

Introduction

Politicians in Representative Politics

An Introduction to an Ambiguous Conceptual History

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When History was established as a scholarly discipline in nineteenth-century Europe, the history of politics formed its core. Many other subdisciplines have been developed since, but political history has remained important. Odd though it might seem, political history has never paid much attention to how ‘politicians’ – arguably its main institutional actors – have talked about themselves, perhaps because that seemed to be self-evident. Politicians have been ubiquitous in the modern world, and one would expect to find many historical studies of the changing meanings of the word, term or concept of ‘politician’, yet, in fact, they are rare. The few existing historical studies testify to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, since they have often been written by historical sociologists or political scientists. They do not pay much attention to words or concepts, and are mostly interested in modern or contemporary politicians. However, they help to understand some of the ambiguities that have appeared time and again in the history of the concept of politician. In particular, the professionalisation of politicians has attracted the attention of researchers, even though the literature on this topic is not abundant either. French historical and political sociologist Michel Offerlé edited an important collection of essays about ‘la profession politique’ (1999). His German colleague Jens Borchert (2003) has also used a historical perspective in trying to determine the special nature of the political profession. Their original work has not led to a fresh wave of historical literature, even though, for instance, the extensive new epilogue to the re-edition of Offerlé’s collection in 2017 presents an update of the bibliography about the contemporary and historical sociology of politics.

Until quite recently, with a few exceptions, these studies have focused on the sociological emergence of the modern type of politician and on twentieth-century politicians (e.g. Westermayer 1998; Phélippeau 2002; Biefang 2009, esp. Chapter 3.1). They take their point of departure from ideas about politicians that partly originated in late nineteenth-century Europe and seemed to find their definitive expression in Max Weber's famous lecture about the profession and calling of the politician (1919). The lecture has been a crucial reference in literature about politicians, and will also be discussed in this volume, in Chapters 1, 3 and 5. One of the reasons for the continuing popularity of this text is that Weber does not accuse politicians of being 'mere' professionals, let alone opportunists or carpetbaggers, but discusses the ways in which politicians can be and have been, at the same time, both professionals and serious idealists. Weber's conception has been hailed by politicians who were looking back on their own work, also because the conception speaks to self-images of politicians. Self-images of politicians are also the starting point for the present volume. They show that not only the concept of politician but also the meaning of 'professionalisation' has changed considerably over time.

Politicians have often been attacked because they were mere professionals or not professional enough, because they were abstract intellectuals or thoughtless opportunists, because they were mere activists or because they had lost all contact with their activist roots, or because they looked after their own interest but ignored the interest of crucial parts of their constituency. In this volume, we do not recycle these accusations against politicians but instead try to understand the contested nature of the figure of the politician by investigating historical and contemporary expressed self-images of and discussions about politicians in a number of European countries. We investigate the use of language, mainly in the context of representative institutions. Discussions about what it means to be a politician demonstrate that they have always been at the centre of multiple tensions: between practical and principled, between the general national interests and party or other particular interests, between different forms of professionalism and expertise, between calling and profession, between dilettante activism and professionalism. Instead of a linear history of the species of politicians, in different contexts there have been different conceptions of professionalisation, interests, principles and actions. The concept of the politician has been constantly (re-)calibrated and has never been fixed or completely stable. In general, politicians have been perhaps seen as neither 'pure' impartial and dispassionate administrators nor 'pure' idealists and passionate activists with clean hands, but rather improvising intermediate figures trying to make the best of difficult and unpredictable situations and exercising 'political guidance'.

In this book readers will not find a teleological history of the figure of the politician but an analysis of its various meanings in different contexts. Historical agents had no sense of a clear progress in their understandings of politicians, as if previous conceptions of being a politician were configurations of later, more complete, forms of being professional politicians. We try to understand (Western) European politicians since the late eighteenth century by analysing their self-conceptualisations as political agents. A plural, comparative understanding adds to a Europe-focused conceptual history. In order to make a meaningful contribution to the historiography on politicians, we have made choices to delineate the scope of the book. The most important one is that we use a conceptual approach. We do not limit ourselves to just a history of words, but we use conceptual history to understand images and linguistic constructions, and thereby the nature of being a politician. There are some, mostly German, conceptual histories of *Politik*, from *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Sellin 1978) to '*Politik*': *Situationen eines Wortgebrauchs im Europa der Neuzeit* (Steinmetz 2007). Kari Palonen – the initiator of the present volume – has written a number of studies over the past few decades that break new ground, but so far, a study of the conceptual history of the politician, or *der Politiker*, does not exist, and certainly not in an international comparative sense. In order to be able to present a contribution to a comparative conceptual history of politicians, we have made a second choice. We study politicians in representative systems and as 'representatives' or political actors in parliaments from the late eighteenth century onwards. Digitised parliamentary debates, now generally available, have been our main sources, as they reflect major trends in the development of key concepts of politics over time. Furthermore, this book is part of a series in European conceptual history, and we have limited ourselves to Western Europe and countries whose languages we master. Even in the case of these languages, national specificities are not always translatable to English (which we use as our analytical language), and hence quotations in the original language are provided when necessary. All translations into English have been made by the authors themselves.

We are aware of Europe's imperial histories and the alternative path to modern politics offered by the United States, to which we refer when appropriate. The warning and encouraging examples of an American 'politician' are discussed in Chapters 1, 3, 5 and 6 and American contributions to conceptualisations of international political actors are addressed in connection with the founding of the United Nations in Chapter 7, for example. Each contribution deals with at least two different European countries. Though not exclusively, most contributions concentrate on Western and Northern Europe, where democratic representative institutions emerged and many

of the most defining discussions of politics, political representation, parliamentary government, democracy and the duties of politicians have taken place since the late eighteenth century. While discussions were informed by transnational interaction, they usually circulated around national parliaments as the primary forums of acting politically. Representative forums at local, regional and supranational levels often mirrored parliamentary procedures and ways of conceptualising political agency. Conceptual analyses in national contexts are our starting points, and we take into account national peculiarities as well as international comparisons. There have always been partly separate national developments and not just one fully transnational history. This volume also shows that it has always been difficult to imagine ‘international’ politicians; the notion of the politician as a national actor has only lately been challenged by globalisation and European integration. Without a clear sovereign polity, it is hard to think about the representatives as politicians, or at least to use that express term.

We are not aiming for an exhaustive or comprehensive history of the politician in Europe. Rather, we cast light on the figure of the politician in national and European institutions, and point to similarities and differences between a number of national polities. Our volume offers a substantial and relevant empirical basis from which we have comparatively reassessed one of the pivotal concepts or figures in modern political imaginations in a number of European countries since the late eighteenth century. Whether consciously or not, the ways in which politicians described themselves and others as political actors have always been politically and strategically relevant. We investigate rhetorical moves of parliamentarians in different national, institutional and linguistic contexts.

Over the past decades, national histories have been increasingly placed in broader international, transnational and global contexts. A comparative and transnational conceptual history is interested in interactions and transfers between countries. Concepts typically travel from one context to another and are redefined in connection with transfers to fit new national contexts. ‘Politician’ and ‘statesman’ are examples of concepts that are transnational and national at the same time. National specificities best become visible and understandable through cross-national comparisons focusing on both conceptual transfers and diverging, isolated national trajectories.

The concept of politician has been recurrently contested in discussions about politics, political representation and parliamentary government in the countries discussed in the volume: Belgium, Britain, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden, together with some inter- and supranational institutions like the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the League of Nations, the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European

Union. A comparative conceptual history can show the plurality and diversity of political discussions, and helps explain transnational similarities in trends, occurrences of terms and the popularisation of vocabulary rhetorically associated with politicians. Rather than uncovering Europe's political heritage as uniform and unique, our volume shows on the basis of empirical data that there is no immediately identifiable common progression when it comes to defining the politician, even if there have been some similarities. We try to work beyond national historical exceptionalism – without losing sensitivity to national nuances such as the exceptionally pejorative meanings that *politicien* has had in French political discourse when compared with the British 'politician' or the Swedish *politiker*, for instance. In this sense, the volume unlocks the potential that comparative approaches offer.

Sources and Methodological Framework

This volume, *The Figure of the Politician in Modern and Contemporary Europe*, examines how historical agents came to perceive and describe individuals who were engaged in political processes, joined a political party, stood as a candidate for elections, campaigned to be elected, spent most of their time doing politics by engaging themselves in debates, negotiations and decision-making on laws and policies, and often received a salary or other type of economic or symbolic compensation, and so on. Whether actors self-identified with this notion or rejected it, or described others as such, are central questions.

In order to grasp the conceptualisations of 'politician' we combine semasiological and onomasiological approaches in a variety of ways in different chapters, sometimes focusing more on the very words used to describe 'politicians' and 'statesmen' and their meanings (semasiology), sometimes considering broader vocabularies surrounding representative political actors and related ideas (onomasiology). The chapters in this book range from strictly empirical inventories of (self-)descriptions of politicians (Chapters 1–5, 7–8) to a political science ideal-typical¹ analysis of politicians focusing on the aspects of politicisation, polity, politicking and policy and thereby adding a more analytical level to empirical historical analysis (Chapters 6 and 9). Using the empirical findings of the volume, the concluding Chapter 9 considers politicians as being permanently torn between different pairs of values, of belonging versus excluding, expedient versus normative, partisan versus independent, controversial versus customary, and contingent versus permanent. Even if the first value of each pair often prevails, politicians always have to negotiate. The volume as a whole tries to understand politicians by analysing their (self-)images over the years, while Chapter 9 uses

these images to analyse the choices politicians have been faced with and shows how difficult and essential their work has always been.

While we selectively illuminate the history of the concept of politician, authors approach their source material by addressing its unique contextual particularities. Each chapter thus illustrates diversity in research practices within conceptual history broadly understood – as a research perspective and as a lens through which we can study the language of the past, with affinity to historical semantics, rhetoric and intellectual history and to a more limited extent with discourse analysis (Ihalainen and Marjanen 2025). With a combination of empirical conceptual and ideal-typical analyses, the volume as a whole reflects a commitment to methodological pluralism and captures the kaleidoscopic nature of the field (Rosales and López 2021).

In modern representative and deliberative democracies, parliaments constitute a unique site for the use of power, argumentation, deliberation and decision-making. Parliamentary debates are regulated by agenda-setting and procedure and recorded systematically under established rules. They present a high variety of political ideologies, discourses and concepts moving in societies and meeting in the same place at the same time (Halonen, Ihalainen and Saarinen 2015; Ihalainen and Saarinen 2019). For conceptual history, parliamentary debates provide unique sources for long-term national and international comparisons (Ihalainen and Palonen 2009; Ihalainen, Ilie and Palonen 2016). Contributions to parliamentary debates involve pragmatic uses of concepts, often rhetorically applied in speech acts for positive and negative evaluations depending on prevalent associations of the term politician and designed to achieve particular goals concerning the substance of the debate. Evaluations of politicians as statesmen, for instance, may have been commented on by fellow representatives, leading to a debate on the exact meaning of these concepts. In the countries studied here, historical parliamentary debates have been made available in long-time series and in a digitised and machine-readable form, which is not yet the case with, for instance, the party press of every country. Regarding these parliaments, it has now become possible to combine quantitative diachronic distant reading with contextualising qualitative conceptual analysis of speech acts in specific debate situations. In this type of research, quantitative tools are used to help focus analytical attention.

We have made use of a number of national databases on parliamentary debates and have drawn our quantitative data and visualisations mostly from a comparative interface of parliamentary debates called *People & Parliament (P&P)*. *People & Parliament* has been constructed by the Centre for Digital Humanities of Utrecht University, the Netherlands, in cooperation with the Academy of Finland Professor Project ‘Political Representation: Tensions

between Parliament and the People from the Age of Revolutions to the 21st Century' at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.²

Three digital methods of text mining applied in *People & Parliament* have been used in this volume. Firstly, we have explored neighbouring words (collocations) that give meaning to the term politician. Focusing on the most common ngrams (bigrams, trigrams or quadrigrams) helps to reconstruct historical vocabularies and phrases surrounding 'politician' and explore how the concept has been qualified over time (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3). Secondly, absolute or relative-term or document frequencies of 'politician' and related phrases allow the reconstruction of sub-discourses, patterns, ruptures and semantic change (see Figures 3.1–3.3, 4.1 and 7.1–7.2). Thirdly, word-embedding models guide conceptual historians to words appearing in historical texts in similar textual contexts with the term politician (see Appendix). They suggest changes in the lexical field that has surrounded the term politician, including potential pseudo-synonyms and antonyms, and also point to more unexpected related vocabulary worth further contextual exploration. We have made use of word-embedding models to present a diachronic overview of changes in vocabulary surrounding 'politician' in five countries since the nineteenth century, integrating observations based on such distant reading with findings arising from contextualising close reading in the empirical chapters. As the examples below illustrate, the 'neighbourhood' or parallel contexts of 'politician' in parliamentary debates can stand for very different topics. They indicate different types, levels or arenas of the activities of politicians or, alternatively, qualities of persons (see the oldest layer of politicians in Chapter 6), which might be appreciative or ironic but very frequently have been pejorative, especially in French parliamentary debates. From the nineteenth to the twenty-first century a certain respect for parliamentarian's activities has nevertheless increased at least in the northern parts of Europe.

Since debating and speaking *pro et contra* are at the heart of being a politician, we are researching core aspects of political life (Skinner 1978, ix–xvi; Palonen 2005). In this line, parliamentary debates offer starting points for long-term and comparative analyses, although they are not the only focus of attention. Much commentary on politicians has taken place outside parliaments, so public and academic debates also need to be considered. A variety of sources relevant for each topic and available from each historical era provide historical evidence of the issues that arise in national parliaments and help contextualise political debates. Thus, examining different types of historical sources complements our quantitative and qualitative readings of parliamentary debates. We thereby aim to illuminate the interplay between parliamentary and non-parliamentary spaces of communication.

Newspapers (especially when available in digital form) have been used to provide empirical support on the emergence, circulation and popularity of concepts beyond parliaments, both from synchronic and diachronic perspectives (see Chapter 2, for example). This is particularly relevant because alternative or pejorative terms for politicians circulated widely beyond parliaments, it being easier to criticise colleagues or representatives of a rival party in the press than in their presence in parliamentary chambers. Dictionaries have helped us explore linguistic conventions, standardised definitions and semantic consolidations as shown in Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 8 for Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German and Spanish. A variety of political genres beyond parliamentary records are considered across the volume. These include political speeches and pamphlets (Chapters 2 and 5), party records and manifestos (Chapters 3 and 5), scholarly works (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), institutional reports, minutes of parliamentary-like assemblies (Chapters 3 and 7) and new digital media, such as personal blogs (Chapter 8). Memoirs and correspondence have added insights into private views and opinions, for instance, as discussed for public intellectuals in Chapter 4. Finally, although more prominently in Chapter 1, all chapters draw on state-of-the-art reviews on history of the figure of the politician. Surveys of scholarly literature help us build ideal-typical interpretations in Chapters 6 and 9 while highlighting the originality of our approach.

The Transforming Concept of Politician Since the Late Eighteenth Century: An Overview and Summary of Changing Meanings of ‘Politician’

The volume opens with a long-term perspective on the figure of the politician since antiquity and a review of central scholarly works on the topic in Chapter 1. A romp through this history until the late eighteenth century lays out the conceptual framework and introduces the political vocabularies that will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 analyses the emergence of the modern concept of politician during the Age of Revolutions, focusing on conceptual transformations in four Western European countries, each with its own history of representative government. In Britain, ideas about parliamentary sovereignty, representation, ministerial responsibility and open deliberation had made possible positive conceptualisations of politicians as legitimate practitioners rather than mere theorists or speculators. The sphere of activity of statesmen and politicians was extended there from foreign to domestic politics. In a country like Sweden, by contrast, monarchical sovereignty and estate representation supported the maintenance of old and often pejorative notions of

politicians and statesmen as a tiny group of leading political actors engaged in international relations. In France and the Netherlands, revolutionary concepts of popular sovereignty and representation of the people opened limited possibilities for new, more active and positive conceptualisations of statesmen. Yet several layers of meaning remained simultaneously available within a single representative institution in everyday struggles for power. Negative associations with self-interested, speculative, meddling and malevolent politicians lived on in Britain as well.

Moving to the nineteenth century, we have extensive empirical data to build on.³ Here, by way of introduction to the chapters, we provide an overview of semantic changes in the neighbourhood of the term politician since the late nineteenth century. This overview is based on a distant reading of the top twenty of its related words from parliaments in four historical periods and five countries – France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The periods in question are (i) the nineteenth century until the First World War as an era of the democratisation of parliaments, the starting point and timing varying from country to country, (ii) the interwar years with their challenges to representative government, parliamentarism, democracy and internationalism, (iii) the 1960s and 1970s grouped together as an era when parliamentary democracy was challenged by extra-parliamentary discourses calling for extended citizen participation to supplement political representation, and (iv) the beginning of the twenty-first century as recent history affected by digital communication, polarisation and populism. The tables of the top twenty related words to politician for each period are available in the Appendix. The narrative both complements and highlights the findings discussed in the chapters. Distant and close readings of sources contribute to the same narrative – just as attention to national nuances and the ideal-typical interpretation of general patterns of linguistic change support each other.

*Politicians and Statesmen Before the First World War:
Legislators, Parliamentarians, Orators, Careerists, Professionals*

For much of the nineteenth century, the British parliament continued to use ‘politician’ descriptively, as a near synonym for ‘statesman’, as confirmed by close reading in Chapters 2 and 4. ‘Legislator’ was a positive related term, which retained earlier appreciative connotations of politicians as expert advisors (see Chapter 1). Words appearing in similar contexts – not so much as synonyms of politician but referring to related fields of action from which the active politicians often originated – included ‘philanthropist’, ‘economist’, ‘financier’, ‘imperialist’ and ‘lawyer’ as well as ‘philosopher’, ‘thinker’ and ‘theorist’, following older early-modern usage (Appendix, Table 1). As

political actors, politicians were often perceived as being at the crossroads of such fields of contemporary activity. The importance of speaking for politicians as political actors is reflected by the contextual similarity of the words ‘orator’ and ‘agitator’ estimated by the algorithm, implying appreciation or rejection of the use of language by politicians.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of being a politician concerned in what sense politicians were or should be professionals (Chapter 3). The diatribes against politicians as mere careerists chasing a good income dominated much of the debate about remuneration of professional politicians in several parliaments at the beginning of the twentieth century. On the other hand, politicians of the new extra-parliamentary political parties such as the German Socialist Party SPD prided themselves on being serious professional politicians of a new kind. Our conceptual approach also shows that there existed an older, mostly British idea of professional politicians as established frontbench MPs. These mostly upper-(middle-)class MPs did not need to earn their living in politics, but they were professionals in their life-long devotion to the profession of politics.

In legitimising their role as politicians, political representatives also invoked principles when describing themselves and others, and discussed the perceived distinction and/or tension between principles and pragmatism in politics. Chapter 4 illustrates how politicians elaborated on controversies around these often contradictory understandings of politics in Britain and Spain. The distinction helps us grasp the changing use of terms such as ‘politician’ and ‘statesman’ – the latter becoming gradually used as a term of honour – but it was also used for derogatory labels to address opponents or when portraying intellectuals in parliament. Ultimately, those describing themselves and others as embracing or deprioritising principles had to rhetorically navigate existing beliefs about the inherent (im)morality of politics.

As a qualifier of a politician in Britain, the attribute ‘politic’ or alternatively that of ‘wily’ had traditionally been used in both admiring and highly derogatory senses (see Chapter 6 for a similar ambivalence as regards the use of ‘cunning’). Divergent political viewpoints – mainly from critics – could be characterised by words such as ‘enthusiast’ or ‘agitator’, reflecting parliamentary rhetoric typical of the time, while talking about a ‘patriot’ was an appreciative commonplace in an era of nationalism. Noteworthy is the relatively high frequency of the denominations of ‘democrat’ and ‘reformer’ in similar contexts with ‘politician’ in British data from the long nineteenth century (Appendix, Table 1), reflecting the reformist pressures of the era, with a crucial change towards a more positive understanding of democracy since the 1880s (Saunders 2013) and the rise of the notion of ‘democratic government’ in the 1900s.

Comparable to the British parliament, in the German Reichstag *Politiker* was used interchangeably with *Staatsmann* or *Parlamentarier*. Close appreciative associations included *Parteiführer* (party leader), *Staatskunst* (statecraft) and *Patriot*, neutral classifications *Sozialpolitiker* (social politician) and less positive denominations *Parteimann* (party man) and *Republikaner* (republican). A parliamentary politician might also be characterised with related terms such as *Schwärmer* (enthusiast), *Kritiker* (critic) or *Vorkämpfer* (avant-garde). Associations of the term *Politiker* were highly positive in the Reichstag compared to the much more controversial concept of *Demokrat*, for instance (see Appendix, Table 2). These positive views may have been rooted in an understanding of politics as an art or a doctrine on wisdom (*Klugheitslehre*) since the early modern period – a point argued in Chapter 1.

The history of the concept of politician in France differed considerably from that in Britain and Germany. In the early Third Republic, negative associations of *politicien* dominated (Chapter 3), a connotation that can be traced back to the 1570s around the term *politiques*, as shown in Chapter 1. A *politicien* could be qualified positively (unless used ironically) as brave, companion (*compagnon*), with integrity (*intègre*) or intelligent, or more neutrally as an informer (*délateur*) or militant. Yet much more frequent were highly negative associations such as murderer (*assassin*), slave (*esclave*), spy (*espion*), thief (*voleur*), crook, devil (*diable*), traitor (*traître*), millionaire or Jew (*juif*). There were very few positive comments about *politiciens* in the French parliament, even if some reclaimed the label (see Chapter 6 for examples of the latter; Appendix, Table 3).

These discussions illustrate the democratisation and contestation of political language, and in particular the vocabulary used to describe politicians, as a Europe-wide phenomenon. Indeed, as Chapter 1 argues, this represents a historical momentum in the formation of the politician, which involved steps towards democratisation, bureaucratisation and parliamentarisation.

The Interwar Period: Parliamentarians, Experts, Patriots, Agitators

Respect towards fellow politicians continued to be expressed with the epithet of ‘statesman’ in the interwar British parliament. Terms describing related yet somewhat different activities included ‘lawyer’ but also ‘journalist’ and ‘educationalist’, reflecting connections between Parliament and the press or universities. Old associations with thinkers lived on in references to ‘intellect’ and ‘intelligentsia’ (Appendix, Table 1). A slight similarity between ‘politician’ and ‘pacifist’ or ‘negotiator’ may reflect interwar liberal internationalist goals for a new world order (Ihalainen and Leonhard 2022). Yet, as Chapter 7 shows, the rise of international institutions such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the League of Nations (and the United

Nations after its founding in 1945) did not lead to major redefinitions of the figure of the politician or ideas about representation – despite high hopes for more extensive international cooperation in the late 1920s. Even though some politicians were called ‘European statesmen’, it proved to be quite difficult for political actors to describe themselves as international politicians. National parliaments remained the main forums for representation and political actors in international arenas preferred to present themselves as delegates or representatives of their respective nation states. Rising ideological confrontations in a world in which democracy, parliamentarism and representative government in general appeared to be on trial were reflected by strong associations between ‘politician’ and ‘agitator’. ‘Democrat’ appeared as the fifteenth most related term to ‘politician’ as opposed to the fifth for the nineteenth century. At the same time, nationalist self-images responding to challenges from dictatorships are visible in strong associations not only with ‘patriot’ but also ‘Englishman’ (Appendix, Table 1).

In the first half of the twentieth century politicians often depended on the support of groups whose interest they had to represent, but they rather wanted to avoid being reduced to mouthpieces of specific social interests. Their professional status as politicians depended on a conception of overarching general interests, yet they had to avoid being mere professional politicians, who were only in it for their own profit. Chapter 5 analyses these conceptual dilemmas in France and the Netherlands. Anti-parliamentary sentiments were more widespread in France, both among the radical right and the radical left, and an alternative to parliamentary democracy such as corporatist interest representation was in France mostly a cause of the syndicalist left. In the Netherlands, organicist ideas about corporatist interest representation were developed by social democrats and progressive Catholic politicians and intellectuals alike. On the other hand, the idea that men of action should lead the way became entangled with widespread French scepticism regarding the role of business in politics, fuelled by financial scandals that had battered the reputation of the Third Republic. In the Netherlands, the idea that men of action had to take the lead was more acceptable.

In the Reichstag of the Weimar Republic, too, *Parlamentarier* was increasingly connected to being a politician. Openly pejorative connotations of *Politiker* were not that many (Appendix, Table 2), with the exception of some internationally oriented politicians, as Chapter 7 illustrates. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 6, there was a striking increase in the use of positive attributes in the years 1928–30. *Politiker* might be characterised with the terms *Machtpolitik* (power politics), *Praktiker* (practitioner) and *Persönlichkeiten* (personalities). The spheres of activity most closely associated yet different included economy (*Wirtschaftler*), diplomacy (*Diplomatie*)

and academia (*Historiker*), much like in Britain. Ideological confrontations in the debates were reflected by the related denominations of *Marxist*, *Sozialist* and *Pazifist* (Appendix, Table 2).

In the Dutch parliament, the concept of *politicus* received meanings that resemble those of the British parliament, on the one hand, and the German, on the other. Similar to both was the high degree of synonymy between *politicus* and *staatsman*, which would remain in use longer than in countries of comparison, while in the Netherlands no word referring explicitly to parliamentarianism rose to prominence in the interwar era. *Kamerleden* representing different political parties were nevertheless referred to with the term *politicus*, which implies the neutrality of the concept. Indeed, the most important qualifiers of *politicus* were all positive, including patriot (*vaderlander*), high-quality (*hoogstaand*) and governing (*regeerend*), which reflects a polite parliamentary discourse. Related occupations included economist (*econoom*), diplomat (*diplomaat*), historian (*historicus*) and author (*auteur*) (Appendix, Table 4), again in line with Britain and Germany.

Likewise, in the Swedish parliament, *politiker* and *statsman* carried closely related and overwhelmingly positive meanings. Politicians were leaders, often party leaders (*ledare*, *partiledare*), and they might be characterised as eminent (*framstående*) and experienced (*erfaren*) as well as champions (*mästare*) who might be praised (*berömma*) due to their wisdom (*visdom*) and personality (*personlighet*), the last term reflecting transnational connections to contemporary French and German discourse. In Sweden, too, politicians came from closely related yet different professions, such as national economist (*nationalekonom*), scientist (*vetenskapsman*) and journalist (*tidningsman*) (Appendix, Table 5).

Post-war Western Europe: Parliamentarians, Representatives, Opinion Leaders, Activists

By the 1960s and 1970s, ‘statesman’ had dropped dramatically in the list of words related to ‘politician’ in most parliaments, being replaced by the more neutral term ‘parliamentarian’, which only now became a leading related term. Vocabulary describing alternatives to being a ‘politician’ had changed, featuring terms such as ‘bureaucrat’, ‘historian’, ‘diplomat’, ‘lawyer’ or ‘patriot’, the last two less distinctly than previously. Traditional references to thinkers did not feature in the list of the top twenty terms, which now included ‘democrat’, ‘idealist’ and ‘internationalist’ instead, reflecting beliefs and doubts about how to change society. Confrontational parliamentary rhetoric might produce positive associations with ‘chap’ and negative ones with ‘opponent’ and ‘traitor’. New in an emerging audience democracy (Manin 1997) were strong discourses on ‘leadership’ (Appendix, Table 1).

In the Bundestag of the German Federal Republic, the Cold War years saw both continuity and change in words related to *Politiker*. *Parlamentarier* was now accompanied by the international term *Repräsentant* as an appreciative denomination, reflecting the ‘Europeanisation’ of German politics (Palonen 2021: 66, 115, 200, 375–76). As in Britain, politicians were frequently associated with leaders (*Führer*, *führend*) and more particularly with the head of the government (*Regierungschef*), often emphasising the importance of personality (*Persönlichkeiten*). The ability of politicians to act (*handeln*), become engaged (*engagiert*) and take responsibility (*verantwortlich*) was highlighted, which again underscores the modernisation of German politics. Post-1968 discussions on the shortcomings of parliamentary democracy may have been reflected by the word distance (*Distanz*), implying a lack of necessary responsiveness (Appendix, Table 2).

From the perspective of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, politics seemed to be too far removed from the people. Activists were needed to rekindle the fire of politics. Weber’s opposition of calling versus profession re-emerged in the shape of activists as true politicians versus meek, established professional politicians. Just as Weber had argued, some activists who had become politicians, such as the German Green politician Joschka Fischer, insisted that they could resolve the tension by combining the virtues of the expert of parliamentary practices with the authenticity, passion and principles of grassroots politics. Others stuck to their outsider position, even as parliamentarians. This happened in many countries, but was certainly conspicuous in Germany and the Netherlands, the two main cases discussed in Chapter 8.

In the Netherlands *parlementariër*, *volksvertegenwoordiger* (representative of the people) and *Kamerlid* (member of the chamber) were now commonly used in contexts similar to *politicus*, establishing a close identity between politicians and parliamentarians. As in the British and German parliaments, references to (party) leadership (*leider*, *lijsttrekker*) were made, and a good politician might be described as skilled (*bekwaam*) (Appendix, Table 4).

The Swedish conceptualisations of *politiker* in the 1960s and 1970s reveal the extension of the concept to the local level (*kommunalpolitiker*, *kommunalmän*), which may have been more intense in Sweden than in the countries of comparison due to its multi-level representative system. In Swedish parliamentary discourse, politicians appeared like opinion leaders (*opinionsbildare*), decision-makers (*beslutsfattare*) or holders of power (*maktthavande*, *maktthavare*) but might also be members of the Riksdag (*riksdagsmän*), party leaders (*partiledare*) or government members (*regeringsledamöter*, *regeringskretsen*) as elsewhere. In the prevailing conceptualisation, politicians were responsible (*ansvarsmedvetna*), also in relation to their voters (*väljare*). In

Sweden, closely related professions included public debaters (*debattörer*) (Appendix, Table 5).

The French story remains different. Even the post-1968 era saw no turn to more positive understandings of *politicien*: merely the qualifiers of bad politicians had changed. A *politicien* could be subtle (*subtil*, possibly in the sense of concealed), abstract (*abstrait*) or passionate (*passionnel*), all implying ironic praise. The list of derogatory characteristics seems endless, including unreal (*irréel*), *électorale* (implying a tendency to rely on popular prejudices to win elections), *rituel* (implying mere rituals), outdated (*passéiste*), aggressive (*agressif*), misleading (*trompeur*), caricatural, demagogic (*démagogique*), funny (*drôle*), Malthusian (*malthusien*), ideological (*idéologique*), *partial*, superficial (*superficiel*), dogmatic (*dogmatique*) or simplistic (*simpliste*) (Appendix, Table 3).

The Early Twenty-First Century: Democrats, Representatives of the People, Female Politicians, European Politicians, Populists

The late twentieth century was distinguished from earlier periods – including that of the founding of the United Nations in the 1940s – by the gradual but still hesitant emergence of a European representative politician. While some had hinted at the idea of a European representative in the early stages of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, the concept had not become conceivable until the gradual construction of the European Union as a supranational polity of its own, with directly elected representatives convening regularly in the European Parliament since 1979. However, such self-designations, when appearing in the 2000s usually complemented rather than replaced the role of a representative of a nation-state. As demonstrated in Chapter 7, only a few politicians have both made a European career and been ready to view themselves as politicians.

In the British parliament, by the 2000s, a ‘politician’ was essentially a ‘parliamentarian’ or an ‘MP’, sometimes also a ‘legislator’. While statesman had disappeared long ago from the list of related words, a bit unexpectedly ‘man’ and ‘chap’ still appear high on it, reflecting the continuous gendered character of the institution. Rising characteristics of a politician would seem to have been ‘moderniser’ and ‘charismatic’. The vocabulary of related professions continued to include ‘lawyer’, ‘diplomat’ and ‘historian’, and the old terms ‘philosopher’ and ‘thinker’ were also back on the list. Interesting new parallel activities were those of a ‘businessman’ or a ‘commentator’ but also an ‘activist’, which had by the early twenty-first century become the fifth most related term to ‘politician’ in the British parliament. A similar rise in associations cannot be traced from the other parliaments compared here, though the concept did play an important role in several Western European

countries (Chapter 8). At the same time, confrontational parliamentary rhetoric in Westminster might lead to labelling a political opponent a ‘poodle’, for example (Appendix, Table 1).

In the parliament of united Germany, the most obvious transformation concerned the way in which women as politicians had become linguistically present in the gendered term *Politikerin(nen)*, while references to *Staatsmänner* had evaporated. Post-1968 conceptualisations of democracy are visible in the rise of *Volksvertreter* (representative of the people) to the strongest association of politicians, and also by the strong status of *Demokrat* as an alternative denomination. As for the qualifications of a politician, one might ‘perform’ (*aufreten*), ‘govern’ (*Regierenden, souverän*), deserve or not deserve ‘trust’ (*zutrauen*) and become engaged in ‘election campaigns’ (*Wahlkämpfe*). A politician might have a background as an ‘official’ (*Funktionäre*) or ‘trade unionist’ (*Gewerkschaftler*). The political confrontations of the 2010s, with the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the consequent entrance of neo-nationalist discourse in the Bundestag, is reflected by the rise of *Populisten* and *Patriotismus* to the related vocabulary (Appendix, Table 2).

Words related to *politician* in the Dutch parliament demonstrate the relative stability of the concept there (Appendix, Table 4). In Sweden, the different institutional levels of acting as a politician were increasingly recognised with Riksdag politicians (*riksdagspolitiker, riksdagsledamöter, riksdagsmän*) being accompanied by county council politicians (*landstingspolitiker(na)*) and municipal politicians (*kommunalpolitiker(na), lokalpolitiker, kommunpolitikerna*). Reflecting a broad Swedish concept of democracy, politicians might also be characterised as ‘elected by the people’ (*folkvalda*) or ‘elected in confidence’ (*förtroendevalda*), being accountable to voters (*väljare*) (Appendix, Table 5).

In France, by contrast, negative connotations of *politicien* remained common; merely the feminine form *politicienne* had been added to vocabulary. The attributes *philosophique* and *intellectuel* were the only ones among the top twenty to potentially imply something positive – provided that they were not applied with ironical undertones. Old accusations were now complemented with those of being populist (*populiste*), Manichean (*manichéen*), rude (*grossier*), corporatist (*corporatiste*), semantic (*sémantique*), sempiternal (*sempiternel*), theological (*théologique*), clientelist (*clientéliste*), binary (*binaire*), biased (*biaisé*), partisan or opportunist (*opportuniste*) (Appendix, Table 3).

Despite the French exception, the examples discussed here and in the following chapters counter commonplace criticism against politicians as self-evidently untrustworthy and self-serving (on this point see also Chapter 6). While this cliché is a recurrent political complaint, it perhaps indicates

a general lack of depth in understanding politicians as key political actors in a representative government at different times and places. Appreciating nuances in the use of vocabulary when politicians speak about themselves, or when others speak about politicians, contributes to doing justice to what makes them stand out as political actors, including repertoires of rhetorical strategies. The histories offered in this volume resist sweeping generalisations but present some common transnational features. Building upon the empirical chapters, Chapter 9 thus offers a second-order analysis of the main findings provided in this volume by emphasising the types of political actions that politicians carry out. Kari Palonen's four-layered typology of politics (Palonen 1993, 2003) is elaborated further to distinguish four types of politicians: policy-politicians, politicking-politicians, polity-politicians and politicisation-politicians. The result is a meta-analysis that illuminates the work of politicians transnationally.

Ways Ahead in the Study of the Concept of the Politician

By emphasising the history of self-conceptualisations, the chapters that follow illustrate the difficulties of acting as a politician. Politicians were in the middle of conflicting political pressures and rhetorical struggles in which several meanings of 'politician' were simultaneously available. A repertoire of potentially pejorative connotations of being a politician was related to existing beliefs and expectations. Consequently, some expressions of a self-conception have turned into politicising moves in themselves, as when embracing or rejecting labels such as 'politician' or 'statesman'. At the same time, explorations of diverse European experiences demonstrate that politicians are indispensable in representative government. There are close entanglements between, on the one hand, ideas about parliamentary sovereignty, representation, ministerial responsibility and deliberation, and democratisation and parliamentarisation of politics (see Ihalainen, Ilie and Palonen 2016; Kurunmäki, Nevers and te Velde 2018) as well as the rise of gender diversity and, on the other hand, the gradual emergence of the modern concept of the politician. The closer to the twenty-first century we come, the more politicians themselves have emphasised their representativeness and their need to be responsive to the electors. In earlier times as well, parliamentary politicians were not merely self-serving actors, and the chapters help to nuance any such accusations.

We hope that this volume contributes to sparking interest in explaining how people imagined politicians in the past. Future research could tackle whether some of the trends that have become apparent in comparative analyses are also visible in Eastern and Southern European countries, or

in other world regions. Also, the overwhelmingly negative conceptions of politicians in France and Spain that have emerged in different chapters deserve more attention both on their own and in comparison with other European countries.

The different degrees in articulations of ‘international’ politicians discussed in this book have shown the significance of exploring levels of institutionalisation outside national, such as local, regional and eventually global. As Chapter 7 illustrates, even in an international context most political actors did not expressly conceive of themselves as international politicians due to sovereignty remaining so predominantly associated with nation-states. It would be worth exploring if this lack of self-identification is mirrored in different institutions. As suggested by the Swedish examples above, the Nordic countries might be seen as a case study to investigate local and regional re-descriptions of politicians. Meanwhile, global politicians could be investigated beyond the scope of this book series, as connected with past transnational ideologies, movements and activism.

The potential conflict of interest between party politicians and their role as representatives of citizens’ general interests is an angle that has proved to be interesting and would be worth examining more extensively. The impact of female or gender-fluid politicians on the conceptions of politicians also merits further investigation. Equally interesting is whether the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of politicians have played a role in such conceptions. Conceptual histories of politicians in colonial contexts offer another avenue for research. Finally, this book stands as an example of the potential that digitised sources have to offer by mostly studying parliamentary records. Future research may want to broaden the scope as more historical records from the media and civil society and methods become available for computer-assisted analysis supported by machine learning.

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Notes

1. Ideal types as sketched by Max Weber (1904) are no mere inventions of scholars but abstractions from existing vocabularies or practices by one-sided accentuation (*einseitige Steigerung*). They cannot be found in the sources, but with their help the scholar can hope to detect interesting aspects in the sources and emphasise their significance for interpreting the analysed theme.
2. At the time of writing, *People & Parliament* contains all recorded parliamentary debates from Britain (1803–), Sweden (1809–), the Netherlands (1814–), Norway (1814–), Denmark (1849–), Finland (1863–), Germany (1867–), France (1882–89, Ireland (1920–) and the European Parliament (1999–2017) as well as parallel text-mining tools. Some technical and legal questions related to the long-term maintenance of the interface and opening it to the public remained unsolved. The Dutch corpus is nevertheless open at <https://people-and-parliament.hum.uu.nl/>. We welcome researchers willing to explore the interface to contact us and agree on collaboration in its use, while we aim at opening new corpora in coming years. See Ihalainen et al. (2022) and Bonin et al. (2025).
3. The word-embedding models (WEMs) of *People & Parliament* compare the contextual similarity of a seed term such as ‘politician’ in each vernacular over time, calculated on the basis of occurrences of the words in parliamentary debates in the same context of five words. These WEMs are derived from the rather simple and much used vector-analysis tool Word2Vec, the algorithm calculating the semantic similarity of the words in a multidimensional vector space. The larger the cosine similarity of the terms, the higher the estimated similarity – either in the sense of (pseudo-)synonyms or antonyms or just related words appearing in the same syntactic context. The actual similarity and degree of synonymy needs to be evaluated by the researcher, ultimately through contextualising close reading. The WEMs have been trained separately for different historical periods to allow the observation of possible historical breaks. While WEMs are usually available since

the nineteenth century and provide up to a hundred related words, limited occurrences of the seed terms in some countries and periods (*politicus* or *politiker* in the nineteenth-century Netherlands and Sweden, or *politicien* for interwar France) have prevented their calculation. Systematic comparative data has been available since the Second World War.

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