

ARTICLE

Are citizens looking for alternatives to bridging-and-bonding leadership? A secondary analysis of 38 population surveys and their impact on profiles for the Dutch mayoralty

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Abstract

Over the last decades, the selection procedure for Dutch mayors has gone through a gradual but steady process of democratisation, with municipal councils now having a decisive role. An emerging practice in the selection process is that councillors use population surveys to inquire what citizens expect of their new mayor to collect input for the profile text that describes the desired leadership qualities. While this instrument can be considered a hybrid democratic innovation, citizens' preferred leadership style and to what extent and how survey results are included in the profiles remained unclear. Our cluster analysis of 22,894 survey responses shows that citizens differ considerably in what they expect of mayors, and that these expectations do not necessarily align with the traditional leadership style of Dutch mayors. Further, we find that the survey results do typically find their way to the profile texts, but also that their role often remains unclear. The current practice in population surveys, therefore, carries a clear risk of disappointing citizens. Citizens are asked for input, but how that input is used in the selection procedure remains ambiguous, and mayors might be unable to live up to the expectations because of the characteristics of the office.

Keywords: Mayor, Local politics, Democratic innovation, Leadership

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Population Surveys as a Democratic Innovation in the Selection of Dutch Mayors

The selection procedure for the Dutch mayor, who is appointed by the national government, is often seen as a nondemocratic anomaly, as most other mayors in Europe and beyond are either directly elected or appointed by the municipal council (Heinelt et al., 2018). This observation can be increasingly debated, though (Karsten, Cachet & Schaap, 2013; Karsten, De Ceuninck & Reynaert, 2017). Over the course of the 20th century, municipal councils, which consist of directly elected representatives, have wielded more and more influence on the selection of their mayors, democratising the process and giving the local community the deciding voice in who will be their next mayor. Before, the procedure was dominated by a direct appointment by the Minister of the Interior and was long surrounded by processes of lobbying between the bigger national political parties. Gradually, though, local influence on the selection procedure increased. First, a practice of consultation evolved in which the commissioners of the King, who oversee the selection procedure, consulted the municipal councils over the appointment of the mayor. Later, the initiative shifted towards the municipal councils, who started preparing the selection by drafting a profile text that contained the desired qualities of the new mayor and that guided the search. In the second half of the 20th century, an informal and later formal practice developed in which the municipal councils recommended candidates to the Minister of the Interior. Since 2001, when the current procedure was put into law, the municipal council makes a twofold recommendation out of the applicants and publicly announces the number one candidate. In practice, this amounts to a direct council election of the new mayor, as, in the last 24 years, the Minister has never deviated from the council's primary recommendation and their room to manoeuvre in this respect is also limited by law, allowing them to appoint a different mayor only under serious circumstances (see also Karsten, 2019). In practice, the Crown appointment, thus, has become a formality, somewhat similar to how Belgian mayors are appointed. Although Belgian mayors are selected in a completely different way, amounting to a quasi-direct election, they are officially appointed by their regional government, not their municipality. But, quite unlike the Belgian selection procedure, the current Dutch procedure remains a form of indirect democracy, where the elected council members select their mayor. Also, Belgian mayors are selected from among the council members. In contrast, Dutch mayors are selected through a public vacancy to which all Dutch nationals can apply, irrespective of their domicile. One of the results is that Dutch mayors often come from outside of the municipality, which is also an expression of their apolitical role as they typically have few to no ties to the local political parties.

The starting point for the current Dutch selection procedure is the drafting of the so-called 'profile' (in Dutch: *profiel*). The council is legally required to compose

such a text, which should contain “the job requirements to be met by the person to be appointed as mayor” (Section 61, paragraph 2 Municipalities Act). In essence, the document has the same function as a public job vacancy text in other professions. And, the document serves as the official standard for evaluating the appointee’s performance and for considering the reappointment of a mayor (Karsten, 2019). Though it is difficult to trace back the actual influence of the profile description on the selection of the mayor – because many other factors play a role, too (for example which candidates actually end up applying, impacting what choice committees have to decide on their preferred candidate), and because the selection, as determined by law, takes place behind closed doors – we can assert that the profile plays an important role in the Dutch mayoralty. For this reason, it is both interesting and relevant to study them as well as the process of how they are composed. In politics, having such a written-down and public document that describes the desired characteristics of political executives is very uncommon, making it a unique source for empirical data about what political leadership style is preferred by local communities (see also Karsten, 2019).

An emerging practice in the process of drafting a profile is that councillors use population surveys to inquire about what citizens would like to see in their new mayor. This instrument is increasingly used by the nomination committees, made up of a selection of council members, who draft a profile that is later approved by the municipal council by simple majority. These population surveys serve as an instrument to raise public awareness of the fact that a new mayor is being selected, but their main function is to give inhabitants a say in the process and to collect input for the profile.

As a result of this emerging practice, the profiles progressively become, in a sense, hybrid coproductions, expressing the desires of both councillors and citizens. Through the use of this instrument, and also in their communications about the surveys, councillors give the suggestion that they value and take the public’s opinion about the desired leadership qualities of the new mayor seriously. As such, the population surveys hold the promise of constituting a small but meaningful “hybrid democratic innovation” (Hendriks, 2023), where citizen input feeds into an otherwise representative-based selection procedure, supplementing the still-dominant institutions of the local representative democracy with an element of more plebiscitary democratic designs. If the instrument is taken seriously by councillors, it may serve as a modest but relevant contribution to the further democratisation of the selection of Dutch mayors.

One of the most telling illustrations of this promise and its hybridity is perhaps the 2025 Tilburg advertisement campaign for the municipality’s mayoral population survey, which prominently used the slogan “Jouw stem, jouw nieuwe burgemeester”, which carries connotations of having a voice as well as voting, since “jouw stem”

translates as “your voice” as well as “your vote”. This ambiguity is strengthened by the accompanying slogan of “Kies meel”, which refers directly to having a choice, or voting. Moreover, the website where people could complete the survey was named “kiesdeburgemeester.nl”, which translates to ‘choose the mayor’. This example shows how the mayoral population-survey instrument hovers between the representative-democracy default and more direct forms of decision-making by citizens. At the same time, it shows that such initiatives run the risk of overpromising and misrepresenting the potential impact of the citizens’ input on the actual decision (see also Hendriks, 2023). The Tilburg case, though, is an exception in this respect. The large majority of municipalities are more precise in how they frame the instrument, indicating that it serves as a consultation instrument that is used to collect input for the council’s profile. This function is also illustrated by the profile texts themselves, several of which indicate that the results of the surveys have been “taken into account” in the drafting of the profiles.

Although the actual impact of the surveys on the final profile texts often remains unspecified and their impact on the selection of the mayor is nearly impossible to reconstruct because of the secrecy of the process, the surveys contain unique insights into what citizens expect of their next mayor and how the instrument is being used. In this paper, we provide a secondary analysis of the results of 38 such population surveys, conducted between 1 January 2023 and 31 January 2025. In total, these inhabitant surveys represent 22,894 respondents and approximately half of the vacancies for mayors in this period. The purposes of our analysis are twofold. The first aim is to report on the leadership style that citizens expect from their mayor. Here, our data provide a unique insight into the thus far underexplored citizen perspective on preferred mayoral leadership styles (see Van der Lelij et al., 2016; Heinelt et al., 2018). Our data also complement existing knowledge on what elected councillors in the Netherlands expect from their mayor (Karsten, 2019; Van Zuydam & Boogers, 2024). The second aim of our paper is to provide an analysis of the extent to which and how these desires find their way into the final profile text. In this way, we innovatively trace the observable impact of the instrument, identifying the extent to and ways in which Dutch directly elected councillors visibly accommodate the citizen voice in the otherwise representative practice of mayoral selection and the extent of hybridity of this still-developing practice. The research question for this article is: What leadership style do Dutch citizens expect to see in their mayor, and to what extent and how do these desires translate into profiles for the mayoralty?

In the next section of this paper, we introduce our theoretical framework of leadership style, which lies behind the questionnaire that was used. Then, we elaborate on our research strategy, methods, and data. In the fourth section we present our results, which are followed by a conclusion and discussion.

Citizens' Expectations of Mayors: Differences in Leadership Style

As Karsten, Cachet, and Schaap (2013) have previously stated, no two Dutch mayors are the same. Even though the overall make-up of the office is the same in all municipalities – mayors are, for example, the chair of the municipal council and executive, are responsible for public safety, and represent their municipality internally and externally (Boogers et al., 2021; Karsten et al., 2014) – mayors have considerable freedom in how they choose to carry out their role. This also implies that municipal councillors and citizens have considerable room to articulate what they expect of mayors – in terms of specific assignments, but even more so in terms of their desired leadership style.

The concept of leadership style can be defined as “the way in which the leader operates” (Leach & Wilson, 2000, p. 10) or the “personal enactment of the institutional position of leadership” (Getimis & Hlepas, 2006, p. 179). In this context, Schouw and others (2018) refer to patterns in leaders' behaviour and the explicit or implicit choices they make in how they act while in office. Although especially the latter two definitions might suggest that how leaders, including mayors, operate while in office is fully at their own discretion, we understand leadership style to be the result of the interaction between context, someone's attitude towards the office, and their personality (see Elgie, 1995).

To further conceptualise leadership style, we find that four relevant dimensions of leadership style can be distinguished in the literature on (political) leadership style and related fields like mayoral leadership, leadership and management studies in general, and political communication: 1) leadership predisposition, 2) attitudes towards the exercise of power, 3) orientation towards tasks and relations, and 4) communication style.

With regard to the first two dimensions, we build on the typology of mayoral leadership as proposed by Getimis and Hlepas (2006; see also Elgie, 1995; John & Cole, 1999; Leach & Wilson, 2000). They describe leadership predisposition as mayors' orientations towards change. Are they responding to the challenges facing government or society at this minute, or are they proactively thinking about what lies ahead? And, do they aim to maintain the status quo as much as possible, or are they trying to initiate change? As regards mayors' attitudes towards the exercise of power, Getimis and Hlepas (2006) distinguish between mayors who are inclined to act authoritatively, and mayors who operate in a more cooperative way. Authoritative mayors tend to exercise power exclusively and try to singularly determine their agenda, whereas cooperative mayors include others to set the agenda and are more 'open' in exercising power. Moreover, authoritative mayors coordinate action by relying on their formal powers. In contrast, cooperative mayors tend to coordinate action using deliberation and aim for consensus (see Stone, 1989). Juxtaposing these

two dimensions results in four ideal-typical leadership styles: “1) the visionary (cooperative and strategic), 2) the city boss (authoritarian and strategic), 3) the consensus facilitator (cooperative and reproductive), and 4) the protector (authoritarian and reproductive)” (Hlepas et al., 2018, p. 214).

For the latter two dimensions of leadership style that we discern in this article – leaders’ orientation towards tasks and relations, and their communication style – we build on research from the fields of leadership and management, as well as political communication. By adding these two dimensions to the dimensions used by Getimis and Hlepas (2006) in their typology of mayoral leadership style, we further enrich and refine our understanding of how mayors prefer to operate, as well as what others, including citizens and members of municipal councils, expect from them.

Leaders’ orientation towards tasks and relations relates to the classic dichotomy in leadership and management literature between goal-oriented and process-oriented leaders (Kaarbo, 1997), or between task- versus relations-oriented leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Whereas task- or goal-oriented leaders are concentrating on what they aim to achieve and focus discussion on the issue, process- or relations-oriented leaders are focused on building and maintaining relations (Kaarbo, 1997). Promoting harmony and making sure everyone is still on board is considered important by these leaders.

Political leaders’ style of communication refers to the way in which leaders present themselves to others, while at the same time those others try to acquire information about them (Goffman, 1956). It is about how leaders perform and communicate. Communication is both verbal and non-verbal and relates, among others, to their personal appearance, their preferred medium to communicate with citizens and others, and their tone of voice (Charteris-Black, 2007; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Schlenker, 1980). Overall, mayors’ style of communication can be more formal or informal. Whereas a formal style of communication can be characterised as objective, distant, and business-like, an informal style is considered to be more casual, spontaneous, and relaxed.

Leadership Style in the Context of the Dutch Mayoral Office

As mentioned, we consider leadership style to be the result of the interaction between context, someone’s attitude towards the office, and their personality (Elgie, 1995). Political leadership does not exist in isolation; it emerges “in context” (t Hart, 2014). Hence, some types of leadership styles might be more prevalent and more likely to flourish than others in the context of a specific office, in a specific country, with a specific institutional make-up or political culture (Helms, 2005, 2014; John & Cole, 1999).

Dutch mayors have a role in chairing the municipal council and the executive board, representing their municipality and community vis-à-vis citizens and beyond

municipal borders, and promoting public safety. In executing these roles, the characterisation of the Dutch mayoral office can be summarised as: “Don’t call me a leader, but I am one” (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). Although setting strategic policy direction is considered a core task of political leaders by various scholars, even for facilitative leaders (Blondel, 1987, p. 16; Greasley & Stoker, 2008, p. 723; Leach & Wilson, 2000, p. 668), it does not lie at the core of what Dutch mayors contribute to the governance of their municipality. In relation to the municipal council and the executive board, mayors consider “giving policy direction” their least important task (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). Although the substantive policy responsibilities of mayors have increased over the years, especially in the field of public safety, this does not seem to have changed (Boogers et al., 2021). In contrast, less content-driven and more process-oriented activities are considered more important by mayors themselves, including safeguarding integrity and overseeing the quality of the decision-making process. “Sitting on their hands” and not having an opinion are considered key qualities. In relation to society and beyond their municipal borders, Dutch mayors also do not adhere to a classic image of a strong and decisive leader that is common in Anglo-Saxon contexts. Rather, they see themselves primarily acting as ‘first citizen’, ‘liaison’, and ‘representative’ (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). Consequently, Dutch mayors can be considered leaders of the bridging-and-bonding type.

Translated to leadership style, the above suggests that a cooperative, reproductive, relations-oriented and relatively informal style vis-à-vis citizens fits best with the characteristics of the mayoral office in the Netherlands. In contrast, a highly change-oriented and authoritative style with a clear focus on realising specific (policy) goals can be expected to be less likely to flourish. At least, that is what we derive from the institutional make-up of the office and how mayors describe their most important responsibilities. However, it remains to be seen to what extent this is also the case in terms of what citizens expect of their mayor. If citizens’ expectations deviate from the rationale behind the institutional design of the mayoralty and preferred leadership style, this would raise questions about the sustainability of the current design of mayoral office in the future.

Data and Methods

To answer the question of what type of leadership style Dutch citizens expect from their mayor, and to what extent these desires translate into concrete text passages in profiles, we collected and analysed two types of data: population surveys that municipal councils conducted as part of their selection process for new mayors, and mayoral profiles.

Population Surveys on Expected Leadership Style of Mayors

A secondary analysis of population surveys in 38 municipalities covering 1 January 2023 to 31 January 2025 was conducted to assess what citizens wish for in their new mayor. In total, these population surveys represent 22,894 respondents and approximately half of the mayoral vacancies in this period. The number of inhabitants of these municipalities ranged from approximately 14,000 to approximately 130,000 inhabitants, covering all Dutch provinces except for Zeeland, and municipalities of various sizes (see appendix 1 for an anonymised overview of key characteristics of the 38 municipalities of which the population surveys are included in our analysis).

Citizens of these 38 municipalities could primarily participate in the population survey online and through an open link. In addition, in 29 of these 38 municipalities, the option of filling out the questionnaire on paper was made available. Various means were used to bring the survey to the attention of citizens, including via advertisements and posts of councillors and the municipal organisation on social media, advertisements in local newspapers, an invitation on the website of the municipalities, and canvassing on the streets. In each of the included municipalities, the exact choice of means and campaign was tailored to the local wishes.

Citizens form the unit of analysis in this article, as our primary interest lies with their expectations of the new mayors in terms of leadership style. In the original surveys, we checked the representativeness of the responses based on postal code and a segmentation model. Because of contractual agreements with the municipalities involved and GDPR considerations, we did not collect demographic information about the respondents. Consequently, we could not check whether the citizens who participated in one of the 38 population surveys combined were representative of the overall Dutch citizenry in terms of characteristics such as gender, age, education, and migration background.

Via respondents' postal codes, however, we do have information about the characteristics of the 38 municipalities that we cover in our analysis (see also appendix 1). And since the literature indicates that leadership style preferences for mayors vary across municipalities of different sizes, be it to a limited extent (Karsten, 2019), and since there are indications that region might matter, we assessed the representativeness of our respondents on these two variables. For municipal size, we used four categories that align with the distribution of our data: a population of 20,000 citizens or less, between 20,000 and 40,000 citizens, between 40,000 and 65,000 citizens, and 65,000 citizens or more. To assess the distribution across regions of the Netherlands, we used the same classification as is used by the Dutch Central Agency for Statistics (CBS), dividing the country into four regions (North, East, South, West).

Assessing the goodness-of-fit indicates that both for municipal size ($\chi^2(df=3, n = 22,894) = 5282.6, p < .001$) and region ($\chi^2(df=3, n = 22,894) = 4384.6, p < .001$), there is a statistically significant difference between our respondents and the Dutch

population. To account for these differences, the data were weighted on these two measures in our descriptive analyses.

Operationalisation of Leadership Style in Survey Items

To measure leadership style, ten seven-point slider items were included in each population survey. Over time, the wording of some of these items has changed slightly to further improve (linguistic) accessibility (more “B1-level”). For example, in Q6 we changed the Dutch word “draagvlak” to the simpler word “steun”, which in English both translates into support. Table 1 includes the exact wording of each item in the youngest surveys.

Each dimension of leadership style – leadership predisposition, communication style, attitude towards the exercise of power, and orientation towards tasks and relations – is measured by two or three items. These items cover the various aspects of each dimension, as they are described in the literature (see also the theoretical framework section in this article). For example, following the literature, the dimension ‘leadership predisposition’ consists of two aspects: 1) the scope of the leader and 2) their time horizon (Hlepas et al., 2018). The first item that is included to measure leadership predisposition taps into the aspect of scope, and the second item is aimed at measuring time horizon (see table 1, items Q1 and Q2).

Table 1. Items Leadership Style and Competencies in Population Surveys

Item
Leadership predisposition Q1. My mayor is a... Enthusiastic innovator < > stable factor (7-point slider scale) Q2. My mayor focuses on... The challenges of the future < > the challenges of today (7-point slider scale)
Communication style Q3. My mayor... Keeps things professional < > shows emotions (7-point slider scale) Q4. My mayor's attitude is... Business-like < > informal (7-point slider scale) Q5. Above all, my mayor is a... Government official < > father/mother of the citizens (7-point slider scale)
Attitude towards the exercise of power Q6. My mayor... Keeps talking until support is achieved < > acts quickly (7-point slider scale) Q7. In the face of imminent threats, my mayor... Sits down with all parties involved < > takes decisive action (7-point slider scale) Q8. When dealing with disturbances, my mayor... Meets with stakeholders < > enforces the rules (7-point slider scale)

Item
Orientation towards tasks and relations
Q9. My mayor strives to achieve... A good atmosphere < > optimal results (7-point slider scale)
Q10. My mayor... Is strictly impartial < > stands for his/her beliefs (7-point slider scale)

We used a principal component analysis (PCA) to check whether the individual items form the four dimensions they were intended to measure (leadership predisposition, communication style, attitude towards the exercise of power, and orientation towards tasks and relations). This analysis confirmed the presence of four factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 19.6%, 16.9%, 12.9% and 10.9% of the variance, respectively. Next, we inspected the individual factor loadings for each of the items, setting the threshold to >0.40 (see table 2). Except for Q9 (striving towards a good atmosphere or optimal results), we found that all items loaded on the expected factors. As Q9 is loading on the factor 'attitude towards power' and 'communication style' instead of 'orientation towards tasks and relations', we only utilise this item in descriptions of citizens' preferences and have dropped it from all other further analyses.

Table 2. Standardised Factor Loadings for Four-Factor PCA Solution of Mayoral Leadership Style

	Factors			
Item	1 - leadership predisposition	2 - communication style	3 - attitude towards the exercise of power	4 - orientation towards tasks and relations
Q1	0.762			
Q2	0.781			
Q3		0.764		
Q4		0.740		
Q5		0.735		
Q6			0.524	
Q7			0.804	
Q8			0.756	
Q9		-0.469	0.428	
Q10				0.923

Analysing Citizens' Preferences of Mayoral Leadership Style in Population Surveys

Next, we used descriptive techniques to assess citizens' preferences on each of the individual slider items on leadership style. In addition, cluster analysis (kmeans) was performed to assess whether patterns were discernible in the combinations of preferences on the dimensions of leadership style. Whereas the PCA was used to assess the extent to which the individual items indeed measure the four distinguished dimensions of leadership style, cluster analysis segments these dimensions into types of mayors. As such, we take a more inductive approach as to which types of leadership style preferred by citizens emerge in practice, as opposed to starting from ideal types that follow from theoretical assumptions. Such an approach leaves room for tracing possible ambiguity in citizens' preferences compared to what could be expected based on 'likely' combinations – the approach that has been previously employed in, for example, mayoralty research by Hlepas et al. (2018).

Analysing Use of Population Surveys in Profiles

To determine whether and how municipal councils utilise the results of the population surveys in their mayoral profiles, at least to the extent that this use can be observed, we analysed the final text of these profiles. To this end, we first downloaded the profiles of all 38 municipalities that were also included in our dataset of population surveys. These texts are commonly designed as a brochure and available in PDF through the council information system.

Next, we thematically coded all profiles for the way in which they reported on the results of the population surveys in the texts. Specifically, we coded whether explicit references were made to the population survey. In addition, we coded whether the results were included using graphs and figures or as text. In the latter case, we coded whether this included a substantive discussion of the results or 'merely' illustrative quotes on the two open questions in the survey. In addition, we coded the location of the survey results in the texts: included in the main body of the text (at the start, middle, or end), as an appendix or in a footnote. Finally, we checked whether the results of the survey were presented standalone, or whether the expectations of citizens as expressed in the survey were explicitly confronted with the expectations as formulated by the municipal council.

Results

In this section, we present the findings of our analysis. We first describe what kind of leadership style citizens wish for in their mayor, both in terms of preferences on individual aspects of mayoral leadership style and patterns in overall types of leadership

style. Next, we present our findings on the way in which the results of these surveys are translated into mayoral profiles.

Citizens' Preferences on Individual Aspects of Mayoral Leadership Style

With regard to citizens' preferences on individual aspects of mayoral leadership style, we found that citizens are the most outspoken in agreement on the style of communication they prefer for mayors. Roughly six out of ten citizens included in these surveys stated they preferred a mayor who shows their emotions instead of someone who always stays professional. In addition, more than half of the respondents indicated they would rather have a 'father or mother of the citizens' than a government official (*'bestuurder'*, see table 3), and almost three-quarters of all respondents (72%) opted for an informal instead of a business-like attitude for their mayor.

In addition, a slight preference is discernible among citizens for mayors who take a neutral position focusing on relations, instead of being highly goal-oriented taking a political stance. Of all citizens included in the survey, 45% prefer a mayor who is strictly impartial over someone who stands up for what they believe in; and 45% prefer a mayor who strives for a good atmosphere over someone who aims for optimal results (see table 3).

On other aspects, citizens' preferences are more diverse. In terms of their attitude towards the exercise of power, for example, citizens like their mayors to be decisive. However, when public safety is at risk, more or less equal groups of people opt for cooperative strategies as for authoritative strategies. As table 3 shows, 48% of all citizens included in the survey would want their mayor to sit down with all parties involved in the face of imminent danger, whereas 40% would want him or her to take decisive action. Comparatively, while 47% of citizens ask for a mayor who meets with stakeholders when dealing with disturbances, 41% want a mayor who enforces the rules in these types of situations.

Regarding the preferred leadership predisposition, table 3 shows the survey results are mixed as well. While 45% of citizens prefer a stable factor over an enthusiastic innovator, 48% of citizens would rather have their mayor focus on the challenges of the future instead of those of today, thereby combining a conservative attitude with a future-oriented time horizon.

Table 3. Citizens' Preferences of Mayoral Leadership Style on Four Dimensions

		Neutral				Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
Leadership predisposition								
Q1. My mayor is a:	Enthusiastic innovator	40%	15%	45%	Stable factor	4	4.13	1.86
Q2. My mayor focuses on:	The challenges of the future	48%	20%	33%	The challenges of today	4	3.78	1.79
Style of communication								
Q3. My mayor:	Keeps things professional	21%	16%	63%	Shows emotions	5	4.70	1.64
Q4. My mayor's attitude is:	Business-like	12%	16%	72%	Informal	5	5.10	1.49
Q5. Above all, my mayor is a:	Government official	29%	15%	56%	Father/mother of the citizens	5	4.50	1.80
Attitude towards the exercise of power								
Q6. My mayor:	Keeps talking until support is achieved	31%	17%	52%	Acts quickly	5	4.55	1.70
Q7. In the face of imminent threats, my mayor:	Sits down with all parties involved	48%	12%	40%	Takes decisive action	4	3.90	1.92
Q8. When dealing with disturbances, my mayor:	Meets with stakeholders	47%	12%	41%	Enforces the rules	4	3.97	1.95
Orientation towards tasks and relations								
Q9. My mayor strives to achieve:	A good atmosphere	45%	20%	35%	Optimal results	4	3.85	1.78
Q10. My mayor:	Is strictly impartial	45%	16%	39%	Stands for his/her beliefs	4	3.81	1.88

Note: "My mayor strives to achieve: a good atmosphere / optimal results" was dropped from further analysis (see "Data and Methods"). However, it still provides interesting descriptive results and is therefore included in the table above.

In a way, these results reflect the traditional Dutch character of the mayoral office, in which leadership is of the bridging-and-bonding type instead of taking a decisive stance while realising a political agenda. This is especially the case regarding citizens' preference for an informal style of communication, in which mayors present themselves as being part of society as a 'mother or father of the citizens', and their preference for mayors who act as a neutral liaison between various parties. One of their main tasks, after all, is to represent the municipality vis-à-vis society and bring people together, making sure others with a political mandate make sensible decisions in the best interest of the municipality as a whole and living up to the standards of what can be considered good governance (Breeman et al., 2020; Karsten & Hendriks, 2017; Van Zuydam, 2021).

Also, the contrastive results on the items measuring 'leadership predisposition' can be understood taking into account the nature of this office. On the one hand, citizens seem to appreciate a stable factor who maintains the status quo instead of someone who is highly change-oriented, indicative of a 'reproductive' leadership predisposition according to Getimis and Hlepas (2006). It is not considered to be up to mayors to initiate change and turn things upside down, or so it appears. That mandate belongs to the elected political leaders like aldermen and council members. However, unlike these elected leaders who need to seek voter approval every four years, being Crown-appointed for at least six years makes mayors uniquely positioned to maintain a long-term perspective on future challenges (Gossink et al., 2024; Karsten et al., 2014). As such, it can be understood that citizens, on the other hand, prefer a mayor who is focused on future challenges instead of those of today, fitting to a 'strategic' leadership predisposition rather than a reproductive one.

Types of Mayoral Leadership Style Favoured by Dutch Citizens

However, there is more than meets the eye. Combining citizens' stances on the dimensions of leadership predisposition, their attitudes towards the exercise of power, and their orientations towards tasks and relations using k-means cluster analysis reveals differences between citizens in the type of leadership style they prefer. We found that citizens can be clustered into three groups with a distinct combination of preferences.

To perform the k-means cluster analysis, we first determined the optimal number of clusters. In this analysis, we utilised all items on leadership style except for Q9, which was dropped from further analysis after the PCA revealed it did not load on the expected factor (see our data and methods section). Also, the items on communication style (Q3, Q4, and Q5) were excluded from this cluster analysis because we found that respondents were relatively univocal in their preference for an informal communication style. Therefore, it is a dimension that is useful to characterise the Dutch mayor in general, but not to differentiate between distinct types in the Dutch context.

Elbow and gap statistic methods suggested that using two clusters would fit the data best (see figure 1). However, to determine the optimal number of clusters, not only the elbow and gap statistics are important, but also theoretical considerations. Upon closer inspection, we found that the two-cluster solution evens out the differences on the dimensions of leadership predisposition and orientation towards power too much. Scores centre around the middle of the scale, which would suggest citizens hold no clear preference either way. This does not match the distribution of answers on the items measuring these two dimensions. Therefore, we explored three- and four-cluster solutions and compared their quality.

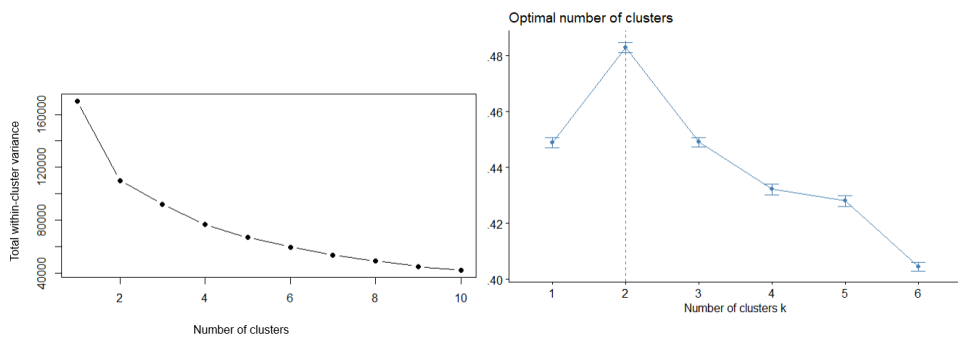


Figure 1. Determining Optimal Number of Clusters: Elbow and Gap Statistic

The silhouette score for three clusters is 0.27, compared to a silhouette score for two clusters of 0.32 and for four clusters of 0.25. This indicates that the four-cluster solution balances on the threshold of a poor cluster fit. The three-cluster solution is better in this respect, even though it is statistically weaker than the two-cluster solution, as could be expected based on the elbow and gap statistic methods. The Davies–Bouldin Index (DBI) confirms these outcomes. For $k = 2$, $k = 3$ and $k = 4$, the DBI values were 1.34, 1.42 and 1.48, respectively, where lower values indicate more compact and better-separated clusters. However, analytically, the three- and four-cluster solutions fitted better compared to the distribution of answers on the individual items in the descriptive analysis. Overall, we argue that a three-cluster solution balances statistical requirements and analytical considerations best. Or in other words: we distinguish between three types of leadership style that citizens prefer.

In this three-cluster solution, the largest number of citizens (43.6%) opt for mayors who combine a reproductive outlook with an authoritarian attitude towards the exercise of power and a task-oriented approach. This type resembles the ‘protector’ style in Getimis and Hlepas’s (2006) typology. The second type citizens prefer (36.3%) is a mayor with a change-oriented leadership predisposition, a cooperative attitude

towards the exercise of power, and a task-oriented approach. In the typology of Getimis and Hlepas (2006), this type comes close to the style of a 'visionary'. Lastly, 20.2% of citizens opt for mayors who have a (slightly) reproductive leadership predisposition and authoritarian attitude towards the exercise of power, but who combine this with a relations-oriented approach. As such, this type can also be considered a 'protector', albeit a different kind than in the first cluster, with the main difference being that this type values being impartial over taking a stand.

Table 4. Clusters of Preferences on Dimensions of Leadership Style

		Clusters		
		<i>1 – Protector A</i> <i>N=9,975 / 43.6%</i>	<i>2 – Visionary</i> <i>N=8,302 / 36.3%</i>	<i>3 – Protector B</i> <i>N=4,617 / 20.2%</i>
Dimension of leadership style	Leadership predisposition	5.11 (reproductive)	3.15 (change-oriented)	4.10 (reproductive)
	Attitude towards the exercise of power	5.25 (authoritarian)	3.76 (cooperative)	4.14 (authoritarian)
	Task or relations orientation	5.54 (task)	5.02 (task)	1.97 (relations)

Reading example: the average score on leadership predisposition for cluster 1 is 5.11. This was measured on a 7-point scale, with a score of 4.0 constituting the middle of the scale. A score lower than 4 indicates a preference for change-oriented mayors, a score higher than 4 a preference for mayors with a reproductive outlook.

Interestingly, each of these three desired mayoral leadership styles differs from our expectations on at least one of the three dimensions. After all, as discussed in the theoretical framework, one would expect a reproductive, cooperative, relations-oriented, and informal style to be most commonly desired. While the descriptive analyses showed that an informal style of communication indeed prevails, more than a third of citizens opt for a change-oriented instead of a reproductive mayor. Moreover, almost two-thirds of citizens favour an authoritative mayor instead of a cooperative mayor, and almost 80% of citizens wish for a task-oriented style instead of a relations-oriented one – an aspect that the protector A type and the visionary type have in common.

Comparing these results to other studies on mayoral leadership style, most notably Hlepas et al. (2018), shows that just as mayors' leadership styles vary, citizens' preferences also appear to vary, albeit in a different way. Citizens whose data were included in this study prefer a leadership style with a relatively authoritative attitude towards power more often than Dutch mayors described themselves as such in the project of the European mayor. Of the Dutch mayors included in the European

mayor project, 30% were considered a 'consensus facilitator' (cooperative and reproductive). Moreover, 19.3% were described as a 'protector' (authoritative and reproductive), 26.7% as a 'visionary' (cooperative and change-oriented) and 24% as a 'city boss' (authoritative and change-oriented; Hlepas et al., 2018: p. 186). Partly following from the fact that both the 'city boss' and 'consensus facilitator' types do not follow from our cluster analysis, the 'protector' (in two variants) and the 'visionary' are more prominently preferred by citizens in this dataset than in the data on Dutch mayors collected in the European mayor project.

We should, however, be careful to conclude that the leadership style of mayors in office is misaligned with citizens' preferences, as in the survey of the European Mayor leadership style is measured more indirectly, using different items, as well as that the survey data was collected between December 2002 and July 2004 – over twenty years ago (Bäck, Magnier & Heinelt, 2018, p. 14). As such, it could also be possible that the leadership style of mayors today might still resemble citizens' preferences.

Use of population surveys in profiles

Our analysis of how the survey results were communicated in the profiles reveals that the majority of them, or 52.6%, provide a stand-alone quantitative report (see table 5). Such accounts consist of an overview of graphs and figures, typically included at the end of the document. Fourteen of those are accompanied by a series of quotes from inhabitants throughout the text, coming from the responses to the open questions in the survey. These usually serve as illustrations of points made in the profile. One profile adds the results in an attachment, though it also contains quotes throughout. Slightly over a quarter of the profiles include a more elaborate discussion of the results as an integrated part of the profile that reports on citizens' expectations of their new mayor. Most of these can be found towards the middle of the document, connecting the description of the character of the municipality to the expectations that are set for the new mayor. In one, the discussion of the results of the population survey forms the opening paragraph. Nine of these combine quantitative data with qualitative data; one provides just a qualitative discussion. Five profiles contain a few quotes from respondents only, with four of them not mentioning that a survey was conducted nor referring to the full report in a separate document. Two profiles lack any reference to the survey results and are not particularly responsive to the input citizens have given for the profile text – at least that is not visible to outsiders who were not present during the discussion between members of the municipal council when drafting these texts.

Table 5. Utilisation of Survey Results in Profiles for the Mayoralty

	Profiles (N)	Percentage
No mention	2	5.3%
Quotes only	5	13.2%
Attachment	1	2.6%
Quantitative report	20	52.6%
Qualitative discussion	10	26.3%
Comparison council/inhabitants	0	0.0%
Total	38	100%

The large majority of profiles, thus, explicitly make the voice of citizens heard in the vacancy texts, feeding into the otherwise representative-democracy dominated processes of selection and evaluation of Dutch mayors, at least formally. The extent to which they do so differs, but on the whole citizens' input seems to be taken seriously. Most profiles provide a hybrid combination of expectations for the new mayor as voiced by the municipal council and expectations as voiced by inhabitants.

Interestingly, apart from where quotes are used as illustrations, these two types of expectations are mostly presented as two separate elements of the profile. None of the profiles that we analysed includes a comparison between what councillors expect of the new mayor and what citizens expect. Though there are sometimes clear similarities and differences between the two types of expectations, these are not discussed in any of the profiles. In the profiles, councillors, thus, do not reflect on what citizens expect of their mayor or on how their expectations compare to their own expectations, leaving any potential tension undiscussed. As such, the profiles are typically hybrid products where a confrontation between the voices of the representative democracy and citizens' voices is avoided. The profiles make heard two largely separate voices, leaving it up to the future mayor to interpret whether they are attuned. That said, several of the profiles at the same time indicate that the survey results "have been taken into account" or have been "incorporated" in other parts of the text as well, with one even suggesting that the survey has "formed the basis" for the text. Unfortunately, since the process takes place behind closed doors, such influence cannot be reconstructed.

As warned about by scholars of hybrid innovation, these results indicate that there is considerable ambiguity in how the plebiscitary elements of the population-survey instrument relate to the institutions of representative democracy (e.g. Hendriks, 2023), particularly when there is no confrontation of the two voices that

are being communicated through the profiles. Though it is evident that representative councillors are still in the lead in the selection of the mayor, it remains implicit how they weigh the input that they ask of citizens, let alone how that impacts the final decision of who becomes the next mayor.

Conclusion and Discussion

Although Dutch mayors are formally appointed by the Crown, the selection procedure has gone through a gradual but steady process of democratisation over the past decades. In practice, the mayor is nowadays elected by the municipal council. As part of the selection process, municipal councils increasingly use population surveys to collect input from citizens about the leadership style that they prefer for the new mayor. This emerging practice can be considered to be a small but meaningful “hybrid democratic innovation” (Hendriks, 2023). Whereas these surveys can provide a unique insight into the thus far underexplored citizen perspective on what are preferred mayoral leadership styles, the instrument’s practice and outputs so far have remained understudied. This article, therefore, centres around the following research question: What leadership style do Dutch citizens expect to see in their mayor, and to what extent and how do these desires translate into profiles for the mayoralty?

Our secondary analysis of 38 population surveys reveals that a majority of citizens prefer a mayor who is closely connected to the community: someone who communicates informally, is emotionally expressive, and is more of a ‘father or mother of the citizens’ than a government official. At the same time, we find that there are substantial differences among citizens in their preferences regarding the leadership style of a new mayor. Overall, we find three main clusters of preferences. Our analysis shows that about four in ten citizens prefer a leadership style that closely aligns with the leadership style that Getimis and Hlepas (2006) labelled the ‘protector’; that is, an authoritarian and reproductive leadership style, combined with a task-orientation. In addition, a little over a third of citizens opt for a visionary kind of style, and about 20% prefer a style like the ‘protector’, but with a relations-orientation. These findings are somewhat unexpected, as these styles all deviate from the typical bridging-and-bonding type of leadership that the Dutch mayoral office requires on one or more aspects, as well as from the importance that is widely attached to mayors maintaining a neutral, non-partisan position (see Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). At the same time, this finding aligns with a preference for vigour that was identified earlier among Dutch local councillors (Karsten, 2019).

These findings add to the relevance of studying how municipal councils incorporate the results of population surveys into the profiles that are composed to select new mayors. These profiles, after all, articulate the desired qualities and expectations for the new mayor, based on which candidates decide whether they want to apply,

and nomination committees decide who they wish to recommend. If the criteria and expectations included in these profiles are misaligned with the character and institutional make-up of the office, this may have serious implications for the functioning of mayors and how that is evaluated by, for example, council members and citizens.

Our analysis of the 38 profiles concerned shows that, with two exceptions, the large majority of profiles explicitly make the voice of citizens heard in the vacancy texts. The degree and ways in which they do so vary, though. More than half of the profile text provides a stand-alone quantitative report on citizens' preferences. Roughly 25 per cent includes a qualitative discussion of the results. And about 13 per cent features a series of quotes from citizens only.

As the process of drafting the profiles takes place behind closed doors, the effect of the population survey on other parts of the vacancy text remains unclear. The profile texts themselves, too, are typically quite vague about possible effects, indicating that the survey results have been "taken into account", without providing any further reflection on the processes. An interesting finding in this respect is that, in the 38 profile texts that we studied, we found no explicit comparison of citizen preferences against those of the municipal council. Potential tension between the two types of preferences remains undiscussed.

Although the population surveys, thus, provide relevant insight into what citizens expect from a new mayor and hold a promise of constituting a small but meaningful hybrid democratic innovation, where citizen input feeds into an otherwise representative-based selection procedure, our findings identify considerable weaknesses. Though the input of citizens is mostly represented in the profile text in one way or another, its role in the process mostly remains quite unclear. As a result, the surveys carry a clear risk of disappointing citizens as they are asked for input, but how that input is used in the selection procedure remains quite ambiguous (see also Hendriks, 2023).

This is also a limitation of the current article, which did not and could not reconstruct the actual impact of the population surveys on the profile text. In part, this restriction is a consequence of the fact that the selection process for Dutch mayors takes place behind closed doors. At the same time, simultaneous surveys among council members in the same fashion would have made it possible to directly compare local politicians' leadership style preferences for mayors to those of citizens and to see how the two materialised in the resulting vacancy texts. As we conducted a secondary analysis of existing data, such an opportunity was not there for us, though. The fact that we could not collect demographic information about our respondents forms another important limitation, which prevented us from identifying more variation in citizens' leadership style preferences.

Together with these limitations, our findings call for further study. We identify two promising lines of research. The first concerns the profile itself: the way it is

drafted, and how it is used in the selection procedure as well as in evaluating mayors' performance after they have been appointed. It would be valuable to study how the results of population surveys are discussed in the meetings of nomination committees who prepare a draft of the profile and how that discussion can consequently be traced in the criteria and expectations that are listed in the text. Although in the profile texts, we could only find a few ambiguous indications of how the survey results were debated and interpreted, this does not necessarily mean they played only a small role. While still respecting the secrecy of the selection process itself, it might be possible to survey councillors on their experiences with the population surveys. Also, it remains to be seen to what extent the survey results play a role in the subsequent selection phase of the procedure or even after the appointment of new mayors in their performance evaluations. Formally, the suitability of candidates and mayors' performance are assessed against the criteria and expectations included in the profile, but how this works in practice remains largely unknown. Again, there might be possibilities for studying these practices indirectly.

The second line of research concerns the consequences of how the results of population surveys are used in profiles. While we consider citizen disappointment to be a risk of how survey results can currently be visibly traced in profiles, it remains to be seen whether this risk materialises. What expectations do citizens have regarding the impact of their input on the profile and the following steps in the selection procedure, and to what extent are these expectations met? Additionally, how do mayoral candidates interpret and weigh the requirements put forward by citizens in relation to the requirements in the other sections of the profile, and with what effect? The latter question is particularly relevant in a time when the number of candidates for mayoral positions seems to be declining, the attractiveness of the office is under pressure, and mayors' positions seem to have become more vulnerable (Boogers et al., 2021; Runderkamp & Otjes, 2025). Losing potentially strong candidates and mayors due to misaligned expectations would be unfortunate. Finally, it may be especially problematic to leave it to the mayoral candidates to decide how to interpret potential differences in the requirements put forward by citizens and the municipal council, if their interpretation later results in criticism of their mayoral performance and – as a worst-case scenario – results in an untimely resignation. A relevant research topic, therefore, is to assess to what extent mayors get into trouble if their interpretation of the profile, and how they weigh citizens' input, deviates from what the municipal council or citizens deem important. A mismatch in this respect does not only affect the mayor personally, but can also have negative consequences for the reputation of the municipality. In a way, this line of research, therefore, focuses on acquiring a better understanding of the intended and unintended consequences of introducing population surveys as a hybrid democratic innovation in the representative-democracy default procedure of selecting a new mayor.

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Appendix 1. Key Characteristics Municipalities and Response Population Surveys

	Number of citizens	Province	Number of respondents in population survey
1	20,000 - 40,000	Limburg	206
2	20,000 - 40,000	Drenthe	467
3	20,000 - 40,000	Limburg	556
4	20,000 - 40,000	Noord-Brabant	258
5	20,000 - 40,000	Noord-Brabant	468
6	20,000 - 40,000	Noord-Holland	553
7	20,000 - 40,000	Noord-Brabant	415
8	40,000 - 65,000	Fryslân	625
9	<20,000	Noord-Brabant	449
10	40,000 - 65,000	Drenthe	718
11	>65,000	Zuid-Holland	2002
12	20,000 - 40,000	Gelderland	331
13	20,000 - 40,000	Zuid-Holland	230
14	40,000 - 65,000	Limburg	600
15	40,000 - 65,000	Limburg	867
16	>65,000	Noord-Brabant	1067
17	<20,000	Noord-Holland	585
18	<20,000	Drenthe	521
19	40,000 - 65,000	Zuid-Holland	700

	Number of citizens	Province	Number of respondents in population survey
20	20,000 - 40,000	Utrecht	238
21	>65,000	Zuid-Holland	559
22	20,000 - 40,000	Noord-Holland	399
23	40,000 - 65,000	Gelderland	411
24	>65,000	Noord-Brabant	1027
25	40,000 - 65,000	Groningen	680
26	20,000 - 40,000	Noord-Brabant	476
27	20,000 - 40,000	Overijssel	170
28	20,000 - 40,000	Drenthe	603
29	40,000 - 65,000	Fryslân	606
30	<20,000	Limburg	163
31	20,000 - 40,000	Noord-Brabant	368
32	20,000 - 40,000	Flevoland	682
33	40,000 - 65,000	Gelderland	1010
34	>65,000	Zuid-Holland	2291
35	40,000 - 65,000	Utrecht	237
36	40,000 - 65,000	Overijssel	721
37	20,000 - 40,000	Fryslân	337
38	40,000 - 65,000	Noord-Holland	263