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# Dilemmas of Powerlessness: The Ethical Dimensions of Political Action in the Swedish Parliament

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## Abstract

What are the most challenging ethical dilemmas for politicians, and how do they handle them? The classical literature on ethical dilemmas in politics has mainly explored them as conflicts between ethical principles in high-stakes decisions. However, empirical evidence of the extent to which such dilemmas accurately reflect the experience of most politicians is scarce. Drawing on extensive in-depth interviews with Swedish parliamentarians, I show that their dilemmas stem mainly from powerlessness. Powerlessness in politics manifests itself in primarily two ways: relational powerlessness, which is driven by constraints like party and constituency loyalties, and inherent powerlessness due to formal and informal barriers like constitutional mandates and limited time and resources. This study contributes to the field of political ethics by anchoring political dilemmas in everyday democratic politics and by introducing powerlessness as a new central concept. In doing so, it supplements our understanding of ethical dilemmas in politics with insights from those confronting them.

**Keywords:** dirty hands; parliaments; political dilemmas; political ethics; powerlessness

## Introduction

Politics is a messy business. Filled with contradictory obligations, imperfect relationships, and uncertain outcomes, the very nature of politics ensures that its practitioners will face ethical dilemmas on an everyday basis. Yet, the literature exploring these ethical dilemmas has largely avoided empirical explorations in favour of theoretical discussions, primarily held in the dirty hands literature. Classical dirty hands scholarship has theoretically explored a vast number of ethical dilemmas in politics, such as whether a politician should authorize the torture of a terrorist who knows the location of bombs that are about to go off, or whether they should, as Winston Churchill is widely reportedly had done during the Second World War, refrain from warning citizens about an incoming bombing raid when doing so would jeopardize other war efforts. While these are vital questions that require deep theoretical and normative exploration, they are also unrepresentative of the magnitude and types of ethical dilemmas most politicians will ever face. Despite this apparent distance between theory and practice, little is known about the kinds of ethical dilemmas real-life politicians identify as the most challenging ones, who primarily face these, and how they handle them. Accordingly, I set out to address this gap between theory and practice by asking the following question: What are the most challenging ethical dilemmas for politicians, and how do they handle them?

To answer this question, I conducted seventy-four in-depth interviews with randomly selected Swedish parliamentarians.<sup>1</sup> To get beneath the surface of their responses, I employed a three-stage

<sup>1</sup>Stratified by party and gender. See section three for more information about the sample.

coding procedure based on interpretive abductive principles. This research design allowed me to analyze their answers in relation to the relevant literature while simultaneously exploring new aspects of their reasoning that could inform our practical and theoretical understanding of political dilemmas. The main objective of this analytical approach was to search for what Shapiro calls problematizing re-descriptions, which in this case meant exploring if politicians' lived experiences and views of what constitutes ethical dilemmas in politics could inform, refine, or challenge the way political dilemmas have previously been theorized.

The result offers a new empirical perspective on what politicians themselves see as their most challenging ethical dilemmas. Through an in-depth exploration of the parliamentarians' answers, I show how the traditional view of political dilemmas in the dirty hands literature – as momentous political decisions and clashes between deontological imperatives and consequentialist moral logic – do not adequately represent what politicians themselves believe are the most challenging or the most frequent ethical dilemmas in their everyday representative work. Specifically, whereas the literature would lead us to believe that with great power comes great responsibility, and presumably greater ethical dilemmas, this research shows that the reverse also can be true. The most frequent and challenging ethical dilemmas for Swedish parliamentarians stem not from their hold on power but from their lack of power – their political powerlessness.

Political powerlessness manifests itself in two theoretically distinct ways, namely in relational and inherent restrictions of options. Relational powerlessness occurs because most parliamentarians act within a web of relationships that include crucial external actors such as their political party, their constituents, and even parliamentarians from rival parties. This kind of powerlessness highlights the intricate and ongoing contentious process that is modern legislative politics. In Sweden, this kind of powerlessness is not predominantly formal; legislators technically possess the freedom to act and vote as they see fit. It is the informal constraints – such as political customs, strategies, and loyalties to party or constituents – that curtail their options to act as they see fit. This contrasts with the inherent powerlessness, which is caused by formal barriers such as constitutional mandates and informal barriers like the practical challenge of having finite time and resources to carry out multiple representative duties.

The study of powerlessness in political dilemmas contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it highlights how ethical dilemmas in politics arise not only from difficult decisions but also from the relational and inherent powerlessness that is integral to democratic political life, which limits the ability of politicians to make those decisions independently in the first place. Second, in contrast to much existing literature, it offers the counterintuitive insight that those on the lower rungs of the hierarchical ladder confront ethical dilemmas more frequently than those on the higher rungs. Third, the results offer insight into how the ethical dilemmas due to powerlessness in politics are typically navigated, whether by adhering to current role obligations or by striving to expand one's political power. These are not merely theoretical issues; they have implications for the questions citizens can ask when evaluating politicians' actions and the directions future research can take.

Fundamentally, this research anchors our normative discussions closer to an everyday, perhaps more mundane, political reality. The extent to which the ethical dilemmas parliamentarians speak of should be what constitutes genuine ethical dilemmas in politics is, naturally, something that requires deep theoretical and normative scrutiny – it is not something empirics alone can tell us. I hope this article can be one starting point for such conversations.

### What are Political Dilemmas? Insights from Previous Research

The theoretical, normative, and philosophical literature on political dilemmas is vast. Scholars have addressed varied and crucial questions such as what ethical obligations do we owe to our adversaries (Appelbaum 1999); what we ought to do when moral intuitions pull in opposite directions (Yemini 2014), as well as the ethics of good democratic representation (Rosanvallon 2011,

2018). Yet the lion's share of the literature on political dilemmas has been written in the dirty hands genre, to such an extent that some scholars have even argued that this genre has become almost synonymous with the field of political ethics (Sabl 2002, 22; Hall and Sabl 2022, 4). Drawing primarily on classical dirty hands literature, three key themes emerge about what political dilemmas are, who primarily faces them, and how politicians should handle them.

First, political dilemmas in the dirty hands literature are generally portrayed as conflicts between deontological imperatives and consequentialist moral logic, a view that is often attributed to Walzer's seminal article, *Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands* (1973). When confronted with such a dilemma, politicians are asked to forgo what can be seen as crucial deontological principles (for example, not authorizing torture) if doing so will lead to greater consequences for the many (for example, saving a city). The dilemma is said to occur because a politician can pursue either value independently but not together, where choosing one ethical foundation does not *per se* release a politician from the ethical obligations of the other (Marcus 1980; Marcus 1996). Paradoxically, this can 'leave politicians facing a situation where, even when their actions are, all things considered justified they will become morally polluted for having so acted' (Nick and de Wijze 2023, 416). Numerous studies have explored dilemmas from a similar Walzerian view, covering broad topics such as what happens if a politician decides not to dirty their hands by choosing the deontological options (Cunningham 1992; Hollis 1982); the extent to which politicians should feel remorse about their decisions in these dilemmas (de Wijze 2005; Roadevin 2019); how dirty hands dilemmas can be understood from a Marxist perspective (Lukes 1986); and to what extent, if at all, politics constitutes a normatively different moral sphere from the individual sphere (Dobel 1998; Hampshire 1978; Tholen 2020; Tillyris 2019).

However, not all scholars accept the standard Walzerian thesis that political dilemmas are conflicts between consequentialist and deontological requirements. For instance, rather than seeing dirty hands dilemmas as conflicts between consequentialist and deontological obligations, Nick (2019a) argues that such dilemmas should be understood as instances where one has to choose between competing plural moral values, which does not necessarily need to be consequentialist or deontological. Similarly, Tillyris (2016a; 2016b; 2019) argues that dirty hands dilemmas arise in conflicts between private convictions and ethically distinct public duties, where the ethical requirements of political office can render politicians having to pursue what in the individual sphere would be considered immoral practices to achieve political ends.

Besides arguments about what kind of dilemmas qualify as dirty hands dilemmas, there are also concerns that the standard conception of dirty hands dilemmas misrepresents the magnitude of the most common dilemmas in politics. For instance, Shklar (1984) critiqued the tendency to treat political dilemmas as personal moral conundrums, describing it as 'a fantasy quite appropriate to the imaginary world' and emphasizing how 'stark choices and great decisions are actually very rare in politics' (p. 243). She argued that what matters more from an ethical point of view is the cultivation of character dispositions gathered through a lifetime of everyday, more mundane, trade-offs in the political arena.

Second, another theme in classical dirty hands literature is that the risk of facing such dilemmas increases with political status, influence, and power. Classical writings from Walzer (1973), Camus (1962), Sartre (1989), Hollis (1982), and Weber (1919) highlight how the individuals who have to make the final decisions are the ones who experience the most challenging ethical dilemmas. But in more recent literature, there is growing unease with depicting political dilemmas as situations where a lone heroic figure faces momentous life-and-death decisions (de Wijze 2018; Nick 2019b; Tillyris 2019). For instance, Sutherland has criticized those who focus on political dilemmas for failing to consider other vital aspects of politics, such as democratic actions under constitutionalism, deliberative politics, and the role of institutions. She argues that 'the problem of dirty hands, as focused on the intentions of the lone political actor trapped in a vicious scenario, distorts our understanding of the nature of politics' (Sutherland 1995, 503). Following this critique, contemporary analysis of real-world dilemmas has to some extent shifted

toward more commonplace politics including, but not limited to, areas such as the ethics of compromises (Fumurescu 2022; Hall 2022); using dirty tricks against those who do the same (Sarra 2022); getting one's hands dirty to combat injustices and oppression (Bellamy 2010; Tillyris 2023); and, more generally, how the democratic condition influences political dilemmas (Archard 2013; Beerbohm 2012; de Wijze 2018; Tholen 2020). While this burgeoning literature has enriched and deepened our comprehension of political dilemmas, it typically maintains the underlying assumption that it is the politician who ultimately makes the decision who faces the greatest dilemma, even if they are not alone in doing so.<sup>2</sup>

Third, the main approach to handling the dilemmas is to weigh the contrasting ethical principles against one another. Central to this is the question of whether it is morally permissible to inflict harm upon a few in the name of increased utility for the many. While the jury is still out on the moral permissibility of doing so in private life – and likely will be for the foreseeable future – the scale has arguably shifted more clearly in favour of the consequentialist argument for public life. Philosophers as different as Nagel, Walzer, and Williams, who generally do not advocate utilitarianism as a comprehensive theory for private life, recognize that, at least sometimes, the consequentialist ethos has the upper hand in public life (Parrish 2007, 6). This does not mean that the decisions are easy. When advocating for the consequentialist point of view, Walzer, for instance, added that such decisions would still 'leave the man who does it guilty of a moral wrong' (Walzer 1973, 161). Nick (2022) also considers guilt when exploring how apologies can and cannot function as reparations for dirty hands decisions.

As shown above, the classical dirty hands canon arguably hinges on certain foundational assumptions that have been complemented, expanded, and challenged over the years. Yet, there is a striking absence in the literature of empirical research about the extent to which both classical dirty hands literature and more contemporary literature on ethical dilemmas in politics accurately mirror politicians' day-to-day experiences. To bring this perspective into the conversation, I adopted the methodological approach set out in the next section.

### Research Design, Data, and Analytical Approach

The extent to which assumptions about the most challenging ethical dilemmas in the literature correspond to what politicians themselves find most challenging in their everyday political work matters, not only empirically but also theoretically.<sup>3</sup> A disconnect between empirics and theory can lead to conclusions being drawn from political theorizing that have little to no bearing on real-world situations: 'What was thought to stand in need of explanation' may have been 'so misspecified that the right causal questions were not even on the table' (Shapiro 2002, 614).<sup>4</sup> The methodological approach I adopted aims to bridge this gap between theoretical and empirical political science by searching for what Shapiro (2002, 615) calls 'problematizing redescriptions'. These arise when empirical results inform political theory in such a way that there is a change in how a political phenomenon is theorized.<sup>5</sup>

To address the potential gap between theory and practice, my analysis goes beyond analyzing to what extent the views of Swedish parliamentarians correlate with previous assumptions and explores to what extent, if at all, their views call into question the foundational assumptions

<sup>2</sup>For an example of an analysis about who is and who is not responsible in dilemma situations involving many hands, see Thompson (1987, 40–65). For a notable exception to the rule described above, see Waldron (2018), who highlights how dilemmas can occur in politics due to the collective and continuous nature of politics.

<sup>3</sup>The role of practice and political theory, particularly normative political theory, is too extensive to do justice to in this article. For an excellent review, discussion, and theoretical development about the role of practice in political theory, see Erman and Möller (2018).

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that in this article I do not engage in re-evaluating the 'causal' question, but focus on re-evaluating what, normatively speaking, needs theoretical explanation. I appreciate the reviewer who pointed this out.

<sup>5</sup>For similar arguments about the need for empirical approaches in political theory, see Herzog and Zacka (2019), Longo and Zacka (2019), and Zacka (2017).

about what ethical dilemmas are for politicians in the first place. While empirical evidence does not dictate what political dilemmas theoretically ought to be, it can illuminate what politicians believe them to be. To do this, I began by asking seventy-four Swedish parliamentarians the following question: ‘What is the most challenging ethical dilemma for you in the Swedish Parliament, and how do you handle this dilemma?’<sup>6</sup>

I used the term ‘ethical’ rather than ‘political’ for several reasons. First, ‘political’ is implied given that the question was being put to parliamentarians and referenced the Swedish Parliament. Second, the term ‘ethical’ stresses that the question relates to situations with an ethical component, thus bringing the measurement closer to the theoretical concept of interest. Third, using common academic terms such as ‘dirty hands’ would likely have caused confusion since the term is not commonly used in political settings and there is no equivalent term in the Swedish language in which the interviews were conducted. It is important to note that the question was asked during in-depth interviews, allowing me to clarify the term, ask follow-up questions, and reflect aloud on the responses of the parliamentarians. This personal interaction created an interview environment in which parliamentarians likely felt that they could express themselves freely and that their views were being responded to rather than simply noted. Previous studies with political elites have used a similar approach (Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Lilleker 2003).

Why Swedish parliamentarians? Sweden offers a political context that is relatively common throughout Europe: a single-chamber parliament, a proportional election system, strong political parties, and an environment where parliamentarians have representational responsibilities to both their parties and their electoral districts (Öhberg and Naurin 2016, 129). Sweden has a proportional party list system, whereby members are elected from a multi-member constituency following the preferred ranking of the ballot decided by party members during the nomination process. Since 1998, the election system has also had a flexible component. Whereas voters primarily cast their ballot for a party, they now also have the option to express a preference for a specific candidate placed somewhere on the pre-decided ballot. This could, in theory, override the parties’ preferred ranking of candidates. Yet in practice, individual campaigns that ascend the party list using preferential votes to get elected to parliament are relatively uncommon, and the chances of success are slim (Fransson 2018; Hagevi 2022). Although the parties dominate the electoral cycle at this stage, once elected the mandates belong to the individual parliamentarian. Constitutionally speaking, parliamentarians are thus allowed to act and vote in whatever way they see fit during their tenure. Despite this constitutional leeway, the reality is that strong party discipline prevails in most situations. Rebellions on the grounds of personal convictions or constituency priorities are uncommon, for such rebellions would jeopardize one’s chances of being renominated for an electable position for another tenure.

Should the theoretical findings, specifically the analytical categories identified in this research, then be considered generalizable only to a similar multiparty system characterized by strict party discipline and limited executive authority? I do not think so. Although this context likely influenced the particular examples parliamentarians spoke of, I resist the notion that Swedish parliamentarians are the only politicians who battle the intricate demands of political hierarchy, loyalty, and strategy. I leave it to future empirical research to prove my assumptions wrong.

Sweden was also chosen because of the generally trusting relationship between social science researchers and politicians, which increased the likelihood of getting honest, detailed, and in-depth answers. The trusting relationship is demonstrated by politicians’ relatively high

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<sup>6</sup>This was the last question following a series of scenario questions that resembled traditional dirty hands dilemmas adapted to fit the Swedish context. The answers to those interview questions are not the subject of this article. The extent to which they influenced parliamentarians’ responses to this question is hard to determine. However, if anything, the structure of the dilemmas as competing values should make it more rather than less likely that parliamentarians would think about political dilemmas in terms resembling those in the literature.

acceptance of, and willingness to, participate in experimental and survey research (Naurin and Öhberg 2021; Öhberg, Oscarsson, and Ahlbom 2022, 19). Social desirability was further addressed by conducting the interviews in places chosen by the parliamentarians and by giving them pseudonymity by only revealing their party affiliation, gender, and a fictitious name.<sup>7</sup>

The parliamentarians were randomly selected from a stratified list based on party and gender. In total, 74 out of 168 parliamentarians contacted agreed to be interviewed, yielding a 44 per cent participation rate. Most non-participants simply did not reply to the interview requests, and those who did almost exclusively gave time constraints as their reason for abstaining. The sample is well-balanced in potentially theoretically interesting aspects such as gender, party affiliation, and age.<sup>8</sup> A balanced sample increases the likelihood that the results accurately reflect the diversity of viewpoints in the Swedish Parliament. However, a systematic comparison between subgroups is not the focus of this article, as this would have required a different methodological approach and other theoretical aims. Still, when substantial differences in views or emphasis were prevalent, this is noted in the results.

The analytical approach consisted of a three-stage flexible coding procedure based on abductive principles.<sup>9</sup> In the first stage, I coded parliamentarians' responses to the most challenging ethical dilemmas and how they handled them as close to the empirics as possible, meaning that I left little to no room for interpretation. In the second stage, I compared these results to what previous theoretical research argued should be the most challenging ethical dilemmas and how parliamentarians ought to handle them, searching for similarities, contextualization, and deviations from previous theories. Finding that previous theoretical conceptualization in the classical dirty hands literature was inadequate to capture the kinds of dilemmas parliamentarians spoke of and how they handled them, I advanced to a third stage. In this stage, I used an iterative abductive process between previous theories on political dilemmas, the empirical material, and additional literature.<sup>10</sup> This analytical process allowed me to compare parliamentarians' answers to previous theoretical conceptualizations while simultaneously exploring what new aspects parliamentarians' lived experiences could bring to the scholarly discourse about political dilemmas. Rather than reporting all the dilemmas that all parliamentarians spoke of, the results section that follows shows the outcome of this analytical process.

## Results

One of my final interviews was with a high-profile parliamentarian. Historically and currently, this was someone with a successful political career within as well as outside the walls of the Swedish Parliament. Initially, I assumed such an influential parliamentarian would experience dilemmas more frequently and with greater magnitude than those who lacked such political stature. However, when I reached the conclusion of my interviews, their reply no longer surprised me: 'Actually', the parliamentarian said, pausing briefly to think of an answer, 'I am rarely confronted with those [ethical dilemmas]'.<sup>11</sup>

This answer aligns with a key finding among those interviewed: the greater the power a parliamentarian has – whether in their party, parliament, or politics in general – the less likely they are to encounter ethical dilemmas in their political position. Instead, the most challenging and

<sup>7</sup>Pseudonyms were randomly selected from a list of the most common male and female Swedish names. The gender of the parliamentarian is reported in the reference list.

<sup>8</sup>For an overview of distribution within the full sample in comparison to the Swedish Parliament as a whole, see [Table 1](#) in the Appendix.

<sup>9</sup>For a similar multi-staged coding approach, see Deterding and Waters (2021).

<sup>10</sup>For discussion about how an abductive approach differs from deductive and inductive approaches, see Brinkmann (2014), Tavory and Timmermans (2014), and Timmermans and Tavory (2012).

<sup>11</sup>Given the additional information provided in the paragraph, the pseudonym and gender of this parliamentarian have been removed to maintain confidentiality.



frequent dilemmas for Swedish parliamentarians seem to arise from their inability to make independent choices rather than from the choice itself.

Specifically, I argue that two main analytical categories – relational and inherent political powerlessness – play a critical role in understanding what Swedish parliamentarians consider the most challenging ethical dilemmas, who is likely to face such dilemmas, and how they handle them. The remaining sections discuss what each category theoretically entails, the kinds of dilemmas they give rise to, and how parliamentarians navigate them.

### *Relational powerlessness*

Parliamentarians frequently feel powerless when it comes to making decisions about how to act, vote, and speak. This may seem counterintuitive: parliamentarians are elected on individual mandates, granting them the right to act in more or less whatever fashion they deem fit. However, seen another way, maintaining the support of key stakeholders is politically crucial for those wishing to serve beyond their four-year tenure. Lose that support and you will likely find yourself in an unelectable position on the party's list for the next election. In practice, the number of ethical dilemmas a parliamentarian faces seems to increase with the number and importance of these kinds of relational constraints. The nature, number, and even constitutional design of these relationships will naturally vary between political cultures, contexts, and institutions. Swedish parliamentarians who operate in a political setting with historically strong party cohesion face two particular kinds of dilemmas stemming from relational constraints: (a) those arising from rapid changes in key relationships and (b) conflicts between two important but not equal relationships.

### *Powerlessness in relational change*

Relational powerlessness is a constant issue for many parliamentarians. Those representing government parties, for instance, often feel compelled to both vote for and publicly defend policies over which they have minimal control. 'The biggest ethical dilemma is when you are part of the government and are forced to vote on things where your whole body, I mean every fibre in you, just screams no!', Sofia from the Green Party explained with great agony. She added: 'It is hard to deal with because it becomes such a genuine sadness for me, and that's how it is for most of us'. Lena, from the same party, echoed this view, saying 'the biggest ethical dilemmas must surely be to support political issues where you have a different opinion [from the party] and where you have to make compromises'. The same perceived lack of choice, or being forced to follow the party's official position, was also felt among parliamentarians in the Social Democratic Party, the largest party in the then-governing coalition. 'I sometimes think about how far I can compromise with myself on behalf of the party', Sven from the Social Democratic Party explained. 'When you think the party is doing something wrong or you think the government is doing something wrong, then it can sometimes be a dilemma. To then choose not always to raise one's voice on all matters all the time. I know it's not a huge ethical dilemma, but it's always there'.

Sven's last statement, 'but it's always there', highlights a common sentiment among parliamentarians. Disagreeing with your party on some issues is inevitable, and is something parliamentarians anticipate when they sign up. But the sense of relational powerlessness is particularly acute when a key relationship – for most, their party or the government – makes a rapid and unexpected change in its political position on a topic of deep significance to the parliamentarian. In those situations, many parliamentarians perceived themselves to be, and if they wish to continue having a key role in their party in practice, are often compelled to vote for and advocate these new policies. Dilemmas of this kind occur when 'things happen unannounced', as Jenny of the Social Democratic Party explained. One key issue with such rapid changes is that they are seldom preceded by what some parliamentarians describe as a proper process. 'If we have had a proper review process, then I can live with the result', Elisabeth of the Christian

Democrats explained, adding that problems occur when ‘you do not consider the trade-offs’. These procedural aspects were also raised by Lena of the Green Party:

There is enormous tardiness in politics, but there is also extreme rapidity in changing opinions or pushing policy forward. It may be completely impossible to change one’s opinion on long-standing issues, but it might be essential to change your opinion because society has changed. But on other types of questions, it can go extremely quickly ... and that, I think, is where the ethical dilemma is: some things never seem to be able to change, and sometimes it goes way too fast.

Another primary example of perceived powerlessness caused by unexpected policy changes was found among parliamentarians from the Social Democratic Party regarding migration policy. Although how, when, and why the Social Democratic Party changed its stance on migration issues is debatable, few would dispute that the change occurred rapidly and that those favouring more generous policies were on the losing side. For instance, Sara, one of the parliamentarians who seemed to not fully subscribe to the new stricter policy, acknowledged that the party was ‘forced to pursue much stricter policy due to the migration situation’. This had consequences for those who had and still held, different views. ‘I would say that the biggest dilemma’, she continued, ‘is when we change policy really fast. It may not align with what you think or said to voters’. Elin, a parliamentarian from the same party, gave a similar account. Describing how she felt conflicted about advocating for views she did not believe in – but which the party had settled on – she said she ‘still thinks that these are extremely important things, to achieve good integration in society’, and that not being able to advocate for this fully was ‘something I still struggle with’. As illustrated by these examples, ethical dilemmas arise from relational powerlessness due to such things as rapidity, lack of process, and the unexpectedness of policy changes.

#### *Powerlessness in relational conflicts*

Although rapid changes in policy positions among their primary relationships were among the most frequently mentioned dilemmas, dilemmas also arose in conflicts between important, albeit not equal, relationships. For example, feelings of powerlessness arose when parliamentarians felt unable to freely choose between prioritizing their local constituency and their party. This occurred when there was ‘great pressure from many people [in your home constituency]’, as Daniel of the Social Democratic Party expressed it. Ove from the Sweden Democrats echoed a similar view, explaining how ‘it goes back to the basic question ... who are the local constituents that have elected me? An ethical problem would be if I had to go against what they believe ... because sixty-one other members in my party group think something else’. While this was a dilemma for him, his choice was clear; ‘I wouldn’t sit in the chamber and vote against my party’. Similarly, Andreas from the Left Party described how he ‘usually never has problems with my constituency about ethical dilemmas’, but that sometimes there was a clash when the party was not in line with his constituency’s more progressive policies. However, Andreas’ conclusion about whose interests to prioritize in these instances differed from Ove’s. ‘I have seen many politicians over the years come in young and very radical and wanting to make changes, and then the party whip changes them, and they go along with things they fundamentally disagree with. I hope I never become that person’. The same problem of a clash between the will of the constituency and the party was spoken of by Johanna from the Social Democratic Party. Her answer provides a good summary of how the choice between party and constituency can, and often does, create ethical dilemmas for parliamentarians:

This balancing act [between constituency and party] is incredibly difficult. We sometimes end up in situations where I feel that people perceive me almost like a parrot: that I have forgotten where I come from or who elected me. People expect me to protest to a much



greater extent. It is difficult to convey the idea of the Riksdag's mission and the importance of being part of a team, how my opportunities to achieve good things for my constituency are much greater if I am part of a context and join majority decisions, even though they may not always be the ones I want. I could then get more people with me on other topics and proposals that could benefit [my constituency]. I think that part is very, very difficult to understand ... I think it is a very tough discussion that often puts parliamentarians on edge: Whose representative are you really? How important is it to you to be popular in your parliamentary group compared to your constituency?

### *Inherent powerlessness*

Most parliamentarians put a lot of pressure on themselves regarding what they should achieve in office, and they are not alone in doing so. Pressure also comes from those around them – many are optimistic about what their parliamentarians can do for them, including influencing decisions in individual cases. Yet as both parliamentarians and constitutional scholars can confirm, this is neither in theory nor in practice how the Swedish Parliament works, or reflects the democratic authority individual parliamentarians have. The combination of personal pressure, expectations from others, and limited influence on the day-to-day formulation of legislation are key ingredients in the second kind of political powerlessness: the inherent limitations of the parliamentary role. While formal constraints like constitutional limitations could theoretically be the primary cause of ethical dilemmas, most dilemmas of this kind seem to arise from practical constraints: the inability of parliamentarians to sufficiently influence, or spend adequate time on, issues they care about.

### *Inherent inability to influence important issues*

Parliamentarians' inability to sufficiently address what they see as social injustices generate many emotional political dilemmas. These dilemmas arise not only from their expectations, but also from the widespread misunderstanding by the general public about the actual role and responsibilities of a parliamentarian. Peter, from the Moderate Party, for instance, said 'there's an over-estimation among voters of how much influence you [a parliamentarian] have', and that 'this dilemma is sometimes a bit difficult, to explain [to citizens] how legislation works and how parliament actually works, that there is sluggishness to it'. The combined external and internal pressure generated dilemmas because parliamentarians felt, and in practice often are, unable to address the particular challenges of individual people with whom they interact. This kind of dilemma was directly expressed by Kerstin from the Social Democratic Party: 'The biggest ethical dilemma is that you cannot do more. You see the homelessness and the social vulnerability of certain groups, but you know that you have limited resources during a term in office'. While she saw the need to do politics on the aggregate level, this did not help when you are 'sitting on the subway and see[ing] people who are passed out and you know that they might have to sleep without a roof over their heads. That stays with me'. Jenny from the Social Democratic Party made a similar point: 'I can see the faces of people that this [decision] will affect, and it is difficult'. This anguish at being powerless to help individuals was perhaps most vividly expressed by Jenny and Kerstin's colleague, Monica. Her words can stand as a concluding comment on the ethical dilemmas arising from parliamentarians' inability to influence specific issues:

There are things that I find really difficult to defend, such as the Swedish Social Insurance Agency's interpretation of legislation that causes people to be so terribly affected.<sup>12</sup> My

<sup>12</sup>The scope of social insurance is a continuously contentious issue in Swedish politics. Parties to the left favour more extensive coverage, whereas conservatives argue for a more restrictive stance. Monica's response should be interpreted in terms of this ongoing debate rather than a specific major policy change at the time of the interview.

natural reaction as an individual is ‘What the hell is that damn Social Insurance Agency doing? What laws have we enacted that allow people to be sent to hell like this?’ But as a politician, you cannot express yourself like that ... it is clearly a kind of ethical dilemma. But nowadays, it is more of a dilemma to try to remain somewhat calm and professional and reason about [policies]. That yes, we will need to make changes to this, it will take time, and we will investigate it. I feel so incredibly small and powerless in these situations.

#### *Inherent inability to adequately focus on equally important issues*

Beyond the inability to influence decisions impacting specific individuals, another constraint generating dilemmas was the lack of time – after all, the day only has twenty-four hours for parliamentarians, too. This created dilemmas, particularly because of the prioritization and consequent deprioritization parliamentarians had to do. It was not primarily a matter of prioritizing one principle above another in a single decision, but, rather, that pursuing one goal inevitably meant that they had less time and energy to spend on another, perhaps equally important, goal. ‘The dilemma is time’, Gunnar from the Liberal Party explained, ‘how I allocate time, to whom I respond ... that’s the dilemma, that you don’t always have enough time’. Speaking about how a parliamentarian can be swamped with information, impressions, and requests, Simon from the same party explained that prioritizing is a ‘very difficult task in parliament, and sometimes it has ethical dimensions. There are things one should do, but that one has been forced to set aside’ (Simon 2020). Likewise, relating to a feeling of powerlessness on both the political and personal level, Eva from the Moderate Party explained how ‘the ethical dilemma is also a personal, emotional, dilemma. That you do not have enough time. The day has 24 hours, and I must constantly, constantly, constantly prioritize’.

By and large, the inherent restrictions of options for parliamentarians created various kinds of political dilemmas. As illustrated in this section and the one above, these dilemmas were particularly profound when parliamentarians were unable to help individual people or when they were unable to be equally engaged in all issues that carried great political or personal value for them.

#### *Handling powerlessness in parliament*

Dilemmas arising from relational and inherent powerlessness offer new insights into the nature of political dilemmas and who faces them. How, then, do they handle these dilemmas? Two strategies stand out: (a) seeing each decision as part of a long-term strategy and (b) defining the boundaries of their responsibility.

#### *Losing the battle – winning the war?*

Rather than focusing solely on the immediate consequences, parliamentarians tended to view their actions as being on a continuum. Thus, while their actions here and now may not be what they would have preferred, the very same actions might lead to better outcomes in the future. A common perspective was that politics is not a sprint but a marathon. The dilemma, then, is to know when to stop running. Fredrik from the Moderate Party illuminated this point: ‘What you sometimes grapple with is what you think is best in the short and long term. It’s about whether you think you need to make some changes you don’t support but think are for the greater good: the long-term development you want to achieve. That kind of dilemma bothers me sometimes. It is more about a time perspective’. Essentially, it came down to the question Fredrik ended his answer with: ‘How much should you fight to win the battle versus the war?’

Parliamentarians had different answers to this question. Describing the problems of staying true to your principles while getting politics done, Kerstin from the Social Democratic Party explained that tactical aspects are always present in politics, saying that she ‘would be very dishonest if I said it doesn’t matter’. The strategic aspects were put more directly by Linnéa from the Moderate Party. Explaining what the most challenging dilemma was, she said, ‘you cannot agree with everything you vote for. You

vote through things that you think are wrong. That's probably the biggest dilemma I can think of. The two approaches Linnéa adopted to manage such issues are, I would argue, characteristic of how many parliamentarians approach them. They seek to (a) impact the decision-making process as much as possible internally and (b) climb the party hierarchy to gain influence and power. As previously noted, the more responsibility parliamentarians get – or the more power they have – the fewer ethical dilemmas they seem to face. 'The greater the responsibility you get in your party and the more successful you become, the more you can avoid ethical dilemmas, and the more things go your way', Linnéa explained. 'So', she continued 'one way to handle this is to try to be as successful as possible so that you can get more responsibility and thus influence the party to go the way you want'.

While parliamentarians who were in opposition roles, such as Linnéa, raised the issue of supporting policies they did not believe in, this issue was even more prevalent among parliamentarians representing government parties. Parliamentarians in opposition tend to have a role in drafting the policy suggestions they vote for, whereas those representing governing parties frequently have to vote in favour of policies they have had almost no hand in drafting. They manage this powerlessness mainly by emphasizing future benefits or claiming they prevented even worse consequences. For instance, discussing difficulties the Social Democratic Party had to take on while in government, Lennart explained that the alternative would have been far worse. 'It is important that you know that if you make a deal with the Social Democratic Party, we will keep our promises. I also highlight that we got 28 per cent of the vote in the last election and 60 per cent Social Democratic politics [gained] over four years, which is better than 100 per cent Conservative politics over several years. That is my defense of the compromise, and the honestly quite difficult ethical dilemma it created'. Elin, from the same party, came to similar conclusions: 'In the end, it is about what government I want to have'. Sofia from the Green Party highlighted similar issues, explaining how it is her moral responsibility to vote with the party line because she knows 'we've worked hard, and we get other victories ... but it hurts like hell'.

Conflicts around winning the battle versus losing the war seemed to create the greatest dilemmas for parliamentarians who, like Sofia, represented the Green Party. For example, Marianne spoke of how 'it is when it stands between delivering a result in the right direction, but one that is too small in relation to the principled ideas and convictions you have'. Using the climate question as an example, she explained that 'it is, after all, partly whether you can stand up for the compromise in the end. You must be convinced that it is better than the alternative'. But she also added, 'there are short and long-term parameters, which is distinctive about the climate issue: we cannot afford to take small steps too slowly. But on the other hand, we cannot afford to sit on the bench and do nothing either'. Bengt, too, wrestled with the realities of either sitting on the bench or playing an inadequate game. He offered a good summary of the difficulties of using this strategy to handle powerlessness in relation to issues of climate change:

How much can I compromise and still feel we are taking steps in the right direction? I think that many people usually say that we, the Green Party, come from a kind of activist background, which is why these kinds of dilemmas are particularly difficult for us. I don't think that is the case at all. Instead, we constantly have such inner dilemmas because our political engagement is based on the fact that we hear a ticking clock in the background, and the questions we are passionate about are existential: they have a time axis. This means that we must get a result here and now. But we also know that it requires huge changes. It is almost a constant stress that we feel, making it extra difficult and the dilemmas extra relevant to us. If you want to build a welfare society, you can do it over many years. That is not the case when it comes to stopping climate change.

#### *Defining boundaries of responsibility*

The second main way parliamentarians deal with powerlessness is to restrict where their ethical responsibility starts and ends. When trying to influence party decisions and overcome

powerlessness, a crucial aspect for many parliamentarians was to keep the debate within the officially sanctioned structures. 'I will vote as the party decides', was the prompt answer from Ingrid of the Moderate Party to a question about what she would do if she fundamentally disagreed with the party. But she added that she would have 'argued a lot before that'. The approach of arguing behind closed doors, but, ultimately, following whatever decision the party made was particularly prominent in the Moderate and Social Democratic parties. Parliamentarians from these parties are to some extent used to limited influence over the policies they vote for, as these are often drafted in the government offices across the river from the Swedish Parliament. Sven from the Social Democratic Party explained the problem of arguing outside these structures: 'If I were to go out in the media a few times against the government, it doesn't take many times before you are seen as a very problematic person, as an individualist'. He then continued: 'It's not a good thing in my party. I don't think it is in the Moderate Party either for that matter, or in any big parties that are used to being part of the government. That is the dilemma you can get frustrated with sometimes, but then it is crucial that you have opportunities in internal forums. You have to make sure you are active in the internal debate and try to have an impact there instead'. Sara, also from the Social Democratic Party, similarly pointed to the value of having internal rather than external debates:

I am of the principle that we have majority rule in the organization. It would be unsustainable if we did not have it; we would not be able to get any political decisions through. You can see this in other countries right now, where there are a lot of politicians going their own way. It becomes tough to conduct politics then, and politics is complicated, so you have to help each other. I also have a hard time with people who score political points outwards on difficult political issues, making it seem like they are good, and others are bad. It usually is not quite that simple.

Understanding where the political battles within the party should take place and keeping within those structures was seen as one fundamental way to handle dilemmas arising from powerlessness. 'I think I have decided that I must bend to the party's will. I have decided always to be loyal to my party', Marie from the Moderate Party explained, 'there you have the answer to the question: [if you do this], then you don't end up in any dilemmas'. Helena from the Social Democratic Party made a somewhat similar point: 'I handle them [the dilemmas] by thinking exactly as I said before: Sometimes you get what you want, and sometimes you do not. That is what democracy is'. She pointed out that if she lost this time, she might win another time – an argument many reverted to – saying: 'After all, no party thinks exactly as I do on all issues. It is quite natural that such situations arise. But having said that, it is not fun to defend positions you disagree with'.

What, then, could parliamentarians do if they lost a crucial debate within their party? Rather than continuing to argue for their cause in the media – an enormous step for most parliamentarians – many said that they would either avoid being associated with the question or, if it came to it, quietly leave the political scene altogether. The specifics about when, how, and what issues parliamentarians would leave over naturally varied between parliamentarians. Some had specific issues, what the Social Democrat Jenny described as kamikaze questions: 'I have also decided what my so-called kamikaze questions are. When I take out the list [and something on it comes up], do I leave? I think you have to know this'. She added: 'I am very loyal to my party's ideology. I got involved in this party because I had a view of what society, and the world, should be. But if the party were to go in a different direction, where I do not feel at home, where the ideology is interpreted differently than I do, then I would not continue to represent this [party]'. Anna from the Liberal Party had a similar view. Instead of kamikaze questions, she said she had red lines that she would not cross: 'where do my red lines go?', she asked rhetorically, 'above all, it is about continuous political positions the party takes that might not have been so

clearly chiseled out before I entered the Riksdag'. Birgitta from the Moderate Party summarized the position many had about how to handle these dilemmas, and what to do when either red lines or kamikaze questions came into play: 'I am very loyal to whoever is in charge of my party', but if the day came when she disagreed with the party on fundamental issues, 'that day I will do something else'.

## Conclusions

In his foundational book *Political Ethics and Public Office*, Thompson (1987) tells the story of a scholar who ventured onto Capitol Hill to interview members of Congress about the issues and nuances of their representative role. When asked if they saw themselves more as delegates, voting in strict coherence with the views of their constituency, or as trustees, having more leeway to exercise their judgment even if this meant going against the will of their constituencies, many refused to acknowledge that there was such a binary choice.<sup>13</sup> Responses included the outright dismissive – 'Who dreamed up these stupid questions?' – and a refusal to answer what they saw as 'high school questions' (Thompson 1987, 99). Although the culture and political style in Sweden may not allow for such directness, politicians' answers echo a similar sentiment: there remains a rather stark difference between what the classical dirty hands literature has explored and the dilemmas many politicians today experience. Specifically, I argue that the results from this research offer novel theoretical insights into the nature of political dilemmas. The results also have practical implications for both politicians facing dilemmas and citizens evaluating politicians. These conclusions can, by extension, offer guidance for the direction future studies may take. Although the findings do not warrant a complete overhaul of our theoretical definitions, they offer a new perspective on what constitutes a political dilemma, who faces these dilemmas, and how they handle them.

Emphasizing powerlessness as a key aspect of ethical dilemmas in politics illuminates how dilemmas, from a politician's viewpoint, can arise not only from hard choices but also from the relational and inherent powerlessness restraining them from making independent choices in the first place. Lower-ranking members of the Swedish Parliament appear to encounter these kinds of ethical dilemmas more frequently than their senior counterparts, a result contrary to the conventional view in the literature about who is most likely to face ethical dilemmas in politics. Dilemmas stemming from powerlessness are handled mainly by adhering to role-specific obligations and/or seeking to expand one's future political influence. Exploring dilemmas through the lens of powerlessness can also shed light on other aspects that require closer theoretical attention. For instance, parliamentarians' emphasis on the immediate prioritization of time and the long-term perspective required for making substantial change underscores the temporality of politics.<sup>14</sup> Thorough theoretical exploration of these and similar issues raised by powerlessness could yield additional insights into what the vital aspects of political dilemmas are for those facing them.

Drawing out the theoretical nuances of powerlessness in political dilemmas can also have practical implications for the politicians making the decisions and the citizens evaluating them. If the latter want a more complete picture of the reasoning behind politicians' actions in these dilemmas, this research underscores the need to pose additional questions. For instance, when a politician unwaveringly sticks to their principles against the will of their party, how does this affect their future capacity to influence the issue? When they, instead, choose to follow the party whip, what prior actions did they take to influence the final decision? The normative value one gives the

<sup>13</sup>The distinction is often associated with Edmond Burke in his speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774. The distinction has been discussed in a far more complex way by thinkers such as Mill in his discussion about to what extent pledges should be required of parliamentarians (1861), Pitkin and her inclusion of aspects such as symbolic and descriptive representation (1972), and Rehfeld's expansion from two to eight ideal types of representation (2009).

<sup>14</sup>For more on time and politics, see Cohen (2018), who has extensively explored time's place in both democratic structures and practical political decision-making, and Palonen (2019), who has argued that time, priority, and sequence are essential elements of parliamentary practice.

answers to these and similar questions will naturally vary between individuals. However, asking these questions in the first place can give citizens a more nuanced and informed understanding of politicians' own perspectives.

As for aspiring and practicing politicians, grasping the nature of ethical dilemmas arising from relational and inherent powerlessness may give them a greater toolbox to handle them effectively and sustainably. This seems particularly important in contexts similar to the Swedish Parliament, where quietly exiting the political scene altogether was a main coping strategy. While such a strategy is arguably effective in releasing politicians from a specific dilemma, its widespread adoption is democratically unsustainable in that it risks leading to less competitive and lower quality political institutions.

Future studies can build on these results through an interdisciplinary approach, exploring the complexities and inherent restrictions of the representational role as well as the effects of continuously confronting ethical dilemmas.<sup>15</sup> A thorough engagement with the representational literature can shed light on how aspects such as the democratic mandate given to politicians, who their primary constituency is, and the political environment they find themselves in can influence what ethical dilemmas they are likely to face.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, how parliamentarians handle dilemmas arising from powerlessness – such as long-term thinking and restricting their range of options when they see a wrong committed – are strikingly similar to how healthcare professionals deal with moral distress brought through their incapacity, or powerlessness, to act in alignment with their moral values (see for instance McAndrew, Leske, and Schroeter 2018; McCarthy and Deady 2008; Tigard 2018). Research in this literature has shown how continuous exposure to moral distress among nurses has led to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of those they serve, and withdrawal from the occupation altogether (Hylton Rushton, Caldwell, and Kurtz 2016). Thus, a deeper understanding of continuous exposure to ethical dilemmas caused by political powerlessness can be important not just for fine-tuning our theoretical concepts in line with political realities, but also for the health of democratic representation itself.

**Data availability statement.** The interview data is not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the research and the confidentiality agreements with participants.

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<sup>15</sup>I am indebted to the two reviewers who brought the connection between the results in this article and these two strands of literature to my attention.

<sup>16</sup>Crucial and insightful aspects about representational ethics have been raised by Dovi (2007), although mainly from a normative evaluative perspective – how we should think about representational ethics – rather than how, or if, the representational role changes what ethical dilemmas elected officials face.



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## Interviews cited

Pseudonym	Year	Interview number	Party affiliation	Gender
Anna	2021	32	Liberal	Woman
Andreas	2021	37	Left	Man
Bengt	2021	26	Green	Man
Birgitta	2020	15	Moderate	Woman
Daniel	2021	68	Social Democratic	Man
Elin	2021	55	Social Democratic	Woman
Elisabeth	2021	61	Christian Democrats	Woman
Eva	2021	73	Moderate	Woman
Fredrik	2020	35	Moderate	Man
Gunnar	2020	8	Liberal	Man
Helena	2021	28	Social Democratic	Woman
Ingrid	2021	36	Moderate	Woman
Jenny	2021	54	Social Democratic	Woman
Johanna	2021	42	Social Democratic	Woman
Kerstin	2020	13	Social Democratic	Woman
Lena	2021	63	Green	Woman
Lennart	2020	2	Social Democratic	Man
Linnéa	2020	10	Moderate	Woman
Marianne	2020	16	Green	Woman
Marie	2021	30	Moderate	Woman
Monica	2021	59	Social Democratic	Woman
Ove	2020	20	Sweden Democrats	Man
Peter	2020	11	Moderate	Man
Sara	2021	25	Social Democratic	Woman
Senior Politician	2021	74	N/A	N/A
Simon	2020	29	Liberal	Man
Sofia	2020	3	Green	Woman
Sven	2021	56	Social Democratic	Man

Note: The pseudonyms were randomly selected from a list of the most common male and female Swedish names.

## Appendix

**Table 1.** Selected data characteristics of the Swedish Parliament and the full sample

Characteristic	Parliament (%)	Sample (%)	Difference (%)
Center Party	8.9	9.5	0.6
Christian Democrats	6.3	4.1	2.2
Green Party	4.6	5.4	0.8
Left Party	7.7	12.2	4.5
Liberal Party	5.4	6.8	1.4
Moderate Party	20.0	17.6	2.4
Social Democrats	28.6	31.1	2.5
Sweden Democrats	17.8	13.5	4.3
Women	49.0	51.5	2.5
Age (mean)	47.0	46.9	0.1

Note: Percentage points for the category 'Parliament' come from the composition of the Swedish Parliament when the selection frame was established (8 October 2020). The data is from official records at the Swedish Parliament, which are kept and updated by the Secretariat of the Chamber. Two parliamentarians who had left their party groups were excluded.