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# Super Politicians? Perspectives of Minoritized Citizens on Representation

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Judith Charlotte de Jong  and Liza Mügge

## Abstract

How do minoritized citizens think about the politicians that represent them? How should they act and be? Drawing on 19 focus group interviews with 98 participants with a migration background in Germany and the Netherlands, we find that citizens' evaluation of politicians depends on several factors. Politicians should be responsive, accessible, inclusive, and empathetic. Some participants consider empathy an essential quality for non-descriptive politicians in particular, since they do not have a descriptive or experiential connection with ethnically minoritized communities. Whether participants evaluate descriptive political actors positively or negatively depends on their sociopolitical identification, ideological preference, and the representative's perceived assimilation within the party. Finally, political systems and histories of diversity in representation influence what ethnically minoritized citizens consider to be a good representative. But, the super politicians of their dreams are scarce.

## Keywords

political representation, responsiveness, ethnic diversity, political equality

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*It would be great if your superheroes resembled you, so you could identify with them. I still see it that way, now that I'm not a kid anymore, that my superheroines or representatives should look like me.*

—Faiza, African-German focus group participant

## Introduction

On the premise of equality, scholars and activists advocate for inclusion of politicians who belong to historically marginalized groups. But how do citizens of marginalized

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groups think about representation? Does any woman politician act for women, or any ethnically minoritized politician for ethnically minoritized citizens? Ultimately, citizens should judge what politicians do for them (Pitkin, 1967). But what makes a politician “good” in the eyes of citizens?

We conducted 19 focus groups with Dutch and German ethnically minoritized citizens. We asked what politicians should do and look like. What makes them a super politician? We find that super politicians are responsive, accessible, inclusive, and empathic. The latter qualities are particularly important for politicians who citizens do not identify with. They lack shared experiences that most citizens deem important to adequately understand their political concerns, like racism. How citizens evaluate politicians who they identify with depends on sociopolitical identifications, ideological preferences, and politicians’ perceived autonomy within the party. Finally, political systems and histories of diversity in representation influence what ethnically minoritized citizens consider to be a super politician.

## What Politicians Should Be and Do

What citizens think of politicians differs. Some are loved, some are hated. Some are seen as good, mediocre, or bad. For citizens who belong to historically underrepresented groups, it may matter that the politicians who they identify with perform well. They recently entered the corridors of power and did not yet have much opportunity to demonstrate their “ability to rule” (Mansbridge, 1999). Studies show that leaders who do not fulfill the stereotype of the white male leader have mountains to climb. They are too Black, too white, too feminine, or too masculine (Bauer, 2015). The expectations are oftentimes so high that they can only fail. Is an opposite mechanism at play when it comes to expectations from ethnically minoritized citizens of ethnically minoritized politicians?

Ethnicity/race may affect citizens’ evaluations of politicians in multiple ways. First, the question is how citizens perceive responsiveness. Do they prefer politicians to be “trustees” who do their job as they see fit, or “delegates” that should act according to citizens’ preferences (Pitkin, 1967: 209)? Ethnically minoritized politicians can experience pressure from their party to refrain from expressing minority identities (Murray, 2016). We expect that ethnically minoritized citizens favor politicians who are responsive delegates, despite this pressure.

Second, citizens’ conceptions of what makes a “good” representative depends on their personal qualities: fair-mindedness, trust, and gatekeeping (Dovi, 2007). This shifts the focus from trustee/delegate to what citizens believe makes a good politician. We ask ethnically minoritized citizens what personal virtues super politicians should have.

Third, based on the literature, we expect that citizens’ identification with politicians—“descriptive representation” (Pitkin, 1967)—influences their expectations. Minoritized citizens may experience a sense of “linked fate” with descriptive politicians because they have shared experiences of exclusion and racism (Dawson, 1994). This could lead to the expectation that descriptive politicians are more likely to act on their concerns. Nevertheless, citizens may be disappointed when descriptive politicians do not fulfill expectations (Bird, 2015).

North American studies reveal that minoritized citizens’ evaluation of politicians depends on the political system and legacy (Schildkraut, 2013). Comparative studies in

the European context are limited. Studies show that ethnically minoritized citizens can be more likely to support ethnically minoritized candidates (Bergh and Bjørklund, 2011; Jacobs et al., 2014). In the UK, researchers find a strong preference for candidates with the same immigrant background among Pakistani-origin citizens, but not among those of Indian, Black Caribbean, or African descent (Fisher et al., 2014). Similarly, Street and Schönwälder (2021) show that preferences vary between ethnically minoritized groups, and that those who have higher hopes for immigrant-origin representation do not always vote for it. A Belgian study finds that ethnically minoritized citizens prefer ethnically minoritized politicians who act independently from the party (Akachar, 2018). The findings suggest that ethnically minoritized citizens' preferences for descriptive politicians are multifaceted and context-dependent.

To understand country-specific similarities and differences, we compare two European countries with different national party systems and representation legacies. We pose three questions to understand what a super politician is to ethnically minoritized citizens. First, how do ethnically minoritized citizens view the role of politicians? Second, what do they consider "good" qualities of representatives? Third, how do citizens' identifications affect their assessments of politicians?

## **Focus Groups**

To reveal what ethnically minoritized citizens expect from politicians, we conducted focus group interviews in Germany and the Netherlands between 2020 and 2021. On the national level, the Netherlands has a proportional electoral system with preferential voting and no pre-defined threshold. This system is more inclusive for the political representation of ethnically minoritized citizens than Germany which has a national-level mixed member proportional electoral system and a 5% threshold. In the Netherlands, the share of politicians with a migration background is structurally higher than in Germany (Fernandes et al., 2016). Additionally, there is a significant difference in the number of parties in the national parliament. In 2021, 736 German politicians represented 6 parties, compared to 150 Dutch politicians representing 20 parties.

To measure group political representation, researchers often rely on pre-defined ethnic "state categories," like African-American or "migration background," developed for a census or policy-making (Monk, 2022). We contrast state categories with citizens' own definition of politically relevant groups. We use the term "ethnically minoritized" to flag the social construction of minority groups; it does not refer to participants' self-identification.

Focus groups provide insight into how participants who fall within the same state categories (migration background) negotiate collective identifications, define what good representatives are and whether politicians belong to their group (Barbour and Kitinger, 1999). We invited German citizens with Turkish, resettler,<sup>1</sup> and African backgrounds<sup>2</sup> and Dutch citizens with Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese backgrounds. These citizen categories feature in state categorizations, politics or public debate, and citizens labeled as such report experiencing varying forms of racism and/or misrecognition by the dominant majority (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2017; Goerres et al., 2020).

We snowballed participants through social media, our networks, and on the street. All participants completed a Qualtrics survey with an informed consent form and a background questionnaire (Online Appendix 1). We conducted 19 focus groups with 98

participants (Online Appendix 2). Theoretically educated participants were overrepresented and sometimes spoke more during the conversations. While we did not observe differences related to education, it may have impacted our results. Groups consisted of three to six participants with the same migration background, but political views, education, and age/generation varied. We conducted three to four groups per migration background category (except for the African-German group), each time including one women-only group. Participants received 25€ vouchers.

The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to an online space: Zoom. The first author organized the focus groups and trained assistants with different genders and ethnic backgrounds. Assistants helped recruiting participants and moderated the discussions in either Dutch or German. We asked permission to video-record the sessions at the beginning of each meeting. Here, we focus on three sets of questions in the topic list (Online Appendix 3): (1) How should politicians keep track of the interests of their constituents? (2) What makes a good or bad politician? (3) Is it important that a representative resembles you? Participants discussed politicians at various levels.

Dutch conversations were transcribed by the moderators; German conversations by an external company. Transcripts were coded and analyzed in Atlas.ti in two steps: categorization and interpretation (Van Ingelgom, 2020). We attached background codes to participants' statements and then categorized conversations by topics and questions. In the analysis, we summarize insights from all focus groups and illustrate this with quotes of pseudonymized participants.

## Responsiveness

Most participants prefer delegates over trustees. They value politicians who are in touch with a diverse group of constituents and know their concerns. For some, politicians' ethnicity/race, social class, and/or gender come with experiential knowledge or the lack thereof about community concerns. German participants have a stronger preference for delegates than Dutch participants. Ayla [Turkish-German all-women group]: "That [corona and abortion policy] all comes down from the top. Right? It's like a shower, which falls on the population, which we simply must accept." Others agree that there is a gap between party politics and real life. Both German and Dutch groups discuss parties and politicians, and Germans discuss comparatively fewer individual politicians. Participants positively evaluate politicians who connect with citizens:

Murat: You [politicians] should have [. . .] dialogue days, where you are in exchange with everybody and not every four years.

Pelin: [take] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [US politician]. It is very important to her [. . .] to listen to them [constituents] and to create spaces so that citizens can express their opinions. [Turkish-German mixed gender group]

Young participants in both countries admire politicians who consult constituents via social media, blogs, and podcasts. Politicians should communicate clearly and be accessible.

Participants in both countries feel shut-off after elections. They critique the lack of consultation and the limited opportunities to ensure that politicians remain their delegates. Dissatisfaction is high when they feel that politicians break campaign promises:

Omar: [. . .] when the elections come around there's suddenly propaganda and then Muslims are the big buddies of *GroenLinks* [GreenLeft], *D66* [Democrats 66] [. . .] which makes you think, oh wow are they standing up for us and fighting for us. [. . .] When those elections are over everything collapses again and then we as Muslims just disappear from the map. [Moroccan-Dutch mixed gender group]

Descriptive politicians representing parties led by ethnically minoritized politicians do somewhat better, according to participants who hold that these parties represent them. Some interpret this pattern as a systemic failure: “[. . .] many of those ideals they [politicians] can't live up to, because they always have to cooperate with other parties” [Meera, Surinamese-Dutch mixed gender group]. If compromises are made, politicians need to be transparent about this. Dutch citizens value politicians who secure their goals within the coalition system. Whereas compromising is an issue in the Dutch group, it was not in the German groups.

So, while German and Dutch participants agree that politicians should act based on real-life knowledge of their concerns, their evaluations are affected by differing party systems. Germans seem relatively less familiar with politicians and what they do, possibly because German politics is centered around few majority-dominated parties and a larger number of politicians. These factors could cause German participants to experience relatively limited responsiveness. In comparison, Dutch participants' assessments of responsiveness differ depending on a politicians' perceived autonomy to stay close to their wishes. This depended on their party affiliation and possibilities within the multi-party coalition system.

### “Good” and “bad” Politicians

What makes politicians good or bad? Participants are in relative agreement. Dutch participants illustrate good politicians with historical figures who fought for justice. They often ascribe these qualities to descriptive politicians, including Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela. A Surinamese-Dutch group discusses Sylvana Simons—the first Dutch Black woman party leader—as brave and outspoken despite facing backlash, though not everyone agrees with her ideas. Rachelle: “Sylvana Simons has had a very hard time, I think it's nice that she has stood up in a lion's den [. . .].” [Surinamese-Dutch mixed gender group]

In both countries, participants value politicians who are empathic and positively influence intergroup relations. Turkish/Moroccan-Dutch frequently mention the New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern, who united Muslims and non-Muslims after the Christchurch terrorist attacks. Elena [resettler-German mixed gender group] says, “You should have enough empathy to think about the people who don't belong to your own reference group or to your own horizon of experience.” Changing perspectives is intertwined with responsiveness:

Tom: I think it's important that a politician has other people in mind, somehow in his or her speech and in his or her actions [. . .] What kind of problems do new inhabitants of Germany have? [resettler-German mixed gender group]

Most participants believe that a lack of empathy, mostly of non-descriptive politicians, can lead to misrepresentation. African-German participants mention white, non-empathetic politicians who deny their experiences. There are also positive examples:

Özlem: During Ramadan [Merkel], congratulated us on Eid via Instagram. [. . .] I thought it was great [. . .] that different ethnic religious groups in society are mentioned and their traditions and festivals are addressed. I felt represented there, for example, as a Turk or a Muslim. [Turkish-German all-women group]

Another participant forwarded this post to colleagues to signal that Islamic celebrations should be recognized.

German and Dutch participants value self-critical, reflexive politicians who admit mistakes. This resembles a trustee role, albeit with the precondition that politicians must include them in the process. They should explain why they change their minds.

## Disappointment and Admiration

Dutch participants talk extensively about descriptive politicians, Germans less. A possible explanation is that German ethnically minoritized politicians have less influence to act on specific group concerns in the mainstream parties they represent. Moreover, compared to the Netherlands, German ethnically minoritized politicians acquired prominent positions relatively late. Participants mention Aminata Touré [The Greens], also those who live outside her state.

Faiza: I feel represented by her in any case, because as a Black German, she not only has the perspectives of Afro-Germans or Black Germans on her radar, but also those who came here, because her parents have a refugee biography from Mali. [African-German mixed gender group]

Some expect that descriptive politicians understand their experiences which makes them more equipped to act on their behalf. Others express indifference: they do not expect anything from descriptive politicians because they reject groupist political labels, do not identify with them and/or because their political views do not align:

Tom: I think the first Russian German was in the *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* [Christian Democratic Union of Germany] in parliament and now I think there is also one in the *Alternative für Deutschland* [Alternative for Germany] [. . .] I definitely don't feel represented by them, and they don't address my issues. [resettler-German mixed gender group]

The often-assumed link between descriptive politicians and voters' interests quickly ignores the diversity of identities and political views within social categories. Some evaluate descriptive politicians who they believe do not act on their behalf more negatively than non-descriptive politicians. Participants across focus groups emphasize that identifying with a politician is not enough for representation. Sometimes they feel betrayed by the political stances of descriptive politicians. Some think that descriptive politicians are caught between a rock and a hard place: criticized within and outside of their communities. Others express disappointment in politicians who are too "assimilated."

Canan: I don't feel represented by [. . .] Cem Özdemir [The Greens], who I think has already brought out three books or something. All with a title like, "I'm Cem and I'm German" or "I'm Schwabe" [regional term] [. . .] I also have



the feeling that [he needs] to prove to his party colleagues that he is one of them [ . . . ] [Turkish-German mixed gender group]

Muslim-identifying Moroccan-Dutch women regret that former speaker of parliament Khadija Arib did not advocate group concerns and did not publicly state that she practices Islam. She is a role model, nevertheless. Maysem: [ . . . ] “we see a woman there. That’s one. Who has dark hair. That’s two. Who is called Khadija, who has an accent. And when [as a teacher] I show a video of her in class [children’s] eyes really lighten up. [ . . . ]” Many young women participants positively evaluate descriptive politicians. They are role models, increase feelings of belonging, and change negative perceptions about their group.

## Conclusion

What “a super politician” means to ethnically minoritized citizens is relatively similar across groups and countries. Super politicians immerse themselves in the position of citizens and act according to their concerns. This is facilitated by empathy, community contact, and for some, experiential knowledge. Aspects they mention provide building blocks for future cross-national studies; for instance, the development of a “super politician index” to enable systematic measurement (Rashkova and Erzeel, 2022).

How ethnically minoritized citizens evaluate politicians may correspond with the views of German and Dutch citizens at large. Ethnically majoritized citizens equally may demand increased presence of ethnically minoritized politicians (Street and Schönwälder, 2021). Some views seem to be specifically tied to the experience of belonging to an ethnically minoritized group—for instance, the lack of role model politicians. Future research should empirically tease out differences and similarities between majoritized and minoritized citizens.

Descriptive politicians sometimes receive dispensation from being empathetic or responsive. Due to their background, participants hope that they already understand constituents’ concerns. Descriptive politicians are frequently negatively evaluated when they seem politically constrained or too assimilated. The super politicians of their dreams are scarce.

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## Supplementary Information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Focus group topic list

Appendix 2: Pre-focus group survey and informed consent form

Appendix 3: Background information on participants (pseudonyms) by group (N=98)

## Notes

1. German citizens who migrated to Germany mostly from the former socialist Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union/Russia and who, claiming German heritage, received German citizenship through the Resettler clause of the Basic Law (Donovan, 2007: 459).
2. We follow the Afrozensus (Aikins et al., 2021) definition which includes German citizens who recognize themselves under the label of Black, African, or Afrodiasporic inhabitants of Germany and have varying migration backgrounds. This is a self-identified category, which constitutes a departure from the original research design, and corresponds to what Celis and Mügge (2018) call a “hidden identity group.”

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