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## Miscellaneous

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## Local leadership “beyond city hall”: Analysis of the public communication of Ahmed Aboutaleb, mayor of Rotterdam

### Abstract

This article looks at the public communication of mayors and their leadership styles beyond city hall. The research takes the public communication of Ahmed Aboutaleb, mayor of Rotterdam, as a qualitative case study, looking at the narratives, roles, and rhetoric over his 12 years in office. Aboutaleb’s public communication on migrant integration, radicalization, and terrorism takes a strong visionary approach that deviates from the non-political and less partisan Dutch way of leadership. Aboutaleb combines this approach with ‘democratic guardianship’, using the law and the constitution as the criteria that decide who does (or doesn’t) belong to Dutch society. His communication style is robust and expressive, while still maintaining a typically Dutch binding-and-bonding approach to leadership. This combination of local leadership styles does not receive much attention in the literature on mayoral and local leadership, which doesn’t go much beyond the often-emphasized dichotomy of non-decisive and process-orientated leaders versus directive and strong expressions of leadership.

### Keywords

**Mayors, leadership, communication, public appearance, Rotterdam, societal challenges.**

## 1. Introduction

Scholars increasingly stress the importance of local leadership, especially of (elected) mayors, as major societal challenges such as pandemics, the energy transition and sustainable development, a diverse city population, widening social segregation, housing scarcity and inequalities in health issues (Barber & Eastaway, 2010; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002; Jackson, 2019) all affect regions, cities, and localities. After all, it is at the local urban level that governments need to deal with the societal and economic impact of these wicked issues, which makes the roles and tasks of urban leaders, such as mayors, crucial in dealing with these challenges (Leach & Wilson, 2002).

The literature on local leadership shows that mayors face numerous challenges and dilemmas in fulfilling their personal leadership role (Verheul & Schaap, 2010). A ‘strong’ and present leader is needed to bridge and accommodate differences and to connect people with different cultural, economic and social backgrounds. This strong leadership materializes in public, in appearances and communication in the media, at public events and openings, and at moments of public celebration, crisis, or despair. In these public communications one can see

what the mayor stands for and which leadership role and style a mayor or local political leader takes.

There is quite some literature on the tasks and roles of mayors (Karsten & Hendriks, 2016; Leach & Wilson, 2002), but surprisingly there is less literature that focuses solely on the content of the communication that mayors use in their public appearances. The literature on leadership resources tends to focus mainly on political executives' formal authority in relation to other political actors and their performance 'within city hall' (Mullin et al., 2004). The authority of mayors 'beyond city hall', which we call 'public communication' in this article, remains less studied (Sweeting, 2003; Kjaer, 2013). Bazurli et al. (2022), for example, show how in the realm of migration studies, mayors play a crucial role in responding to the challenges of the integration of refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. They focus on how mayors navigate between multilevel dynamics in order to exert leadership on local migration issues. In addition, Denters et al. (2018) show how mayors play a key role in building coalitions in a network of interdependencies between local, national and international actors in dealing with social issues such as migration, poverty and climate change.

These examples show that the literature aims to elucidate the role of mayors in addressing public issues, primarily focusing on how they form governance coalitions, engage relevant stakeholders, and navigate between horizontal and vertical governance structures. However, there is limited attention paid to how mayors articulate and communicate the substance of these public issues. This is particularly significant considering that the media and the public frequently regard mayors as key representatives of the values, needs, and demands of all residents, a perception that is not similarly attributed to local legislators and lower-level officials (Holman, 2015). In the work of Jong (2019) and others, the main focus is on how mayors respond as public leaders to restore a state of normalcy. The focus of such studies is limited to crisis management and does not encompass regular public engagement and communication. To our knowledge, existing studies hence insufficiently address how mayors articulate their views on social issues outside of city hall, in the realm of the public sphere.

Because of the relative lack of focus on this topic in the literature, our aim was to conduct an *explorative* study by examining an in-depth case of the mayor of Rotterdam. Taking a *grounded-approach*, we sought to develop theoretical building blocks and a conceptual framework for understanding mayors' communication on social issues that extended beyond crisis situations. We took an in-depth case study approach to the mayor of Rotterdam, a city in the Netherlands. In 2021, the 'City Mayors Foundation' chose Aboutaleb as the winner of the World Mayor Prize 2021 (NY Times, 2021). The jury unanimously concluded that he is a "*passionate defender of freedom, tolerance and solidarity*". In 2015, he made international headlines after the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris, with his strong statements on excluding Muslim extremists from society, and his appeal to Muslims in the West to speak out against violence (NY Times, 2015).

While the bulk of leadership literature is dominated by the Anglo-centric notion of leadership, in which political leaders have a strong vision and personality, this does not always fit within the reality of traditionally consensus seeking democracies, such as the Netherlands, Sweden and other Scandinavian countries (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). We need more knowledge on how local leadership 'materializes' in these contexts. In this study, we hence focus on the content of the public communication of the mayor of Rotterdam, aiming to learn more on how mayors develop and shape their roles, narratives and rhetoric in responding to public issues (see section 2). Our lead research question is: *How did the mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, present himself between 2009 and 2022 as a local leader in his public appearances and what lessons can be drawn about how mayors conduct their daily practices in dealing with social issues in contemporary urban society?*

This article serves as a starting point for the exploratory development of knowledge regarding the content of mayoral communication outside of city hall. By highlighting this

understudied area, we aim to encourage further research into this topic and set an agenda for future research. The following sections contain a theoretical background, a method section in which we explain the procedure that we followed in collecting and analyzing the data, and a presentation of our findings and conclusions. Finally, we elaborate on the directions that research could take in this underdeveloped area.

## **2. Public communication of local leaders: theoretical exploration and conceptualization**

### *2.1. The constitutional role of mayors versus ‘outside’ world impact*

In the mainstream leadership literature, there is emphasis on an Anglo-centric model of political leaders, who are often labelled as ‘visionary lone rangers’ with headship and followership (Teles, 2015: 23). The ‘strong leadership’ literature often takes a power perspective on local leadership that emphasizes legal responsibilities and formal resources and structures. In some countries, such as Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, there is little room for directive, strong and individualistic leadership. Compared to most of their European counterparts, Dutch mayors are relatively weak leaders institutionally (Bäck et al., 2006). In addition, a defining feature of the Dutch mayoral office is that mayors are not directly or indirectly elected, but appointed by the central government (Schaap et al., 2009). This translates to the expectation that mayors should maintain a non-political stance. It reflects their role as relatively autonomous actors, positioned at some distance from the political dynamics of local governance (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). In the Netherlands, powers that in many other countries are assigned to mayors individually are instead vested in the collective Board of Mayor and Aldermen. This executive body functions as a formal collective decision-making entity, leaving Dutch mayors with minimal individual authority to make decisions independently (ibid). Mayors in the Netherlands do have some executive capabilities that stem from their legal responsibility for police and public safety, but they are still fully accountable to the municipal council. In general, Dutch mayors are therefore less visionary and more connective and facilitative.

Moreover, Karsten & Hendriks (2017, p.165) claim that Dutch mayors can play a crucial frontrunning role, especially in their role of guardians of democratic decision-making, by focusing on safeguarding the ethics, morals and integrity of local politics. However, other scholars have also drawn attention to the position occupied by mayors; in their role of political leaders they can use political metaphors to inform, inspire and persuade their audiences, to connect present ideas to future plans, raise awareness of specific issues or arouse emotional responses (Holman, 2015). According to Holman, mayors are the most accessible executives and people expect them to “give voice to underrepresented interests in the city” (ibid. p 506). Aside from their limited capacity to unilaterally make political decisions, mayors – even in the Dutch context – have a strong position *outside* of city hall. This environment is characterized by low levels of information, which means that mayoral rhetoric is very important.

### *2.2. Mayoral communication: narratives and leadership roles*

The literature on leadership resources tends to focus on political executives’ formal authority in relation to other political actors, such as the council and layers of administration (Mullin et al., 2004). The authority of mayors ‘beyond city hall’—communication and appearance in public—remains less studied (Sweeting, 2003; Kjaer, 2013). Nevertheless, in the last decade, more and more scholars have argued that it is necessary to pay more attention to the staging, performance, and enactment of governance processes (Hajer, 2009) by studying the role of public leaders in their efforts to achieve meaning and authority in a mediatized society. Studies that focus on this public ‘meaning making’ demonstrate the role that mayors can fulfill—especially in the context of crisis (Jong et al., 2019; Hillmann, 2021). Literature on public communication and appearance often stresses the rhetoric and tactics used by local leaders (Marion & Oliver, 2012; Griffin-Padgett & Allisson, 2010). In other studies, various role

typologies are used to give expression to public performance and appearance (Kotter & Lawrence, 1974; Leach & Wilson, 2002).

In this article, we approach the public appearance of local leaders as the interplay between, on the one hand, the rhetoric by which the message (both are captured in the concept ‘narrative’) is conveyed and on the other hand the activated role through which the mayor channels the narrative. While our study is based on a grounded and explorative approach, our starting point lies in the assumption that the public communication of mayors is manifested through narratives—on a selective number of public issues and embedded in a certain rhetoric—and leadership roles, and the *interplay* between these elements. Figure 1 illustrates our conceptual starting point, while the empirical data will enable us to further refine and develop the first building blocks for a conceptual framework on how narratives, rhetoric and roles are interrelated in mayoral communication outside city hall.

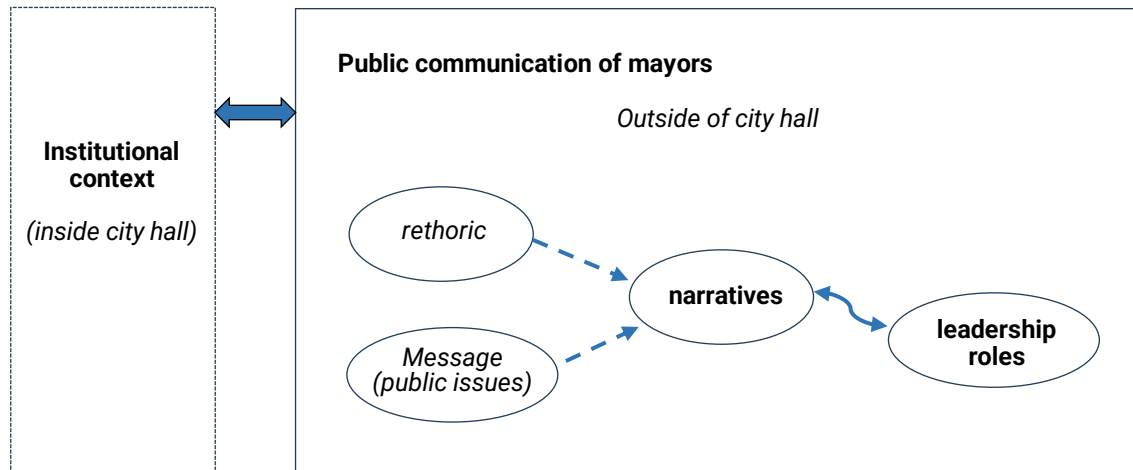
With regard to the narrative, we refer to literature on rhetoric and discourse (Marion & Oliver, 2012; Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010). In our study we define narrative as a story, message, or tale of a series of related events or experiences, whether nonfictional or fictional, expressed through a sequence of written or spoken words (cf. Marion & Oliver, 2012). Marion and Oliver (2013) analyzed State of the City speeches of mayors in US cities to examine their public communication and rhetoric at stressful moments, for example in the event of a disaster. The public communication of political leaders is often studied from the analysis of newspapers and social media related to their response to specific disasters, such as MH17 (Jong et al., 2016) and 9/11 (Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010). Local leaders rely on symbols and rhetoric to reach out to the public to raise public awareness (Stolz, 1999), and make people feel good about the government’s response to a public concern. Rhetoric is language designed to have a persuasive or impressive effect. Local leaders use it to try to reassure and persuade the public. Although Marion and Oliver study mayor’s rhetoric, they do not analyze and discuss it in-depth in a qualitative manner; for example, which words are used, which tone and what kind of story lines are used to address specific societal issues. To our knowledge, very few studies take the latter approach. Some authors have argued that even though mayors are often mentioned in the urban literature as playing a role in managing global issues, their roles are rarely discussed in any detail (Acuto, 2013).

Regarding the public roles of mayors, we use the existing typology of roles most relevant to mayoral leadership in the Netherlands (see John & Cole, 1999; Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). This typology distinguishes between 9 roles: ‘advocate’ (1), ‘consensual facilitator and connector’ (2), ‘enforcer’ (3), ‘first citizen’ (4), ‘moral guide’ (5), ‘ombudsman’ (6), ‘representative’ (7), ‘visionary’ (8), and ‘guardian of democratic principles’ (9). While most of these categories speak for themselves in terms of their meaning, others need more elaboration. In the role of ‘advocate’, the mayor promotes and defends personal beliefs on the one hand and the municipality’s interests on the other hand. In their role as a ‘consensual facilitator and connector’, the mayor acts as a facilitator who promotes positive interaction and bonding and binding connections between several other public and societal actors. The mayor as ‘enforcer’ acts as the guardian of public safety and local and national laws. As ‘first citizen’, the mayor acts as a quasi-monarch, a non-political focal point for the community. The role of ‘representative’ pertains to the mayor as the spokesperson of the local community, especially the unheard voices in society. Finally, as ‘guardian of democratic principles’, the mayor acts as the protector of democratic values and principles.

In sum: in this article we study the public communication of mayors in a Dutch constitutional context expressed as a combination of narrative (message, rhetoric) and leadership roles. As indicated before, strong leadership is not much enacted in the Dutch political context as this is somewhat incompatible with the laws, institutions and culture of a country that has a strong emphasis on consultation, compromise and consensus seeking (Lijphart, 1968). Dutch mayors place a stronger emphasis on their non-political and nonpartisan

role (Cachet et al., 2011) and therefore draw on personal authority sources and soft power and less on hard power and official authority (Karsten & Jansen, 2013).

**Figure 1.** Sensitizing concepts regarding mayors outside of city hall



Source: Own elaboration.

### 3. Methodology

Our research strategy is the qualitative single case study (Stake, 1995). Case study research involves an in-depth examination of a single instance, person or event: a case. This case study has an explorative nature, whereby the data gives further direction to theory building. Case study research can be defined as a research strategy, an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2011). The single case study is used to gain understanding and explore potentials for theory building. It is not used for theory testing or generalization (Stake, 1995). Taking the case study approach, we selected Mayor Aboutaleb as a case to provide insight into a particular issue of (appreciated and valued, see introduction) public communication of mayors in an urbanized environment dealing with societal challenges. We studied the public communication of the mayor of Rotterdam in the period 2009–2022. We selected the case of Mayor Aboutaleb because he has frequently attracted international attention due to his public communications on terrorist attacks and extremism, in contrast to other mayors in the Netherlands who tend to shy away from such political appearances on controversial societal issues. This mayor has a strong visibility in public debates both in and beyond the Netherlands. We collected all of his public speeches (from the speechwriter) during this period. We collected a total of 68 speeches and interviews which were used for public communication activities beyond city hall (Appendix 1).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 1 contains a list of all speeches, and specific details on the date and place where the speeches were held (both within and outside the Netherlands).

**Table 1.** Coding numbers narratives and roles

| Narratives                                  | Subcategory   | Number of mentions in codes |
|---|---|-----------------------------|
| Challenges of multicultural society         | • migration, globalization and its impact (social cohesion, WE society)                             | 85                          |
|   | • radicalization & terrorism, role of local government in combatting radicalization and terrorism   | 57                          |
|   | • refugee crisis and integration policies, emancipation of minorities (LGBTQ, cultural groups etc.) | 49                          |
|   | • discrimination, racism, slavery history   | 47                          |
|   | • diversity as a strength   | 30                          |
| Mobility and talent development in the city | • social mobility through education and talent development  | 19                          |
|   | • success formula ‘hard work pays off’ (climbing social ladder)                                     | 20                          |
|   | • the city as ‘opportunity-machine’   | 8                           |
| Trust and participation in a resilient city | • participation of residents  | 34                          |
|   | • rebuilding trust of residents   | 19                          |
|   | • ‘coaching government’, citizens in the lead   | 11                          |
|   | • transparency towards residents: informing and involving residents                                 | 3                           |
| Green cities and sustainability             | • Sustainability, green city, future-proof, energy transition                                       | 12                          |
| <b>Rhetoric</b>                             | • Inclusive   | 11                          |
|   | • Emotional   | 4                           |
|   | • Confrontational   | 37                          |
|   | • Directive   | 14                          |
|   | • Personal Story  | 40                          |
| <b>Roles</b>                                | • Visionary   | 9                           |
|   | • Ombudsman   | 10                          |
|   | • Citizen first   | 81                          |
|   | • Representative  | 59                          |
|   | • Democratic Guardian   | 60                          |
|   | • Moral Guide   | 4                           |
|   | • Connector & Facilitator   | 138                         |
|   | • Enforcer  | 10                          |
|   | • Advocate  | 23                          |

Source: Own elaboration.

The data was open coded, using Atlas Ti. Three broad categories were used as a starting point: roles, narratives and rhetoric (as depicted in our conceptual framework). For the category ‘roles’, the detailed 9 subcodes ranging from ‘advocate’ to ‘democratic guardian’ (see Karsten & Hendriks, 2017) were further applied to the data. For narratives and rhetoric, the subcodes were more open and hence further informed by the data, see table 1. This led to the identification of three main narratives: multicultural societies, social mobility and education, and resident’s participation. For ‘rhetoric’ the data showed different styles and tones, such as ‘confrontational’, ‘inclusive’, ‘personal story’ and ‘directive’. The data were re-coded over several rounds to improve accuracy (see Berg & Lune, 2004). Although coding doesn’t generate an interpretation,

it helped us to rethink the data and to arrive at valid interpretations. Table 1 shows how many times the codes and subcodes were mentioned in the data. While this study aimed to *qualitatively* give meaning to mayors’ communication, the frequency of the codes also gave insight into how the narratives and roles were extracted from the data, as the numbers helped us to reconstruct broader patterns within the speeches.

We also conducted an in-depth (2 hour-long) interview with Ahmed Aboutaleb to share our findings. This gave us the opportunity to validate our findings and to gain a more in-depth understanding of the mayor’s public communication. While the combination of speech analyses and an interview yielded a rich portrait of Ahmed Aboutaleb’s communication in his public appearances, we acknowledge the limitations of this study, as we did not incorporate how narratives and roles manifested visually, such as the gestures he used and the situational context of his words. In a time and age where the visual consumption of news and information pervades all facets of social life, it is important to explicitly mention that we did not take this fully into account. In the analysis we do provide some context—such as international developments to which the mayor responds—but we do not fully uncover the context of all the speeches. In the last section of this paper, we will further elaborate on directions for future research, as these components add significantly to the interpretation and comprehension of the message (Hostetter, 2011).

#### **4. Analysis of the public communication of mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb**

Aboutaleb’s public speeches show 4 dominant narratives that recur over time, whereby the first three are the most dominant and recurring ones. The first three narratives are consistently present throughout the years. As the analysis will show, in the last few years (starting after 2015) there was some change with regard to the balance within some of these narratives. Furthermore, a new narrative slowly started to emerge.

##### **4.1. Recurring narratives by mayor Aboutaleb**

###### **4.1.1. The challenges facing multicultural societies and responding to threats/tensions**

From the very start of his period as mayor, Aboutaleb responded to the issue of ‘the challenges of multicultural societies’. The essence of this narrative is about how to deal with the many different groups living in the city within the context of terrorist attacks and the radicalization of youth, which threatens the peaceful coexistence in multicultural cities such as Rotterdam. In the first few years of his term as mayor, Aboutaleb reinforced his commitment to this narrative, especially after the murder of the columnist/film-maker Theo van Gogh in 2004 by a Muslim extremist, an act that further polarized the public debate on issues such as terrorism, radicalization and the integration of migrants in general. The mayor was convinced that his personal background—a public figure with both a Moroccan and Muslim background—was much needed in the debate. The following statement made during his installation speech illustrates the importance that Aboutaleb attached to this issue, sympathizing mainly with the original residents of the city who were struggling with the changes that globalization and migration had brought to their local communities:

Many people feel insecure in a world where so many things are changing. Jobs for life no longer exist. We have learnt that money can just vanish. Churches are declining and mosques are appearing. It makes people feel uncomfortable and we cannot downplay these feelings. (Installation speech Mayor Aboutaleb, 5 January 2009).

Throughout the years, Aboutaleb consistently argued that migration in modern societies is asking too much of cities’ original inhabitants. He expressed his understanding of the fear, frustration and anger of many residents in the city, while providing answers rooted in a zero-tolerance policy towards migrants (and their descendants) who are unwilling to participate in society. His message to newcomers (new migrants) was that they should fully embrace the norms and values of Dutch society. For the descendants of migrants who applaud violence

towards Dutch society the message was also clear: there is no room for them in Western societies.

To the newcomers in my city I say: You will soon have your passport. This is not just a travel document, it is a mandate. It mandates you to not only take advantage of the rights and freedoms that the constitution provides, but to actively observe and promote them. (Speech after the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, January 8, 2015).

When he {Theo van Gogh} was murdered by Mohamed Bouyeri, I addressed my words to those who applauded this crime, and I said: Go and leave! Go and live in Afghanistan or Sudan where you will be much happier. A plane departs from Amsterdam every 5 minutes. (Interview in *L'Express*, “Islam needs to reinvent itself”, February 2015).

This statement was not exceptional, as the mayor had addressed a similar message to the perpetrators and their followers after the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015. In this narrative, the mayor clearly defined the criteria for who does and who does not belong to Dutch society. When addressing youngsters who support terrorist organizations, he took the boundary of the constitution as the main criterion for drawing this line, clearly stating that there is no place in Dutch society for those who do not respect the boundaries set out in the constitution. A similar argument was presented to newcomers/migrants in Rotterdam, whom Aboutaleb mandated to embrace the constitution and promote the values of Dutch society. Here Aboutaleb presented a solution for the many problems in multicultural society: *teaching* residents—especially those with a migrant background—the values of the Western world, the importance of the democratic rule of law and respect for the constitution.

In line with the national discourse in the Netherlands, Aboutaleb frequently addressed the negative implications of migration for local communities, especially the ways in which it impacts on old residents who feel that the world around them is changing too quickly. He stated that there should be more understanding for these people and their feelings of frustration, alienation and discomfort.

Interestingly, the mayor stressed the feelings of native residents more often and more emphatically than the position of migrants or newcomers in society. While he addressed problems of discrimination and racism in Dutch society on some occasions, these were not generally recurring themes within his broader narrative on multi-cultural societies. Moreover, in his public appearances the mayor urged residents with a migrant background to not point too quickly to discrimination or racism and to develop more understanding towards natives who were being confronted with changes in their neighborhoods and societies.

Nevertheless, analysis of his public appearances shows that from 2015 onwards, Aboutaleb seemed to seek for more balance between addressing the lifeworld of native residents on the one hand and the challenges of migrants faced with discrimination and racism on the other hand. In 2015, he introduced the concept of the WE society which appears to integrate tolerance and anti-discrimination towards newcomers to a greater extent. Although Aboutaleb used the same criteria for excluding people from society, he adopted a more inclusive tone:

In order to root out the rotten apples, we need as many people as possible. People from all walks of life, of all creeds and convictions. Though one hundred percent security does not exist, we can tighten the net around radical people who plan to use violence against democracy and kick them out of what I call the WE society. A fair and just society in which the good are not punished along with the bad. To build such an inclusive society, we need the trust and commitment of as many people as possible. (Speech: OSCE International Security Days in Vienna, 30 March 2017).

This concept contains ideas that Aboutaleb had consistently advocated for years, and was also used frequently in his international speeches to show how “*things are done*” in Rotterdam. While the main narrative on multicultural societies remained intact, there was more attention for the perspective of migrants.

In other public appearances, the mayor addressed discrimination and racism as a problem that society needs to combat more explicitly. Starting from 2019, for example, he became more active in the discussions on Rotterdam’s historic role in slavery<sup>2</sup>:

The search continues for all of us. It is not only about freedom, but also about acknowledgement. Acknowledging what was done to those who were treated as slaves. It is about justice. Making sure that discrimination and racism are no longer part of our societies. It is about making progress and creating equal chances for everyone, to compensate for the economic inequality. (Remembrance speech: slavery history, 30 June 2019)

#### 4.1.2. Mobility and talent development as crucial to successful people and cities

A second narrative which is strongly visible in the public appearances of mayor Aboutaleb is the idea that people can increase their social mobility through education and talent development. Aboutaleb argued that to combat poverty, youth radicalization, and unemployment, the city needed to invest in education and recognize talent. This argument is recurring theme in his public appearances, for example:

Good education, adequate traineeships and jobs will always be necessary. Because a good education is important for finding a good job, of course. Because a paid job is the best remedy against poverty and a life on the margins of society: the margins where malicious people will find their victims. (Speech: CVE Summit in Washington after the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, 17 February 2015).

Here the link to the first narrative is explicit, as on several occasions Aboutaleb argued that “*young people in the city with prospects will be less receptive to extremist ideas*” (Public speech UN New York, 2016). Moreover, in this second narrative, Aboutaleb portrayed Rotterdam as a city of ample opportunities where, under his leadership, there would be substantial investment in educating young people and developing their talents. There is a considerable need for such investment in a port city with a relatively high number of ‘lower’ educated residents compared to other large cities in the Netherlands. He described cities in general as places where one can take advantage of a wealth of chances and opportunities. The essence of this message is that it is possible to climb the social ladder, no matter where you start out. Cities are emancipation machines, a prerequisite for transformation. This idea is illustrated in the following statement:

The city also provides the freedom to develop yourself to your full potential. You can become part of the anonymity, where the only thing that counts is your own talent and your own ambitions. You are no longer the son of a poor family, you are maybe a lawyer in the making (...). (Speech at EFUS conference, 12 December 2012).

Interestingly, this narrative is also closely related to the mayor’s own life story, which he frequently referred to, positioning himself as a son of a migrant who became the mayor of a large European city. As such, he is living proof that it is possible to overcome one’s social-economic position through education and hard work. Aboutaleb used reflections on his difficult upbringing in Morocco – in which poverty and the lack of education were the norm rather than the exception – to lend credibility to this narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> In the interview with Aboutaleb, he did not fully agree with our perceived lack of balance regarding this narrative. He referred to other public appearances that were not always seen by a broader audience, in which he had emphatically spoken out against discrimination and racism. He also explained that addressing and combatting racism and discrimination are two sides of the same coin. According to Aboutaleb, the efforts he made in this respect were not always picked up on by the media.

#### 4.1.3. Trust and participation as the main ingredients for peaceful, strong, and resilient societies

A third narrative that featured in many of Aboutaleb’s speeches, interviews and other public appearances, is the idea that citizens play a key role in local societies. From the start of his term as mayor, Aboutaleb insisted that trust was a key ingredient of peaceful societies:

We should not only intervene, but we should also listen and initiate the dialogue. The government is very well able to build bridges (...) but that same government should also build bridges between people. In my view, the recipe is trust, trust between people, but also trust between governments and citizens. (Installation speech Mayor Aboutaleb, 5 January 2009).

According to the mayor, a lack of mutual trust between citizens and between citizens and governments is an important problem of contemporary societies. To illustrate this, he often referred to the small village where he was born and raised in Morocco, which exemplifies how trust is essential for social cohesion and solidarity. Throughout the years, Aboutaleb repeatedly stated that there are two main ways in which this trust can be regained from citizens.

The first way is by being transparent about what local governments are doing to combat problems such as crime. In many of his public speeches, the mayor proudly explained that under his leadership, Rotterdam involved residents in consultations between the mayor, the police chief and the public prosecutor, meetings that had previously taken place behind closed doors. In a broader context, this approach is also about creating dialogue and meeting points between communities as a way of promoting trust. Secondly, trust is gained by empowering residents and entrepreneurs by involving them in all kinds of local policies. Aboutaleb advocated local societies that use the eyes and ears of residents to solve problems in the city (information exchange), while also using their creativity to find solutions for the problems facing the city. Aboutaleb framed this as a typical approach for Rotterdam:

I cannot run the city without my citizens’ support. Citizens have the ideas, and they have a better grasp of what is needed in their own neighborhood. If you give them some power, they will come up with very interesting and sustainable solutions. (Speech United Nations New York: On radicalization of Youth and the Rotterdam Approach, 3 June 2016).

Aboutaleb also argued that modern governments should adapt their role. Nowadays, they are no longer fully in the lead, and therefore they need to embrace a coaching role whereby they activate citizens and businesses to take ownership of their city’s problems and present solutions.

Following the commencement of his final term of office in 2021, Aboutaleb’s narrative intensified further as he became more explicitly vocal in the broader discussion in the Netherlands on decreasing trust in governments. In a letter to residents, he clearly outlined the importance of trust and his own role in improving the systems created by the government to prevent any unintended and unexpected effects that policies may have after implementation. On the local level, Aboutaleb claimed that municipalities have become formal, anonymized machines with too great a focus on the bureaucratic system world and risk avoidance. This has forced policy implementers to treat citizens primarily as potential fraudsters, an approach characterized by a lack of understanding of residents’ life worlds and lived experience.

#### 4.1.4. The narrative on “Green cities and sustainability”

Finally, in more recent years—most visibly since 2017—the mayor gradually introduced a fourth narrative, one focused on green sustainable cities and how cities like Rotterdam can address sustainability and green energy sources in order to become future-proof. Even though he claims this narrative has been strongly visible for a longer period of time, it was not explicitly addressed in his public appearances until 2017. He showcased ‘green’ initiatives and projects in and around Rotterdam, organized by residents, business, and the municipality. Take, for example, the following statement:

We have to focus on one of the greatest challenges of our century: to ensure balanced progress in terms of economic growth, quality of life, safety and sustainability. Our first ambition is a green, healthy and future-proof city. We’re making Rotterdam’s streets more pedestrian and bike-friendly (...). (Interview *VVD magazine*, “The story of the city, what will the city look like in 2037?” October 2017).

Aboutaleb connected this narrative to the third narrative on resident participation, as he welcomed and supported projects with a green approach, inviting residents and entrepreneurs in the city to put forward their ideas.

#### **4.2. The enacted roles of mayor Aboutaleb**

A key role that Aboutaleb seems to have embraced throughout the years is the traditional ‘first citizen’ role, which is one of the roles that Dutch mayors generally prefer (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). In his public communication, he consistently emphasized that a mayor needs to know what is going on in the city, sense the atmosphere, and solve the problems of residents with no other alternatives within the bureaucratic system. The latter involves remedying unfair individual situations or changing bureaucratic rules that ruin people’s lives. This is also in line with his frequently uttered statement that “*nobody in my city will sleep on the streets*”, which demonstrates—in line with the ‘first citizen’ role—that he was very much involved with the wellbeing of the local community. In more recent years, the mayor connected this role to the broader discussion in the Netherlands on citizens’ ‘trust’ in both national and local governments. This also relates to his role as an ‘ombudsman’ as Aboutaleb often explicitly expressed his commitment to protecting citizens against the unintended and undesired effects of policies, red tape, regulatory pressure and ambiguity.

The mayor has said (and this has also been confirmed by others) that he frequently walked around Rotterdam to see, hear and experience residents’ reality. Sometimes this role, in which he listened to residents and their concerns, was explicitly related to the first narrative on multicultural societies. He described his role as that of a promoter of dialogue on major societal issues (such as the Islam debates that were organized under his lead) who creates a space where people can formulate their concerns and exchange opinions.

While he described his role as focusing on organizing and promoting dialogue, he also took a significant role in that dialogue, especially in relation to the first narrative, in which he expressed a strong vision of how to deal with challenges facing multicultural societies. Whereas most mayors in the Netherlands do not adopt such a visionary approach, Aboutaleb strongly engaged in this role, both in local, national and international appearances:

Look at the debate in the city on the creeping danger of Muslim extremists. (...) I can contribute to this topic in the years ahead (...). It’s okay to add some colors to the facts now and then, especially as this topic also affects me personally. I was 16 when I came to the Netherlands and people in my street helped me to learn Dutch 5 evenings a week (...). The Dutch government has invested thousands of euros in me. How fair would it be then if I were to decide to pack my bags to join a group of rapists and murderers in Syria? (Interview in *Algemeen Dagblad*, 20 September 2024).

While these statements explicitly address the mayor’s desire to play a role in this specific debate, his vision and confrontational tone on multicultural societies also added a political direction to the debate. This was confirmed in our interview with him, in which he acknowledged his political, sometimes even moralizing input to what he prefers to call “the public debate”. As we will see in the next section, Aboutaleb legitimated his role and position in capacity-based authority, which mainly refers to his personal experience and background as a Moroccan/Muslim mayor.

Aboutaleb combined this strong vision with what Karsten & Hendriks (2017) call the role of ‘democratic guardian’. In the debates on international conflicts and terrorism, he determined his position ‘based’ on the boundaries of the constitution. Members of society that no longer

belong are those who do not respect the boundaries of the law. Here, Aboutaleb strongly positioned himself as a mayor who needed to protect these boundaries against those who would cross them. Interestingly, the case of Aboutaleb is *atypical* for the Dutch context, as Dutch mayors generally prefer to adopt a non-political stance rather than positioning themselves as a strong local leader (e.g. Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). When it comes to the first narrative, Aboutaleb clearly took a political stand and presented a vision that he communicated through the frame of the WE society. However, in line with the tradition of Dutch mayors, he did so by legitimating his position based on his role as a ‘democratic guardian’, someone who safeguards democracy and the constitution, protecting it from those who threaten it.

His role as ‘democratic guardian’ is also apparent in the third narrative on resident participation. Here, we once again see how Aboutaleb used the democratic constitution to empower residents by giving them more opportunities to participate in solving societal problems. As mayor, he consistently argued that a successful society is one that makes optimum use of the engagement of residents and entrepreneurs, creates opportunities for them to participate. The following statement summarized his plea for a stronger local democracy:

As national politics seem to become a permanent election fight, local politics offer residents, entrepreneurs and organizations room to come up with their own initiatives regarding sustainable solutions for social problems (...). It is local government that can support these initiatives, restore the human dimension to policies and make a difference for people. (Speech at the symposium on “Democracy is a verb”, 26 November 2019).

Finally, the question arises where these different narratives and roles of his office left Aboutaleb with regard to the bonding-and-bridging role of ‘liaison’: “a person who brings together people and who establishes and maintains a good working relationship between them” (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017: 162). In the case of Aboutaleb, the answer is disputed as the WE society he promulgated has been criticized for its harsh tone regarding migrants and Muslims and the exclusionary effects of putting people outside society. Nevertheless, Aboutaleb clearly acted as a bridging-and-building leader in terms of the collaborations that he strived to establish with residents, entrepreneurs, and other parties both in Rotterdam and around the world. As he began to receive more international attention, Aboutaleb communicated even more consistently about the critical role of local governments in combatting problems in society, emphasizing their need of support from other parties, such as the European Union (Brussels) and national governments in order to deal with the challenges confronting contemporary societies.

#### **4.3. The rhetoric used by mayor Aboutaleb**

In his public communications – especially those related to the first narrative on multicultural societies – the mayor used a confrontational and emotional tone to show his concern about the increased violence and threats in society. This confrontational rhetoric is illustrated by the way in which he consistently responded to migrants and Muslims, admonishing them for their failure to speak out against terrorist attacks or to fully embrace Dutch norms and values. This rhetoric was used to codify the public’s mores about who does and who does not belong, but also to demonstrate his active, straightforward approach to tackling the problem. Furthermore, this approach is not exclusive to narrative 1, as the mayor had a zero-tolerance attitude towards the broader problem of crime and violence in the city. After a violent demonstration against covid-19 measures in the city center, the mayor used a similar confrontational tone, speaking directly to the youngsters that were involved in these actions:

Do you feel good about yourself? About destroying your own city? Are you happy now? (...)  
Is that your Rotterdam identity? Is that what you are proud of? The city that has raised you?  
(Speech after ‘rioters’ and violence in response to the Covid-19 lock down, 26 January 2021).

The confrontational and sometimes emotional tone that Aboutaleb used to express anger and disappointment is very typical of his public communication throughout the years. Another

recurring element in his many speeches over the years is how he used his own personal story. Aboutaleb frequently referred to his own upbringing in Morocco to show social mobility is possible in today's society, as long as people are willing to invest in learning the Dutch language, gaining an education and developing their talents. Furthermore, his personal background as a Moroccan migrant with a Muslim identity, allows him—according to his own judgment—to directly converse with the migrant and Muslim community and remind them of their duty and role in the debate. When we asked him whether mayors are allowed to engage in the political debate, he replied:

If you have the authority to do it, you can. Not only because you are allowed to do it. I know many colleagues in the Netherlands cannot do what I do, because they are not me. (...) I think it is more limited for other mayors. (Personal interview Aboutaleb, March 2022).

This further reaffirms how Aboutaleb relies on competence-based authority, as he refers to the person behind the leader, claiming that he has achieved a certain position and credibility based on his personal background and interactions. The rhetoric that follows from this is an attempt to educate the public on the issues at stake. Thanks to his personal background as a migrant, a Muslim, and the first minority-mayor in Europe, he has a head start, as he understands issues such as migration, the Islam debate and social mobility as an insider.

Finally, in line with the content of his message, Aboutaleb's public communication demonstrated a strong *consistency* in terms of symbolic rhetoric. This raises the question of whether he used a deliberate strategy as opposed to a more reactive or impulsive style. While the consistency seems to suggest a more carefully considered strategy, our interview with Aboutaleb also revealed that he responded more impulsively in accordance with the atmosphere, circumstances, and his own emotional state at that moment in time, especially in polarized debates and international events. His famous “*get out of here*” statement to the perpetrators of the terrorist attack in Paris is an example of such a moment, in which he adapted his response to the situation, responding more impulsively and therefore more emotionally to the heat of the moment as a way of showing concern, frustration, and anger with the public event in question (Stolz, 1999).

#### **4.4. Interplay between narratives, rhetoric and roles.**

The first narrative on ‘the challenges of the multicultural society’ in the city of Rotterdam was very dominant from the start of Aboutaleb's first term as mayor. This narrative was reinforced by Dutch and international shocks and attacks in the early 2000s. Other narratives also appeared, such as the one on ‘mobility and talent development’, and ‘trust, participation and strong/resilient societies’. Key to the narratives is the way in which the challenges of the multicultural society in Rotterdam can be solved: together, trusting each other, with citizens in the lead, and supportive government structures. The logic here is that enabling citizens to participate and utilizing their talents will increase resistance and resilience to the challenges facing Rotterdam.

In telling these narratives (the rhetoric), especially the first narrative, the mayor used confrontational language and tone towards the Muslim community, as in his view, it was too often silent about violent attacks. Aboutaleb's rhetoric is predominantly direct, provocative, and confrontational in all four narratives but especially in the first one. In our interview with mayor Aboutaleb, he explained how his own Moroccan and Muslim identity enabled him to say what other mayors may not or will not say. As a member of these communities, he can be more critical towards them.

In telling the narratives he mainly adopted the role of ‘first citizen’ as he considered himself legitimized to be the mouthpiece of Rotterdam's society and able to take diverse standpoints of various groups in Rotterdam into consideration. From talks and encounters with Rotterdam residents, he had learnt about their perspectives, worries, and concerns and developed a firm standpoint with a clear vision, which he strongly proclaimed in various public appearances and

debates. In later years, however, it became more inclusive as he strove to increase connection between residents with different backgrounds so that they could tackle the city’s challenges together (in the so-called WE society).

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

Many studies have focused on the *internal* and *formal* tasks and roles of mayors (Jong et al., 2016; Leach & Wilson, 2002; Kjaer, 2013), whereas others have stressed the individual and psychological character of leaders (Verheul & Schaap, 2010). However, less is known about the *public communication* of mayors—outside city hall—within the context of the various social issues and challenges confronting a city, such as migration, climate change and crime. We conducted a study of the internationally highly praised mayor of Rotterdam, zooming in on the narratives and roles enacted in his public appearances. The aim of the article was an agenda-setting one, initiating first building blocks for conceptual thinking and theory building on this research topic, but also to encourage future researchers to further elaborate on our findings.

The study reveals that the case of mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb is both a typical and an a-typical case of Dutch mayorship. It is typical in the sense that mayorship in countries with a consensual decision-making culture, generally reflect a facilitative or connective leadership style whereby pragmatic skills are combined with a strong preference for soft power rather than hard power (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017; Nye, 2004). Most of the mayors in the Netherlands therefore prefer more process-orientated and less content-driven tasks, identifying more strongly with roles such as the non-partisan and non-political ‘father of the citizens’ or a ‘liaison’ and ‘representative’ of the municipality. The case of Aboutaleb is a typical profile of Dutch mayors, as he strongly embraced the ‘father of citizens’ role, while at the same time working closely together with residents, (social) entrepreneurs and parties outside of the city. This reflects the Dutch approach of facilitative and connective leadership, in which stakeholder collaboration is a highly praised consensus-seeking and cooperation-oriented tradition.

Aboutaleb’s mayorship also shows some *a-typical* characteristics, as the analysis over 12 years shows a mayor with a strong content-driven political vision, while at the same time using a (un-Dutch) firm and confrontational rhetoric. This confrontational rhetoric was in alignment with the mainstream political debate in the Netherlands on migration and integration, which is also characterized by harsh and directive language. Here, the mayor of Rotterdam justified and legitimized his tone and approach based on his personal authority, e.g.: his migrant and Muslim background. His clear, consistent messages on migrant integration, radicalization, and terrorism (and to a lesser extent on social mobility and resident participation) exemplify a visionary role that deviates from the non-political and less partisan Dutch way of leadership which is often stressed in the literature (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). Interestingly, Aboutaleb combined this role with ‘democratic guardianship’, as the law and constitution were his main criteria for deciding who does and does not belong in Dutch society. The Dutch tradition of a ‘consensual and cooperative “pater familias”’ (Verheul & Schaap, 2010: p. 444) goes hand-in-hand with the way in which he used formal regulations and guidelines to draw boundaries regarding the content of the issues at stake. Here, an unusually strong political role was combined with a procedure-driven focus on the constitution and the role of the mayor in protecting the values of local democracy.

This study, which focused on one specific Dutch mayor, shows the importance of shifting the debate in the literature, which is too focused on internal, constitutional-legal, and individual appearances of mayors. By combining narratives, rhetoric, and roles in characterizing public appearances of mayors *outside* city hall, we can observe the dynamics of what it means for mayors to deal with different challenges of contemporary society, going beyond the dichotomy of non-decisive and process-orientated leaders versus directive and masculine expressions of leadership (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). The study shows that it is possible to capture additional in-between profiles if we analyze the narratives, rhetoric, and roles of local leaders in a

comprehensive manner. Moreover, this approach combines the investigation of micro-communication and appearances with the dichotomous literature on ‘heroic’ leaders versus process-orientated ones. Our research approach allowed us to understand the public communication and appearances of a mayor who operated in a specific context (Rotterdam) within a broader institutional and constitutional framework (the Netherlands). After all, leadership and public appearance can only be understood from a multi-level point of view at the intersections of personality, context, and legal-constitutional and city-specific circumstances. Therefore, we agree with Lowndes & Leach (2004) that context is not deterministic, but that the interplay of context, capabilities, and constitutions explains the communication trajectory taken by leaders, including mayors. We need more systematic and comparative research that takes this interplay as a research design, moving beyond single case study (like ours) to identify patterns or variations that reveal how mayors address important urban challenges in meaningful, legitimate and effective ways.

We call for more research involving a multiple case study analysis of mayors in different cities in the Netherlands and other (European) countries, comparing their communication styles outside of city hall. While broadening the city-scope, future research could narrow down the scope of narratives, focusing, for example, on the ‘migration-narrative’ or the ‘sustainability-narrative’ in different cities. Such research could potentially lead to a better contextual understanding of the ‘in-between-profile’ for different policy subjects. This would potentially contribute to more variation in profiles influenced by variety in city contexts, going beyond current categorizations in the literature that are now mainly based *within* the context of city hall (Mullin et al., 2004; Bazurli et al., 2022). Communication content and styles could also be compared to actual *policies and politics* in cities, showing how mayors contribute to policies and politics combining communications within and outside city hall. Such research could then—building on our work—further elaborate on the (rightfully or wrongfully) presumed limited) role of mayors in countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden and other Scandinavian countries (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017).

In doing so, future research needs to take account of methodological issues as analyzing mayors in the “interplay of context, capabilities and constitutions” demands a more comprehensive approach that not only examines speeches (text), but which also systematically studies the visual component of public communication. For example, focusing on visual material such as photos and media portraits would enable researchers to pay more attention to gestures and the situational contexts of public appearances. Such research is needed to further develop the current literature and add to knowledge on the potential roles of mayors in combatting modern societal challenges.

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## **Annex**

Appendix 1. An overview of all speeches and interviews that were analyzed is available in Figshare data repository with the following DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28696358.v1>