upholding parliamentary conduct, particularly in withstanding undue pressure in the decision-making process: "There are many people who want to influence the Riksdag and members of the Riksdag," Mohamad from the Moderate Party explained, and it therefore is "important at all levels to be able to listen to everyone. But it is important that you treat all information, even that from your friends, with integrity." Irene from the Left Party pointed out the challenge of engaging with various groups while upholding integrity: "You should preferably be very social and meet people in the constituency, but at the same time, you cannot just agree with everyone on everything. You must also be able to state your own opinion." She concluded that upholding this distinction is "an impossible job." Karin of the Moderate Party considered both perspectives:

> We spend a lot of time doing visits, talking to people, having contact by phone or oftentimes with Skype at the moment. In general, we have a lot of external contacts. Depending on which committee you are on, there are different interest groups [that are important]. It is critical to discuss with these organizations, such as lobbyists and others, and you must be open and listen to them. At the same time, it is essential that you have personal integrity, that you understand that the people you talk to may have slightly different agendas than you do, and that they have a specific direction they want to push you towards, somewhere they think that politics should go. But you have to make these trade-offs, so personal integrity is critical.

Integrity virtues also include the conduct parliamentarians expect in relationships with each other, such as honesty, respectfulness, and compassion. These are particularly important in relationships that occur inside the Swedish parliament. Similar to interactions with external actors like lobbyists, acting based upon these virtues was fundamental to parliamentary conduct and not explicitly tied to a specific role or responsibility.

4.3.2. Entrepreneurial Virtues

Regarding the nature of parliamentary work in Sweden, Oskar of the Moderate Party stated, "I usually say that it is very similar to running a business. You plan your work and your time yourself. In the end, you must be productive." There are no guidebooks for how to be a parliamentarian, "no manual, 'do this and it will turn out right,'" as Roger from the Center Party explained; "instead, you as a parliamentarian need to be driven." The Sweden Democrat Louise similarly claimed:

> It is not like a job where you are told what to do every day. So, if you do not take initiative, come up with ideas, or develop policies and keep your eyes open to what's happening in the news or different groups…then it can get quite dull.

The virtues in the entrepreneurial theme—such as being industrious, structured, and meticulous—were identified by several parliamentarians as key to making the most of their tenure in parliament. These virtues account for around 13% of all coded virtues.

The entrepreneurial virtues emphasize a willingness to work hard, be driven, and be structured enough to accomplish things without supervision. Nils of the Center Party likened the parliamentary role to being a farmer: "There are different chores in a week, but it requires that you do things all the time, ticking off things that have to be done so that you can be flexible." The focus on structure and the ability to handle a mounting workload is easier if parliamentarians are willing to "work seven days a week" and are "passionate about learning new things" as Birgitta from the Moderate Party explained.

The necessity for entrepreneurial virtues arises from the expectation that parliamentarians should be ready to serve in committees beyond their first choice or area of expertise—not everyone can sit in the Committee on Finance—and rapidly switch between them when needed. This necessitates both a willingness and entrepreneurial drive to quickly adapt to new circumstances: "You must have some drive, a desire to learn something new because you can get into just about any committee," Karl from the Social Democratic Party observed; "it is not like you get there [the Swedish parliament] and say I want to work on these questions, and then it is done. You can end up with anything, and then you have to tackle the situation as it is." Oskar of the Moderate Party echoed this sentiment, highlighting how "you must be able to move from the Committee on Environment and Agriculture to the Committee on Health and Welfare and still be able to quickly familiarize yourself with the information, be good at planning and organizing your life." He concluded that this adaptability "is much easier if you plan and organize."

4.3.3. Craftsman Virtues

Who do you need to be, or what virtues do you need to have, to successfully navigate the parliamentary process? The virtues in the craftsman theme provide some guidance. Representing approximately 21% of the coded virtues, this theme underlines the practical, nuts-and-bolts side of parliamentary work. Two types of virtues within this theme stand out: (a) those necessary for discerning the correct decisions and (b) those vital for guiding these decisions through the political system.

The first kind are virtues such as being attentive, judicious, and politically knowledgeable. They concern "the ability to listen and evaluate information from different angles and then make decisions based on your

political beliefs or ideology," as Maria from the Center Party explained, or the "ability to listen and be able to make decisions based on all accumulated knowledge," according to Maja from the Left Party. These comments are indicative of a significant notion among many parliamentarians, namely that these virtues were necessary for their ability to absorb different perspectives, evaluate options, and choose the best way forward—what Kent from the Sweden Democrats and Christer from the Social Democratic Party described as having *fingertoppskänsla*, which roughly translates to "sensitivity." According to John from the Liberal Party, this includes the ability to "think a bit further." Irene from the Left Party raised similar points, arguing that parliamentarians should "be quite broad in their knowledge" and "think about many things at the same time, to draw generalizable conclusions from one committee report to the next."

The remaining virtues mainly concern the second type of craftsman virtues, which are important for parliamentarians in guiding decisions through the parliamentary process. Key among these was being responsive, patient, and willing to make compromises within the parliamentary arena—an arena Roger of the Center Party described as "an institution whose life to a great extent is about grand compromises." While parliamentarians' roles in cooperating or making compromises depends on their status within the party and their party's current goals, certain aspects cross this divide—primarily the need to find compromises within party groups themselves as well. The need for a compromising mindset was often raised with regard to committee work, where a cooperative and positive mindset was said to increase parliamentarians' influence. Daniel of the Social Democratic Party framed these aspects of parliamentary work in terms of alliance building: "It can be alliances within one's party, it can be alliances with other parties, it can be an alliance with individual municipalities, it can be alliances with organizations, and so forth."

4.3.4. Wisdom virtues

The virtues in the wisdom theme are those enabling parliamentarians to approach parliamentary work in an open-minded and analytical way, and they comprise approximately 24% of all virtues. Proponents of these virtues underlined the importance of curiosity, understood as showing an openness to new ideas and developing their understandings rather than being stuck in old truths. Anna from the Liberal Party called this a "flexible intellect." The virtues in this theme paint a portrait of the thoughtful and reflective parliamentarian, one who is "perhaps a little more leaned back than one might generally think," as Elin from the Social Democratic Party described. Parliamentarians stressed that parliamentary work should be about analyzing the pros and cons of a policy proposal rather than taking jabs at each other on social media: "Democracy takes time," Magnus from the Center Party noted; "you can't just go all out and celebrate short-term wins on Twitter."

Importantly, being wise was not mainly about having a certain level of intellectual capacity or a specific academic degree. Rather, the virtues central to this theme rested on a distinct kind of intellectual ability, namely "the capacity to analyze what is happening, see connections, and draw conclusions," as Olof from the Social Democratic Party stated. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the foremost virtue in this theme was the ability to comprehensively take in, analyze, and draw conclusions based on complex materials—to be information-savvy. Leif from the Christian Democratic Party, for instance, argued that:

> It would be wrong to put up specific criteria or to have some IQ quota. But you need a certain minimum measure of talent to cope with the job and do it well. We cannot just take in *pleti* and *creti* believing

> that their words carry equal weight just because different groups are represented like this. There need to be people who both want and can solve different problems.

How this type of intellectual capacity should be acquired is a dividing line within this virtue theme, with a split between proponents of practical lived experience and advocates of ideological and political expertise. Proponents of the former perspective mainly argued that practical knowledge and diligence are crucial for understanding policy implications. In this view, strict adherence to ideology can blind political judgment: "I think members of the Swedish parliament have too much knowledge of ideology and too little knowledge of what people want," John from the Liberal Party remarked. These parliamentarians lack foundational knowledge that is in the bones of those with practical experience. As Mats from the Sweden Democrats expressed, "Sometimes I feel that many people in the Riksdag do not have this. They do not have the experience."

On the other hand, parliamentarians prioritizing ideological and political expertise contended that those legislating in areas they used to work in often fail to see the forest for the trees. They argued that the ideological compass, rather than practical experience, ought to guide the analytical process. These parliamentarians maintained that citizens had voted for a party that stands on a certain ideology and therefore deserved to be represented by this ideology rather than the lived experience of an individual parliamentarian. Seeing the value of both practical experience and ideological knowledge, Jan of the Center Party posited:

> Maybe I believe ideology has a more important role because we have a political system based on the fact that we are elected by the people and must represent parties. We have a lot of authorities and others who will be responsible for the expertise, but politicians still have to make the decisions.

Parliamentarians of this viewpoint, like Leif from the Christian Democrats, asserted that practical knowledge "you gain with time," or that "you can learn the expertise," as Irene from the Left Party concluded. Monica from the Social Democratic Party underlined similar points when explaining how she thinks that: "it is more important to connect with the ideology than knowing what happened for that specific question back in 1947."

4.3.5. Social Virtues

Being a parliamentarian is an inherently social endeavor. To varying degrees, parliamentarians are required to create, maintain, and strengthen relationships with party members, constituencies, and other parliamentarians. The virtues in the social theme are the ones parliamentarians rely on to do this well. Representing approximately 30% of the coded virtues, the virtues in this theme were the most frequently mentioned ones.

Among these virtues was being socially skilled. Generally, having social skills was linked to what Nils from the Center Party and Karl of the Social Democratic Party characterized as the ability to *ta folk*, meaning to talk to regular people in everyday face-to-face meetings. Several parliamentarians explained that this requires a certain degree of social flexibility: "You have to be very flexible, and it is good if you can handle people in different ways," Monica from the Social Democratic Party explained, clarifying how "you need to be able to fit into different contexts; to have been in different environments before makes things a lot easier." Margareta

from the Moderate Party reiterated a similar point: "Sometimes you have to speak with farmers in a farmer's way and with the wise in Latin."

While social skills were about interacting with people in general, being communicative was primarily about addressing broader audiences through posting on social media, speaking in the chamber, or writing articles. It is not, as Åke from the Sweden Democrats proposed, a bad thing if parliamentarians are "somewhat delighted to be noticed." Although it was generally a good thing to be communicative, many parliamentarians also stressed that communicative work always needed to be tied to the parliamentarian's roles and responsibilities in the party group and to align with their party's objectives.

Moreover, the virtues in the social theme extend beyond delivering messages, equally encompassing the ability to listen and maintain approachability for voters: "It is important that we not only listen to the voters in every election," Helena from the Social Democratic Party shared when underlining responsiveness, "but you should also listen between elections, and many parliamentarians do this well." Elisabeth from the Christian Democrats reinforced this point, asserting how "above all, you have to be interested in people. This applies at all levels of politics. I must be interested in people's opinions because I represent the voters." Elin from the Social Democratic Party summarized the need for parliamentarians to listen rather than always speaking: "If I am being completely honest, I think it is better to have big ears than a big mouth."

Being approachable is associated with the Swedish concept of being *jordnära*, which loosely translates to being down to earth. This entails having "dialogue[s] in the community," as Bengt from the Green Party described, and maintaining "great contact with the foundation," as Johanna from the Social Democratic Party stated. Parliamentarians emphasizing this virtue sometimes mentioned it in relation to being re-elected, thus underscoring this virtue's electoral significance: "All this is based on trust," Gustav from the Liberal Party noted; "this whole industry is based on the importance of understanding your constituency." Similarly, Fredrik from the Moderate Party mentioned that he "also think[s] that if you want to be successful in such a constituency [in the countryside], you have to be reasonably down to earth and like being in the small local contexts," concluding that "perhaps Twitter is not the most important arena" for these contexts.

5. Conclusion

Gustav of the Liberal Party likened his work in the Swedish parliament to a tennis match: Competitors clash fiercely on the court but step off with mutual respect. This metaphor encapsulates the cardinal virtue in the Swedish parliament: the ability to separate ideas from those who hold them. For Swedish parliamentarians, this virtue seems to be not merely a matter of personal conduct but a foundational principle that enables the balance between vigorous political debate and the collaborative relationships that many identified as central to parliamentary work. In addition to this cardinal virtue, the findings underline the importance of pluralism within parliamentary groups. The wide range of virtues discussed by parliamentarians, categorized into five key themes—entrepreneurial, social, integrity, wisdom, and craftsman—reflects the multifaceted nature of their representative roles and responsibilities. Collectively, these findings underscore a perspective that I argue warrants further theoretical and empirical exploration: the interdependent nature of virtues in political practice.

What does it mean that virtues in political practice are interdependent? It can mean, as emphasized throughout the history of virtue ethics, that certain virtues are cardinal—so essential that their absence diminishes the value of other virtues, which often depend on them. It can also mean that politicians work in close cooperation with others, especially in legislative settings where diverse roles must be fulfilled. However, as has been less emphasized in past scholarship, the interdependent nature of virtues found in this study suggests that the effectiveness of any given virtue depends not only on the individual fulfilling their role but also on the broader composition of virtues within the group. Contrary to traditional models like the delegate–trustee distinction, the interdependent view originating from political practice underscores that the virtues essential for effective representation are shaped both by individual roles as well as the collaborative dynamics within the political group. Similarly, the interdependent perspective on virtues in politics suggests that for politicians, the "good representative" as discussed in previous literature on representation and political ethics, should not be understood solely in terms of the representative's relationship with voters or the demands of their specific role, but also in terms of how their virtues interact with and complement those of their political colleagues.

Before drawing extensive theoretical or empirical conclusions from these findings, certain limitations of this study that future research could address should be acknowledged. First, the operationalization of virtues as questions about *egenskaper*—a term translatable as both qualities and characteristics—likely shaped the results. This framing might explain why only 13% of the coded virtues fall within the integrity theme, despite its prominence in theoretical and normative literature. This discrepancy could either reflect a different understanding of integrity in political practice or indicate that the question's framing led politicians to overlook aspects traditionally associated with virtues in politics. Clarifying which of these explanations is more accurate could be a valuable contribution in future research. Additionally, this study's methodological aim has been to generate rather than test theory. Future research employing alternative methods is needed to evaluate the empirical robustness of these findings, particularly if they are applicable across diverse political contexts and cultures. Such studies could also examine variations based on key factors like gender, age, and political experience.

Beyond examining the empirical prevalence of the results, a fundamental question remains for future research: To what extent are these virtues parliamentarians spoke of conceptually and normatively significant in determining which virtues ought to be valued in politics? While empirical findings cannot—or at least should not—dictate the definition of theoretical concepts or their normative importance, they can provide a valuable foundation for normative and theoretical analysis by enhancing the likelihood that the theoretical conclusions are practically relevant. Fostering a dialogue between empirical realities and normative ideals in this way can deepen our understanding of virtues in politics, which in turn increases the likelihood that the results remain significant for both scholarly inquiry and the practical demands of democratic governance.

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