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*Published in:*  
International Journal of Public Leadership

*DOI:*  
[10.1108/IJPL-03-2019-0010](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-03-2019-0010)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

van Vulpen, B., Scherpenisse, J., & van Twist, M. (2020). Time to turn over the crown: A temporal narrative analysis of royal leadership succession. *International Journal of Public Leadership*, 16(1), 41-58.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-03-2019-0010>

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# Time to turn over the crown: a temporal narrative analysis of royal leadership succession

Royal  
leadership  
succession

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Received 27 March 2019  
Revised 15 August 2019  
27 September 2019  
Accepted 27 September 2019

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to capture legitimising principles of recent successions to the throne through narrative time. Further, this study considers leaders' sense-giving to succession.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research applies a “temporal narrative analysis” to explicate legitimising principles of narrative time in three recent case studies of royal succession: the kingdoms of Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands.

**Findings** – The findings show that royal successions in three modern European constitutional monarchies are legitimised through giving sense to narrative time. The legitimacy of timing succession is embedded in multiple temporal narratives, in which heirs apparent are brought forward as the new generation who will modernise the monarchy.

**Originality/value** – The paper presents an innovative conceptual framework of sense-giving to succession through narrative time. This framework will be helpful to scholars who aim to grasp legitimising principles of temporal narration in leadership succession

**Keywords** Legitimacy, Sense-giving, Timing, Leadership change, Succession to the throne, Narrative time

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

*Succession to the throne: an issue of legitimising timing*

Succession is a hallmark period for every public office. On the one hand, succession is an occasion that generates a proverbial window of opportunity for an organisation to reinvent itself. Signs of continuity can be communicated, new expectations can be shaped and changes within the institution can be introduced (Weber, 1922/1968; Bynander and 't Hart, 2006; Vancil, 1987). On the other hand, succession can introduce a particularly vulnerable period to an organisational culture with the destabilisation of routines and changing perceptions of authority (Weber, 1922/1968; Hannan and Freeman, 1984). At critical junctures such as these, not only does leadership become compelling ('t Hart and Uhr, 2008), timing is also of the essence. Succession is, intended or unintended, a meaningful moment of reorientation to the past, present and the future. Legitimising the timing of a succession seems especially compelling to abdications in monarchies. Characterised by long-term reigns, a low frequency of leadership change, lineage and charisma, royal houses are challenged to preserve and adapt their office. This being the case, how is timing of royal leadership succession legitimised to the public?



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Although the importance of successions is recognised across multiple disciplines, royal leadership change is still an understudied field. Most research on successions is concerned with party leaders and prime ministers (e.g. Bunce, 1981; Calvert, 1987; Jackson, 1975; De Winter, 1993; Marsh, 1993; Weller, 1983), incumbent change in the public sector (e.g. 't Hart and Uhr, 2011), executive succession (e.g. Kesner and Sebor, 1994; Ocasio, 1999; Giambatista *et al.*, 2005; Vancil, 1987) or successive challenges in family businesses (e.g. Barach and Ganitsky, 1995; Barnes and Hershon, 1976; Bennedsen *et al.*, 2007; Davis and Harveston, 1999; Gersick *et al.*, 1997; Kotlar and Chrisman, 2019; Miller *et al.*, 2003). Studies on royal successions foremost concentrate on ancient dynasties: both in the historical work of Machiavelli's (1515/2005) and Weber on charisma, as in recent historical analyses (e.g. Rost, 2015; Perdue, 1984). These literatures tend to ignore, or under-theorise, the legitimacy of modern royal leadership changes, while these contain valuable insights for leadership studies.

Succession to the throne can be viewed as a staged event, strategically designed "to reinforce the role of royalty within social and political structures" (Laing and Frost, 2018, p. 4). Abdication, then, can be understood as a "planned change" (Huy, 2001): a well-considered decision rather than something that overcomes. We presume that abdication urges more legitimisation than a natural demise. Choosing to turn over the crown might raise public questions about the timing of succession: why step down, why now, who will be the successor and what will happen in the future? This study attempts to capture the legitimation of timing royal succession through leadership narration. How do leaders give sense to timing and legitimacy of royal succession? To answer this, we conduct a cross-national comparative study of three recent successions to the throne in European constitutional monarchies. In 2013 and 2014, three long reigning royal leaders (shortly after one another) stepped down from their thrones for a descendant, in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Kingdom of Belgium and the Kingdom of Spain.

This paper aims to explore and further develop a "temporal lens" to view the legitimacy of succession, in which we combine theories of Weber (1922/1968) on the legitimacy of authority and Albert's (1983, 2013) work on timing. We will elaborate these concepts in subsequent sections of this paper, but let us first clarify them shortly. Briefly defined, timing consists of several temporal elements, such as punctuation, interval, sequence, rate, polyphony and shape (Albert, 2013). These temporal elements are not objective, but are subject to interpretation. Royal leadership is dependent on public perceptions of legitimising principles (Weber, 1922/1968), and at the same time it can influence those public perceptions of events; we refer to this influential process as leaders' sense-giving (Sparr, 2018). A combination of these three theoretical concepts forms the basis of our temporal lens that considers sense-giving to timing by means of narration, in order to legitimise succession.

The paper is structured as follows. To contextualise royal leadership in modern constitutional monarchies, we give a brief overview of historical developments. To better understand the legitimacy of succession in a royal sphere, we explain Weber's work on legitimacy and succession to the throne. We then conceptualise sense-giving to timing succession through narration, and describe the relevance of mixing theories of legitimacy, timing and sense-giving in order to analyse succession. Subsequently, we apply our temporal lens to royal succession in the selected cases and explicate narrative structures of legitimation. In the following, we focus on the different plots of change we extract from the temporal narratives. This paper concludes with a discussion of the key findings on legitimising principles of timing succession, and their addition to public leadership literature.

## **Theory**

### *Royal leadership in constitutional monarchy*

To get a better understanding of royal leadership, we will first give a historical overview of constitutional monarchies. Some of the most stable and advanced liberal democracies in the

world have a constitutional monarchy, for instance: Belgium, Denmark, Japan, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the UK. In other states with a monarchy, such as Bhutan, Morocco, Saudi-Arabia and Thailand, royal houses have maintained strong control over legislation and politics until this very day. Throughout Europe, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, a common pattern emerged: the rise of parliament as autonomous body of the state and the transition to constitutional monarchy moderately limited control of sovereigns over legislative and political power (Bogdanor, 1995). Gradually, political power shifted from the head of state, the monarch, to the head of government, the prime minister. The former became the public spokesperson of a royal house, while the latter became the political delegate in parliament. Most hereditary heads of state in modern European constitutional monarchies can therefore be characterised to reign, but do not rule (Bogdanor, 1995).

Sovereignty of royal leadership made place for public acts to present a sense of belonging to the “imagined community” of a nation (Anderson, 1983; Laing and Frost, 2018). The traditional *droit divin* – divine right to rule that gives Godly mandate to a royal heir to rule in monarchies – no longer acquires sufficient legitimacy to royal houses in secular states (Bradley, 2012). Royal families have taken up the role of national representatives and thereby design royal events to promote national identity and unity (Laing and Frost, 2018). Their constitutional functions are primarily residual and ceremonial. Although some claim that a neutral power of royal house creates a fundamental a-political sphere within the political framework for a representative democracy to function (Elzinga, 2009), royal leadership today is principally symbolic in binding a nation together.

The shift from absolutism to modern European constitutional monarchies has gradually changed the character of royalty into a secular purveyor of personality. Citizens are no longer subordinates of a sovereign; rather, royal houses are dependent on popular support and their reign only exists by the consent of the people (Bogdanor, 1995). Securing authority is contingent on public belief in legitimacy and that leadership is “rightful” (Weber, 1922/1968; Matheson, 1987). Followers of royal leadership, or “monarchists”, seem particularly involved in the private lives of royal families (Otnes and Maclaran, 2015). In *The Fall of Public Man* sociologist Richard Sennett (1977) explains that an erosion of the ritual of public life by private life led authenticity and intimacy to become the dominant standards of modern life. Sennett states that the legitimisation of political leaders is acquired through the demonstration of an authentic personality (McMahon, 1980, p. 318). Accordingly, several studies of monarchies demonstrate the adaptation of royal families to public beliefs: managing their office as a corporate brand in a consumer culture (Balmer *et al.*, 2006; Otnes and Maclaran, 2015); becoming a public figure or “celebrity” in mediatised society (Van Krieken, 2012); doing social work (Prochaska, 1995); and appearing informal, with a personal approach (Wouters, 1989).

Yet, this public context of royal leadership has not made the legitimisation of successions to the throne any less complex. The inauguration of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands in 1980, to give an example, led to one of the nation’s largest riots – known as *Kroningsoproer* (Coronation riots) (Duijvenvoorden, 2005). More recently, the abdication of King Juan Carlos of Spain in 2014 induced large demonstrations, for abolishing the monarchy and for holding a referendum (Piñol and González, 2014). In 2016, a republican movement in the UK announced a campaign for holding a referendum after Queen Elizabeth passes away (Cowburn, 2016). Successions to the throne are still pressing and puzzling moments to the existence of European constitutional monarchies.

### *Legitimacy of royal succession*

To employ research on legitimising principles of timing royal succession, we turn to Max Weber’s (1922/1968) work on the legitimacy of authority in *Economy and Society*.

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According to Weber, a mutual recognition makes legitimate authority different than coercion or power. A system's survival depends on the continual support from its general public (Weber, 1922/1968). To Weber, legitimacy is acquired through people's perceptions of the system and the justification of the system's right to exist. Thereby, cultivation of myths and narratives help, but only have a legitimising effect if people believe in them. Acquiring legitimacy, then, is a matter of influencing beliefs by gaining acceptance for a particular narrative (Wæraas, 2018). This makes legitimation a strategic process that "entails justifications as well as attempts to influence public opinion" (Wæraas, 2018, p. 21).

Weber (1922/1968) distinguished three ideal-typical principles on which legitimisation may be ascribed to, although it is argued that Weber's threefold of legitimacy actually comprises five or more legitimising principles (Matheson, 1987): traditional, rational-legal and charismatic legitimacy. First, traditional legitimation is based on the continuous cultivation of the sanctity of old traditions and habits. Rituals such as the coronation and oath are considered to be important parts of succession (Laing and Frost, 2018; Shils and Young, 1953). Similar to other royal events, succession has a long tradition that at the same time incorporated new elements in order to adapt (Laing and Frost, 2018). Second, rational grounds for legitimacy rest on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of the authority to rule accordingly. In the case of succession to the throne, it is crucial that the rules about who should succeed are unambiguous (Bogdanor, 1995), for this has led to disputes and violent fights over the crown in the past (e.g. Otnes and Maclaran, 2015, p. 4). Over time, institutional routines of entitlement to the throne have been changed in order to preserve dynasties. In most European monarchies, gender limitations for an heir apparent have been scrapped to end primogeniture. It was not until recently that the UK made this change with the Succession of the Crown Act 2013. In the Kingdom of Spain, however, law still prescribes that the male precedes the female heir. Third, charismatic legitimation rests on the devotion to the exceptional character, qualities or powers of a leader. In his work on charisma, Weber focused on ancient religious leaders and kingship that acquired part of their legitimacy through beliefs of their rulers as being divine and war heroes (Eisenstadt, 1968).

Monarchy is, at its essence, a hereditary institution. At the end of a leader's reign, he or she is confronted with the transference of authority to an heir apparent. Royal houses preserve their legitimacy with "hereditary charisma", according to Weber (1922/1968). Lineage, Weber points out, considers a routinisation that depersonalises the charismatic character of kingship, to orderly institutional character (Schnepel, 1990; Lindholm, 1990). However, as noted before, modern standards concerning public credibility are focused primarily around personal authenticity and intimacy (Sennett, 1977). Therefore, we expect that narratives of royal succession accentuate unique personalities and charismatic qualities.

### *Sense-giving to succession through narrative time*

Having explained what is understood as legitimising principles of royal leadership, we will now move on to discuss narrative time. Essentially, myriad crucial features of social life are understood through time, enabling structure and order, but also feelings of continuity, progress and belonging (Edensor, 2006). In this paper, we understand time as a social construct that is used to order and make sense of the flow of things in everyday life. Time is not an object or something "out there". It tends to be easily naturalised and unquestioned (Adam, 2004), but people's temporal orientations are malleable.

Various scholars in the social sciences have explored the role of time in society, politics and governance. Adam (1998, 2004) studied the role of time in social interactions and political concerns; Edensor (2006) illuminated the institutional production of a sense of national belonging, through institutional rhythms and schedules; research by Hassan (2009) demonstrated the utilisation of time and temporalities by political ideologies, in different

empires of speed; and 't Hart (2001) viewed politicisation processes of the past and the future, to name a few.

Yet, time can be much more of a topic of analysis in public leadership studies. Dimensions like timing, sequence, time-frames and time horizons are present in leadership transitions and have an impact on strategies, perceptions and actions. Temporal concepts are essential features people use for sense-making, which helps to give meaning to their experiences (Weick, 1995). Moreover, leadership has the potential to influence public sense-making; this process is referred to as leaders' sense-giving (Sparr, 2018). Sense-giving assumes that the ways leaders talk about an event can influence how people make sense of that event. Therefore, leadership is not only about "knowing when to act" (Albert, 2013, p. 10), but it is also about legitimising the timing of actions.

To grasp the way timing is scripted, we draw on the theoretical framework of Albert (2013) for a temporal perspective on succession. Albert (2013) distinguished six different elements of timing. We divided one of them (polyphony) into two separate elements (attribution and amplification), making seven temporal elements:

- (1) punctuation (pinpointing a moment in time);
- (2) interval (attributing distance between events);
- (3) rate (indicating how quickly events are happening);
- (4) sequence (expressing an order of events);
- (5) attribution (assigning a cause to concurrent affairs);
- (6) amplification (assigning a muting or amplifying effect to concurrent affairs); and
- (7) shape (constructing the overall form of change).

Albert's work is mostly used as a step-by-step guide for analysing timing; these elements can also be considered in a narrative context to analyse sense-giving. Narrative time, as we address it, is a multi-dimensional concept that is broken down into a several themes upon which temporal narratives can be constructed. We will briefly explain these seven elements of timing here, and apply them to leadership succession.

According to Albert (2013), specific moments can capture a certain transition between periods: a break, separation, shift or initiation. Succession is a punctuation of a moment, marking an ending of an era and the beginning of a new one (Rubenson and Gupta, 1996; Boyne *et al.*, 2011). By pinpointing specific dates and moments to a process, a time horizon is construed (Albert, 2013). Succession can be complemented with milestones that represent phases that must be completed to reach a final goal. These are indicators for whether a transition process makes progress or regress. Each succession also has a particular pacing style or rate: a pattern of adjustment distributed over time (Albert, 2013). This concerns perceptions of whether transition is rapid or slow, accelerating or delayed. Various events are assigned to indicate the rate of implementation of changes after a succession; in the case of a family business this could be adjustments in personnel, policy and profit. The perceived speed is related to the perception of what is urgent and what asks for patience.

Timing of an event can be presented as a reasonable sequence: a logical outcome following from a series of events in time (Albert, 2013). Perceptions of a sequence create expectations to a succession. This can be related to the social process grounded in a dynamic of increasing returns, known as path dependence (Pierson, 2000). Other than that, concurrent events can be attributed to succession. Particular correlating affairs, crises or other surrounding circumstances are imputed as being causal. Not only successes and failures of an organisation, but also incidents outside the organisation, can be narrated as a result of the actions of either a successor or a predecessor.

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Concurrent events can also have both muting and amplifying effects on a succession (Albert, 2013). Other events can draw attention and thereby mute others. Such a moment is often referred to as “wag the dog”: a moment on which bad news can be released without generating a lot of attention. Vice versa various events can intensify public scrutiny of a succession, especially in the case of a negative pattern of incidents that rapidly follow one another. Finally, in Albert’s (2013) *When*, researchers are encouraged to notice the temporal shape of events separately from their content. In doing so, Albert envisions change through plotting temporal structures. In this study, we interpret the plot of temporal elements in the light of narrative theory: an organising theme that brings coherence to the telling of events (Ezzy, 1998).

## Methodology

### *Method*

In this research, we combined elements of two qualitative methods to approach our data: a cross-fertilisation of temporal and narrative analysis. Narrative analysis explores the way stories are employed to account for events and to highlight the themes and actors a narrator injects into their accounts (Riessman, 1993; Silverman, 2006, pp. 164-168; Bryman, 2008, pp. 556-560). This research method illuminates the way storytelling creates meaning to people and their lives as narratives. Narrative inquiry is a widespread method in social sciences, prevalent in literature and cultural studies. Also, it is frequently used in philosophical hermeneutics, which studies the social psychology of the self (e.g. Ricoeur, 1994; Ezzy, 1998). Timing analysis considers the significance of various temporalities at stake. This research applies temporal elements of Albert (2013) to give texture to the structures of an event and to help expose temporal narratives.

In contrast to other methods, narrative time is a rather sociological method that illuminates actors’ public descriptions of an event. Process-tracing, for instance, often used in political sciences, composes causal mechanisms based on processes and sequences of events that might explain a case (Bennett and Checkel, 2015). Another more sociological method we have contemplated is frame analysis (Goffman, 1986). However, we found this approach too strictly focused on discourse and lexical choices.

Our analysis of narrative time is conducted following the guidelines of grounded theory, moving back and forth between our data and our emerging theory (Silverman, 2006, pp. 95-96; Rapley, 2011, pp. 274-275). First, we assigned codes to the selected textual data on the basis of the seven temporal elements. Second, we analysed the codes from a narrative perspective for themes and storylines. Third, we turned back to the data for additional coding and analysis in light of the emerging theoretical insights. This iterative process enabled us to construct temporal narratives that provide insights into how sense-giving to timing legitimises leadership succession by state actors (in this study consisting of prime minister, ascending monarch and abdicating monarch), and commentators (journalists and royalty watchers).

### *Data collection*

This study focused on news articles. Official statements on the successions by state actors were scarce and brief, while media reports were rich in quantity. Moreover, media coverages display narratives that resonate with a larger audience. In our data selection process, we aimed to include a wide range of political diversity of media. From Belgium media, we selected *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Nieuwsblad*. Our analysis of Spain is primarily based on English articles of Spanish newspapers *El Pais* and *The Local*, and British newspapers *Telegraph*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian*. We have chosen to add British newspapers to our data collection to increase the number of articles in English, as well as to validate the findings. This may present news stories out of national context; however, we noticed that the temporal narratives per case were very similar across borders.

To examine the case of the Netherlands, we used articles from Dutch newspapers *NRC*, *Trouw*, *Volkskrant* and *Telegraaf*. In addition, we analysed tabloids *Blauw Bloed* and *Hello Magazine* that also covered stories of royal families in other countries. To collect data, we used LexisNexis; however, LexisNexis did not cover all targeted sources. To ensure political differentiation of news sources we also conducted a web search of open source databases of media, which provided us with essential additional articles. We have chosen the following time frame: starting from the public announcement of abdication until one month after succession. Search terms in Dutch and English were related to the names of the new and old leader and succession. For instance, “Beatrix” and “Willem-Alexander”. Out of 1,806 news articles that were identified and 1,051 that were screened by title, a total of 483 articles were included in this analysis. Table I displays our data selection process, based on the identification and retrieval principles of systematic review (Moher *et al.*, 2007).

### Case selection and description

In 2013–2014, three long reigning leaders stepped down from their thrones for a descendant in European constitutional monarchies. We will briefly introduce each case here.

At the start of 2013, Queen Beatrix I of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands announced her abdication in a national televised address. Beatrix was the sixth monarch from the House of Orange-Nassau, which became a monarchy and part of the governing body of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in the early years of the nineteenth century. On the 30 April 2013, Beatrix turned over her power to the crown prince and her son: Willem-Alexander.

In the Summer of 2013, on 3 July, King Albert II of the Kingdom of Belgium announced his resignation on national television. Albert II was the fifth King of the Belgians. The Belgian crown was handed over to crown prince Philippe I, son of Albert II. After the swearing-in ceremony on the 21 July, Belgium officially crowned him as sixth King of the Belgians. The decision of King Albert to step down was the first voluntary abdication in the history of the Belgian kingdom, which gained its independence from the Netherlands in 1831. We note that a court case over alleged paternity of an illegitimate daughter was continuously pursuing King Albert in tabloids and news media.

Lastly, King Juan Carlos I of the Kingdom of Spain televised his decision of abdication in 2014. After 39 years on the Spanish throne, King Juan Carlos stepped down. The succession took place as the backdrop to two scandals that were attached to the royal family. First, King Carlos had taken a luxurious trip to Botswana to hunt elephants, leading to public outrage in 2012, known as “Elephant gate”. Second, a long-running corruption investigation was looking into members of the royal family. The first succession in post-Franco Spain put

### Identification

Articles retrieved from keyword search LexisNexis ( $n = 98$ )	Articles retrieved from web search ( $n = 1,708$ )
Total retrieved articles ( $n = 1,806$ )	Articles excluded ( $n = 755$ )

### Screening

Articles screened by title ( $n = 1,051$ )	Articles excluded ( $n = 455$ )
	Published before or after ( $n = 42$ )
	Not in succession context ( $n = 413$ )

### Eligibility

Articles screened by full text ( $n = 596$ )	Articles excluded ( $n = 273$ )
	Irrelevant for study ( $n = 273$ )

### Included

Articles included in qualitative synthesis ( $n = 323$ )

**Table I.**  
Data selection process



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the country in uncharted waters. Parliament had to pass a new bill in order to make abdication lawful. Three weeks after the announcement by King Carlos, his son acceded the throne as King Felipe IV of the Kingdom of Spain.

## Findings

### *Punctuation: time for a new generation*

Concerning the punctuation of succession, we distinguish a narrative here that is based on the introduction of a “new generation”. Successors were put forward to bring change to a royal house. Succession marked the ending of an era, but mostly the opening of a new era of change. Primary narrators here were two state actors: the head of state and the head of government. One of them first officially disclosed an upcoming succession with the announcement of abdication and subsequently the other responded. Descending monarchs and prime ministers were both key actors that gave sense to the meaning of royal succession.

In a short and brief announcement on national television, Queen Beatrix explained her choice whereby she emphasised the qualities of her successor: “the responsibility for our country now must lie in the hands of a new generation” (*Volkskrant*, 2013). The new king, she claimed, would bring proper changes that fit current times. In Belgium, the resigning King Albert declared he did not only step down due to health issues, but that the moment also calls for something else: “After 20 years of reign the time has come to hand over the torch to the next generation” (*De Standaard*, 2013b). In Spain, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy was the first to officially announce the abdication of King Juan Carlos. He highlighted the moment as “the best moment for change” (*Hello Magazine*, 2014). The retiring king clarified his decision to abdicate by emphasising that the reign of his son will “open a new era of hope” (Burridge, 2014). It was time to pass the crown to “a younger generation, with new energies, determined to take on the transformations and reforms demanded by the current situation” (Kassam, 2014). In Felipe’s first speech as Spain’s new king, he employed the same narrative, describing his reign as “a renewed monarchy for new times” (Urrea, 2014b).

We interpret appointing modernity to a successor, and ascribing progression to personal qualities as a considerable way of transferring hereditary charisma. In the cases, we detect an emphasis on narrating transition to make a clear distinction between two times: breaking with the past and embracing the future. The narrative of a new generation in the selected cases shows that descendants were positioned as the new leaders who will introduce a new period that fits current times. Similar to most organisations, succession in royal houses marks an ending of an era and the beginning of a new one (Rubenson and Gupta, 1996; Boyne *et al.*, 2011). The heirs in this narrative are presented to possess charismatic qualities in terms of modernity, which is ascribed to make the succession a change of an era.

### *Interval: progress and regress*

If we look at narration on succession from the temporal element of interval, it is noticeable that a different selection of periods in the past, present and future construct divergent storylines. Based on two timelines, we were able to extract a distinction between regressive and progressive narratives. The regressive narrative mainly considers the last period of a reign of an abdicating monarch, while in the progressive narrative future and history are incorporated.

Prior to the official announcement of abdication, rumours were spread about possible resignation due to scandals and the aging process in all countries. Also, the Dutch abdication of Queen Beatrix initiated discussions on resignation in the two other kingdoms. Commentators, such as journalists and royalty watchers, introduced a narrative of regression regarding the royal houses and their long-time reigning leaders. Concerns were expressed in news reports on the recently plummeting popularity of monarchy, which raised the question of whether a new royal leader would be able to save a damaged institution.

In times of succession, alternative narratives were introduced by state actors. These focused on longstanding developments of the royal house rather than the latest developments and popularity polls. A long-term horizon offers a narrative on historical contributions of a royal family to political stability and national growth. In Spain, the prime minister claimed that the abdication of King Juan Carlos proved “the maturity of our democracy” (*Blauw Bloed*, 2014). In addition, he said: “For 39 years he was the best symbol of our peaceful coexistence. His figure is so closely linked to democracy that one cannot be understood without the other” (Urta, 2014a). Also, in the Netherlands King Willem-Alexander emphasised long-term stability by the family and short-term change by leaders. In his acceptance speech, he said: “Every king has his own interpretation of the post. He’s a different person, in another time. [...] At the same time the kingship is a symbol of continuity and togetherness. It is a direct connection to our political past, the carpet of our history which, also today, we weave together” (*Trouw*, 2013b). The long term was also emphasised in Belgium. King Philippe stated in his acceptance speech that the oath “is a solemn promise that renews the nearly two hundred-year-old relationship of trust between the King and the Belgian people” (*Nieuwsblad*, 2013), but this hardly resonated in media.

Several state actors placed succession in the context of long-term developments, mostly in a historical sense of democracy and kingdom, thereby legitimising royal succession as a longstanding ritual that is a key to stability of a nation, grounded in tradition legitimacy (Weber, 1922/1968). Through the narration of different periods, generating interval, ascending royal leaders may appear in distinctive storylines. References can be made to the endurance of certain events over time to create a sense of regression or progression.

#### *Rate: rapid renewal*

Leadership change and timing is carefully concerned with hitting the right pace. The succession of the royal house of Belgium and Spain was at the backdrop of one and two scandals, respectively. Especially in Spain, this seemed to affect the integrity of the royal family. When leadership is under pressure, radical renewal may be introduced to overcome an inevitable inertia (Amis *et al.*, 2004). Similar to other examples in crisis management (Boin *et al.*, 2005; Madsen and Snow, 1991), rapid change could be introduced by a new leader at the beginning of his or her reign.

Interestingly, we did not find substantial evidence of narration by state actors on rapid renewal in our empirical data. Rather, commentators gave sense to the pace of change on the basis of their perception of leadership changes. Adjustments in technology, organisation, tradition, events and such were used by the media to indicate rapid and gradual changes in the course of the new leader. King Felipe of Spain was praised for his “rapid adjustments” and “austerity” in the royal household, submitting strict regulations to festivities and the royal family (Giles and Hatton, 2014), for instance by serving cava at his inauguration instead of champagne, and barring the acceptance of expensive gifts that do not “compromise the dignity of the institution” (Tallantyre, 2014).

To a traditional institution such as a royal house, rapid and radical change is a sensitive matter that can easily be frowned upon (Hames and Leonard, 1998). The traditional legitimacy might explain that pushing the tempo of change is something state actors did not speak of, or it might be because royal leadership – in the cases – was never really under pressure.

#### *Sequence: ready to reign*

To legitimise timing, an event can be presented as a logical outcome following from a series of events in time (Albert, 2013). Lineage and predecessors can be emphasised; however, we found that other elements such as life experiences and merit played an important role in the temporal narratives of timing succession.

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In the cases, we distinguished two temporal narratives regarding the sequence of succession: aging and preparation. The latter concerns the successor, while the former involves the abdicating monarch. Heads of state of old age is not uncommon, but the effects may cause concern (e.g. McIntyre, 1988). A regressive sequence of events constructed reason for succession: the predecessor was too old while the heir is matured and prepared. King Albert of Belgium narrated his decision to step down on the grounds of aging: “I note that my age and my health no longer allow me to perform my duties as I would like to do. I would not fulfil my duties and would not honour my view of the royal office if, in those circumstances, I continued to hold my office” (De Standaard, 2013b). We consider this a dismissal of leadership, in which aging undermines the capabilities to lead. King Carlos of Spain did not address aging as a reason to abdicate, and Queen Beatrix even proactively distanced herself from an aging narrative, claiming she had “reached the age of 75 in good health” (*Trouw*, 2013a). Thus, she stepped down “not because the throne would be too heavy for me, but because the responsibility for this country must be in the hands of a new generation” (NRC, 2013b). Beatrix did not narrate her decision to turn over the crown as a dismissal of her own leadership qualities, but rather as an approval of her heir apparent.

A common storyline in the perception of whether heirs are ready for accession to the throne was themed around preparation. All successors were portrayed as a protégé that is prepared for the role of a king. Prime Minister Rajoy, for instance, said “Felipe’s training, character and broad experience are a solid guarantee that his work will live up to the highest expectations” (Urra, 2014a). King Carlos similarly claimed that his successor “has the maturity, preparation and sense of responsibility necessary to assume the title of head of state” (Kassam, 2014). Queen Beatrix stated in her abdication speech that both her son and his spouse were “fully prepared” for their task (Van Helvert, 2013). Also, King Albert narrated that “Prince Philippe is prepared to succeed me. Together with Princess Mathilde he has my full confidence in their assessment” (HLN, 2013).

The heirs may be born to reign, but they are not born ready according to this narrative. Successors were staged as leaders who were prepared to the standards of kingship. The hereditary charisma transmitted through blood ties, as described by Weber (1922/1968), is extended with an emphasis on the extraordinary qualities of an heir apparent, acquired through an exclusive preparation reserved for heirs to the throne. Within this narrative, we recognise a legitimising principle of charisma in which unique personal qualities are ascribed to the successor as a result of a routinisation by familial or institutional forms: a royal transfer of knowledge that makes the successor ready to reign.

#### *Attribution: symbolism of temporal synchrony*

Events can be attributed to various elements to legitimate their timing. Within our cases, we extracted an amalgam of simultaneous events that added a peculiar symbolic value to succession. Symbolic time aspects were used to establish legitimacy for timing a succession. Processes of aging may have led to rumours of a possible abdication, but the perfect timing was also expressed in the numerical synergy of royal milestones. Longstanding occurrences and processes of continuity were emphasised by temporal synchrony, with landmarks and anniversaries.

In the announcement of her abdication, Queen Beatrix referred to two concurrent events. She had reached the age of 75, but more importantly – at the end of that same year – the royal family commemorated 200 years of the existence of the Dutch monarchy. In other words, Beatrix illuminated the concurrence of these two extraordinary events as an occasion to step down from the throne (NRC, 2013b). Likewise, though more implicitly, the Belgian royal house also addressed specific milestones: King Albert claimed he marked 20 years on the throne – while in fact he abdicated just two months before reaching it. Numerical symbols were thus used to legitimise the timing of succession.

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Rumours of abdication typically start with a sense of temporal symbolism. In the United Kingdom of Belgium, rumours of the abdication of King Albert II prevailed as he “marked 20 years on the throne” (*Blauw Bloed*, 2013). Similar suggestions of a forthcoming change of leader were attributed in the Netherlands: “30 years of Kingship” and “what would be the 100th birthday of Juliana [mother and predecessor of Beatrix]” (Thie and Koelewijn, 2009). Round numbers and anniversaries were given sense to legitimise the timing of abdication, not only by commentators, but also by state actors. In this temporal narrative, we recognise a legitimacy claim through the sacralisation of landmarks of both institution and personal leadership. Grounded in a tradition of commemorating and celebrating events (Laing and Frost, 2018), anniversaries are claimed to legitimise timing of succession.

*Amplification: in tune with times*

Concurrent, unforeseen or abrupt events can interfere or be acted upon by leadership (Albert, 2013). Certain concurring developments are sensitive and have to be handled with care; they have the potential to amplify or mute public attention to succession and therefore influence public beliefs.

In all three successions, the nations’ poor economic situations at the time were taken into consideration by royal houses in their communication to the population. In order not to “send the wrong message” and come across as an isolated and indifferent institute, royal leaders incorporated the economic recession. This manifested, in particular, in the appearance of events and performances. In the Netherlands, festivities of the inauguration were claimed to be both temperate and joyful. Prime Minister Rutte stated in his public response to the abdication of Queen Beatrix: “Let us there in the whole kingdom make it an unforgettable party, of course in the sober manner that fits current time” (*NRC*, 2013a). Accordingly, the resigning Queen refrained from accepting a national gift that honoured her services.

In the United Kingdom of Spain, King Felipe was confronted with the scandalous past of his father and other members of the family. Acting in regard to the economic situation was narrated by commentators as being one of the challenges during succession: “The hallmark occasion will take place in a Spain that has been brought to its knees by years of economic crisis and the new monarch is keen to show none of the ostentatious behaviour that marked the last years of his father’s reign” (Govan, 2014). King Felipe introduced strict regulations to the Spanish royal household and family, causing commentators to label him “frugal”, and his changes “a more austere monarchy” (Giles and Hatton, 2014). Economic crises can also be of influence to the inauguration ceremonies.

Furthermore, scandals following royal families – especially in Spain and Belgium – were not addressed by state actors, thereby muting discredits. Incorporating concurrent contexts in sense-giving to succession is essential for the legitimacy of monarchy. Acts of leadership are interpreted by commentators on the basis of simultaneous circumstance; therefore, royal leadership is asked to demonstrate it is in tune with the times.

*Shape: plots of transition*

In Albert’s (2013) When, researchers are encouraged to notice the temporal shape of events apart from its content. In doing so, Albert envisions change through plotting temporal structures. In this study, we interpret the plot of temporal patterns in light of narrative theory that focuses on an organising theme that brings coherence to the telling of events (Ezzy, 1998). Events are given sense through their plots. Subsequently, we distilled several plots of monarchical transition that each was formed in a different sphere of royal leadership. Leadership is exercised in multiple spheres and each entails different challenges (Northouse, 2007; Bolden *et al.*, 2011; ‘t Hart, 2014; ‘t Hart and Uhr, 2008). In our data, we observed plots in three spheres of royal leadership: private, political and public.

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First, within the private sphere a new royal leader becomes the head of the family. One of his or her tasks seems to be safeguarding familial integrity. In case of scandals, a new head of the family can be introduced as leader to restore, or even enhance, the credibility of a royal family. Subsequently, the successor can submit new domestic regulations for family members and household. We call this plot reorganisation: it is a transition in which a new monarch aims to improve the familial integrity. In the United Kingdom of Spain, we observed this plot: King Felipe was confronted with the scandalous past of his father and other members of the family. According to several commentators, King Felipe held a sober inauguration and introduced strict regulations to the Spanish royal household and family. In Belgium and the Netherlands, this plot seemed to be less urgent due to integrity issues being less pressing.

Second, in the political sphere a new royal leader becomes a head of state. Individual capabilities to lead can be questioned, but also the role of a head of state within the political framework. Political opposition may plead for a “modern kingship” that is ceremonial rather than political. It is what we call a reform plot, concerning the political role and power of royal houses in constitutional monarchy. In all three cases, opposition (by citizens or political parties) seized the moment to call for amendments of law soon after abdication was announced. For instance, in Belgium political parties responded to the official statement of King Albert by demanding for a “modern, more ceremonial monarchy”. The largest party of the Belgian political opposition at the time (N-VA) instantly suggested new reforms that would bring the “necessary changes to contemporary Kingship” (De Standaard, 2013a). Likewise, in Spain a large protest led by left-wing newcomer Podemos demanded constitutional change: “We are citizens, not subjects. It is about time we had our say” (Kassam, 2014). Protests were aiming to abolish Spanish monarchy. Transition as reform, thus, can waver political power for royal leadership. In the Netherlands, critique on the political role was almost absent compared to the other countries, which might have something to do with the stricter limitations of the political powers of the House of Orange-Nassau.

Third, within the public sphere a royal leader becomes a head of nation. The royal leader represents a national identity and symbolises national unity (Laing and Frost, 2018). It can be quite challenging to succeed an abdicating leader who embodies those images. In that sense, a new leader can transform royal leadership with the implementation of personal authenticity as representative of his or her nation. In this plot, we detected an emphasis on authentic leadership (Sennett, 1977), to distinguish the successor from his or her predecessor. In the Netherlands, Willem-Alexander was narrated to transform the royal office with his informal style of royal leadership. During his succession, both he and his mother emphasised a personal interpretation of the office. Towards the succession adjustments to protocol, events and ceremonies were disclosed that showed a more intimate leadership. This started with his title: the traditional title King Willem IV was altered into King Willem-Alexander. Also, changes to public appearances and events were introduced, such as acquiring a non-traditional salute and introducing new festivities. For instance, the “King-games” (a national sports event for children in primary school), and a “Kings-song” (a new song performed by famous Dutch artists for the informal inauguration).

Thus, what “modern” kingship is according to a new generation of heirs can be narrated in different spheres. In accordance to the conclusions of Bynander and ‘t Hart (2006, p. 709), different types of circumstances can set the stage for leaders. Table II demonstrates the focal actors, settings, themes and changes in each plot. Accessing royal leaders are challenged to move along with the times, and the royal succession plots contain various sets of feasible narratives for the actors in question as well as the succession process as a whole. Each sphere of royal leadership (private, political and public) presents different plots of transition. Succession then can be introduced to preserve familial integrity, political legitimacy and public credibility of a royal house.

## Conclusion and discussion: a temporal perspective on succession

In this paper, we argued that turning over the crown is a critical period for royal leadership in modern European constitutional monarchies, and that the legitimacy of its timing is embedded in temporal narratives. All three selected cases of succession to the throne can be considered a planned change (Huy, 2001), initiated by royal leadership to give sense to a new course of the royal house (Laing and Frost, 2018). Legitimising the timing of succession is a strategic process, in which the three heirs apparent to the throne were narrated as the new generation, which will modernise the monarchy. The temporal lens we applied in this study foresaw in grasping leaders' sense-giving to timing, succession and, transferring hereditary charisma.

In our cases, we found two of Weber's threefold of legitimacy: charisma and tradition. There was an absence of narration based on ratio-legal grounds of succession, which indicates that there was no ambiguity about the legality of the line of succession (Bogdanor, 1995). This might have been different if, for instance, the still existing Spanish male preference would precede an older female heir in acceding the throne, since it might lead to a discussion about this being backwards rather than modern.

In the transference of hereditary charisma, we recognise an authentic language as described by Sennett (1977), ascribing unique personal qualities such as modernity and expertise to the heirs apparent. Thereby, we see a personalisation of charisma rather than a routinisation of an institutional character. In accordance with Albert (2013), the successions broke with the past and introduced a change of era. Abdicating leaders and prime ministers praised the heirs apparent as representatives of a "new generation" that would bring a new era of progression to their monarchy, fit for contemporary times. This generational emphasis is a form of transmitting hereditary charisma (Weber, 1922/1968), continuing lineage with an essential transference of time. The successors were ascribed charismatic qualities, such as the embodiment of the *Zeitgeist* in order to bring modernisations to the royal house. Interestingly, incorporating the dictates of modernity is emphasised – rather than of God as in ancient dynasties (e.g. Weber, 1922/1968). Also, the new leader's readiness to reign was legitimised with an extensive preparation to carry out the kingship. Additionally in Belgium, a regressive storyline of the aging of the abdicating king was also addressed in order to legitimise the timing of succession.

Other than these charismatic principles, we found legitimation on traditional grounds, as defined by Weber (1922/1968). The timing of royal succession was presented, especially in the Netherlands by abdicating Queen Beatrix, with a numerical synergy of royal milestones, giving a symbolic sense to turning over the throne. Although state actors narrated succession as the beginning of a new era of change, we did not find sense-giving by them to the pace of change. This might be explained by the fact that rapid change to a traditional office is a sensitive matter and can be in conflict with its traditional legitimacy (Hames and Leonard, 1998). Rather, commentators were the ones that gave sense to the rate of transition of new royal leadership on the basis of their perception of adjustments.

Furthermore, in our data we extracted three plots of transition: reorganisation, reform and transformation. Each plot, or thematic structure, considers the legitimacy of transition

Plots of royal succession	Reorganisation	Reform	Transformation
Focal actor	Head of family	Head of state	Head of nation
Setting	Domestic	Political	Public
Theme	Integrity of family	Legitimacy of political power	Credibility of public persona
Change	Introduce new regulations for family members and household	Modify role and amendments of law	Renew protocol, rituals, events and ceremonies

**Table II.**  
Plots of transition in royal succession

in a different sphere of royal leadership. We found that leaders' sense-giving can emphasise various aspects of royal leadership, such as familial integrity, political legitimacy and public credibility.

The findings of this paper not only contribute to studies on the legitimacy of constitutional monarchies, but also to public leadership studies that focus on legitimising principles and timing succession in public offices. We suggest that public leaders give sense to timing succession and can invert it to change strategies, when the understanding of the structures and effects of narrative time is deepened. The temporal lens we presented in this paper can be applied as a conceptual framework to study all types of succession. The findings of this study are also of use for succession planning and timing literature (e.g. Albert, 2013; Amis *et al.*, 2004; Huy, 2001; Tushman and Romanelli, 1985; Rothwell, 2010), broadening the perspective from not only knowing "when to act", but that leadership change is also a matter of legitimising timing.

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