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## How does political leadership influence sub-state electoral behavior? A qualitative approach

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**Abstract.** This research utilizes a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon of sub- state voting. While candidate evaluation plays a crucial role in determining how individuals vote in municipal elections, it is not the sole factor and may not always be the primary one. The review of the existing theoretical framework on electoral behavior, along with the variables and dimensions involved in the decision-making process in municipal elections, is notably limited. Hence, we propose a case study employing focus groups in three municipalities with distinct historical contexts related to the personal leadership of the candidates.

**Keywords:** Leadership; municipal elections; second order elections; candidates; personalization and Spain.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Candidates in municipal elections. 3. The dimensions of personality in municipal candidates. 4. Research questions. 5. Research methodology. 6. Results. 7. Conclusions. 8. Bibliography.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper investigates the variables involved in the decision-making process of voting in municipal elections, emphasizing the significance of the candidate in this process and the array of dimensions that shape it.

The role of candidates in the voting decision is a classic question in electoral studies. Numerous authors have emphasized the importance of the candidate in determining election outcomes (King, 2002; Rico, 2009). Empirical studies have demonstrated the influence of personal leadership in municipal elections, assuming a direct correlation with the municipality's size (Riera, 2017).

This paper delves deeper qualitatively into the personal leadership variable, its importance within the voters' discourse, and its composition. We move beyond the "closeness" factor as the sole determinant of leadership. While this factor is ever-present and central to defining the variable, it alone cannot encapsulate the candidate's personal leadership.

Until recently, municipal elections did not attract particular interest from political science scholars. As mentioned, in democratic systems, local elections have remained relatively underexplored (Marschall, Sha, and Runil, 2011). The situation is not much different in Spain. Studies in this regard often focus on a single election and four big cities (Barberá, 2010) or on an autonomous community (Martínez Fuentes and Ortega, 2010), working predominantly with aggregate data (Delgado, 1997; 2010). In all cases, these studies tend to be quantitative, and there is a dearth of qualitative academic works addressing the variables present in the voting decision process in municipal elections.

The remainder of the article is structured into eight sections. The following two describe the existing theoretical framework of the research and the research questions. The subsequent two sections elaborate on the theoretical framework and research questions, followed by the questions to be answered and the methodology employed. Section 6 is dedicated to presenting the main results obtained, and the final section outlines the conclusions reached, establishing directions for future research.

## 2. Candidates in the municipal elections

In general, the literature on the influence of candidates on the vote has aimed to provide a normative answer to how electoral processes determine who should undertake various political actions. The response to this question is, in turn, conditioned by the relevance attributed to political leaders in electoral processes. In this regard, there are two currents of study. The first, known as second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), typically applicable to European elections but also relevant to local ones, is not of interest to this study. The second, focused on individualization and partially aligned with the theory of the personalization of elections in countries such as the United States, forms the basis of this research.

The personalization or individualization of politics involves studying the importance attained by candidates or leaders in government action, the electoral contest, and even the leadership of their parties (Muchan 1993; Hazan 1996; Costa Lobo, 2014). Guillem Rico (2009: 13 and 23) has defined personalization as "the growing impact of leaders on voters' decisions relative to the weight of other factors, particularly that of partisan identities and other political predispositions. In this sense, encompassing "the way in which citizens process political information, how they view parties, judge governments, and form opinions on issues of political debate."

Initially, the structure of government was considered important in explaining the phenomenon of personalization, almost exclusively attributing it to presidential systems such as the American one (Bartle and Crewe, 2002). However, the monopoly of this approach by these systems of government is no longer valid and has been extended to parliamentary systems (Costa Lobo and Curtice, 2014). Numerous investigations have even studied the impact of candidates in legislative elections (Graetz and McAllister, 1987; Bean, 1993; Clarke, 2000).

The Spanish case is not an exception in the incorporation of the theory of personalization to parliamentary systems in politics. Since the beginning of our new democratic stage, political leaders have enjoyed high levels of power and influence; they have almost complete autonomy when assembling their electoral campaign team and firmly control the organization of their political party. This trend has been evident since the inception of the current democracy with figures such as Felipe González, José María Aznar, or José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, capable of attracting the undecided and abstentionist vote at key moments for their respective political parties (Rico, 2007).

Much of the available literature on the personalization of the vote in Spanish elections focuses on national or regional contexts. However, if there is any level at which a close relationship between electoral behavior and the theory of personalization/individualization can be considered, it is at the local or municipal election level. This relationship occurs for several reasons:

- The relevance of the figure of the mayor in local processes. As indicated by Jordi Capo (1991: 158) “(mayors) are strong, stable, and possess resources and political capital.”
- The very configuration of local elections, with a presidential approach, granting broad powers to the mayor (Vanaclocha, 1997).
- Only the heads of the list can compete for the mayor's office. Although they are part of an electoral slate with the rest of their colleagues, it is the number one who secures the mayor's office.

Despite the parliamentary configuration of municipal elections established in the current Electoral Law, electoral competition persists until the end of the year. The election of the new president now adopts a presidential nature among the different candidates identified with their respective parties (Márquez, 2007). While the remaining members of the electoral list aspire to be part of the government team through a councilor's office. For this reason, parties aim to select candidates with a high level of local knowledge, especially when the party lacks a local presence (Martínez Fuentes, 2008). In other words, the municipal-level electoral campaign revolves around the candidate, and in most cases, they enjoy a high degree of autonomy to direct it. This phenomenon translates into two factors (Martínez Fuentes, 2010):

- The tendency to highlight the candidate's political, personal, and social qualities and trajectory, while other members of the list are relegated to the background.
- The autonomy of municipal candidates to “personalize” their program and discourse, enriching the slogans coming from national and/or autonomous levels of the party where they campaign (even with the risk of sometimes deviating “against” the party's communication lines at the state level). As shown below, this situation is more likely to occur when the candidate far exceeds the brand in the voter's mental construction.

This personalization gives candidates the possibility of establishing power relationships within the party organization that can extend beyond the municipality itself, to the extent that there are mayors and candidates who become national political figures (Martínez Fuentes and Ortega, 2010). In Spain, examples include Ada Colau, Manuela Carmena, and Esperanza Aguirre.

On the other hand, the proximity of candidates to voters gives them accessibility that contrasts with the inevitable distance of those competing in national elections (Barberá, 2010). This proximity, combined with the direct contact that municipal candidates can establish in a context of competition centered on party leaders at the local level, makes them key elements in the voting decision (Freire, 2005). Therefore, local elections emphasize the direct contact of candidates with the electorate, which, in principle, increases their relevance among the factors influencing the vote, at the expense of other elements such as the brand/party, the social and/or economic

environment, among others.

### **3. Personality dimensions in candidates**

The study of the weight exerted by the evaluation of municipal candidates in comparison with other determinants of the vote has been quite scarce in Spain for years. This gap has been addressed through speculative arguments, restrictions to specific territorial scopes, or extrapolations of the evaluation of national leaders from the most relevant parties to the local level (Martínez Fuentes and Ortega, 2010). The results have not been satisfactory due to the singularity of the local vote and the need to delve deeper into a municipal political scenario that is neither territorially nor temporally stable. In the most recent studies of the municipal sphere, the hypothesis regarding the importance of the value of the local vote has been verified (Martínez Fuentes and Ortega, 2010). The study also confirmed that “the degree of personalization of the vote in municipal elections in Spain is influenced by the size of the municipality and the passage of time” (Riera, 2017: 11). Similarly, it was observed that “the extent of vote personalization in municipal elections in Spain is altered by the size of the municipality and the passage of time” (Riera, 2017: 11).

In the study by Martínez Fuentes and Ortega (2010), it was possible to ascertain that the effect of the candidate on electoral behavior persists even when incorporating other socio-demographic factors of the voter, such as gender, employment status, education, or age; and political factors, such as ideology. This research approach utilizes various studies available in the CIS data bank, which hinders our ability to explore whether there are other relevant variables or dimensions in the voting decision process at the municipal level. Furthermore, the very definition of the personalization of the vote is limited to the size of the municipality and the evaluation of the candidate (usually, the CIS employs scales from 0 to 10). This only reinforces the statements regarding the inherent difficulties in studying municipal elections, given the lack of specific and particularized research on second-order elections and, more specifically, on the theory of personalization in this type of election.

The study of personality dimensions in the case of first-order elections has received attention from researchers—although less than in other areas of electoralTable 1. Research on personality dimensions of first-order elections.al political study—and is presented in Table 1 below.”

Table 1. Research on personality dimensions of first-order elections.

	Competition	Integrity/ Honesty	Leadership / Charisma	Empathy	Personal appearance	Responsibility	Other
Miller&Miller (1976)	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Nimmo&Savage (1976)		✓	✓	✓			
Kinder, Abelson and Fiske (1979)	✓	✓					
Markus (1982)	✓	✓					
Kinder (1986)	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Miller, Wattenberg and Malenchuk (1986)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Lodge, McGraw and Stroh (1989)	✓	✓					
McCann (1990)	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Caprara, Barbaranelli and Zimbardo (1997, 2002)							✓
Funk (1999)	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Pancer, Brown and Widdis Barr (1999)	✓	✓	✓				

	Competiti on	Integrit y / Hones ty	Leaders hip / Charis ma	Empath y	Perso nal appea rance	Respo nsibilit y	Othe r
Brettschneider &Gabriel (2002)	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Newman (2003)	✓	✓					
Ohr & Oscar sson (2003 )	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley (2004)	✓						✓

Source: Own elaboration.

The organization of the elements listed in Table 1, summarizing the fifteen theories reviewed in Table 1 results in the following hierarchy of elements:

- Two elements prominently stand out above the rest.
  - Competence is the highest ranked dimension, mentioned in 13 out of 15 theories.
  - Integrity/honesty follows closely, with 12 mentions.
- Four other theories have been highlighted by several studies, albeit a considerable distance from the previous ones.
  - Leadership/charisma, mentioned in 8 theories.
  - Empathy, mentioned in 4.
  - Personal appearance and socio-demographic characteristics, each with 2 mentions.
  - Responsibility, also with 2 mentions.
- Several other dimensions are mentioned by some of these theories: confidence, receptivity, personal attractiveness.

As indicated in the previous paragraphs, there are none – or at least not sufficiently relevant – studies on the personality dimensions of candidates in sub- state elections, specifically at the municipal level. Hence, the relevance of the present research, which aims to shed some more light on an area that has been scarcely studied but is of enormous interest to political parties when selecting and promoting their candidates in different municipalities.

## 4. Research questions

As outlined earlier, it is evident that the evaluation of local candidates significantly influences the vote in municipal elections. This influence endures even when sociodemographic variables and even ideology are factored into the analysis of the results. Additionally, we observe that the impact of personalization diminishes with larger municipalities, emphasizing the significance of the ideological vote (Riera, 2017).

This research adopts an exploratory design to address two primary questions. Firstly, it aims to unravel the social discourse surrounding municipal voting and the decision-making process. While the significance of the brand-candidate combination is acknowledged (Rico, 2010; Costa Lobo, 2014), we question whether these are the sole variables influencing municipal voting. Secondly, we aim to identify variables involved in the personalization of the municipal vote. While empirical studies on personalization have predominantly focused on first-order elections (Crewe, 2002; Costa Lobo, 2014), municipal-level studies have primarily relied on quantitative methods and secondary sources (Riera, 2017). In essence, which variables constitute the dimension of the personalization of the municipal vote?

## 5. Research methodology

Over the last few decades, research on personalization in both first and second-level elections has predominantly leaned towards quantitative methodologies. This includes the analysis of databases from public institutions or organizations and conclusive designs employing surveys.

In contrast, this research adopts an exploratory and qualitative approach, seeking to understand the personalization of the vote as a core variable defined by a set of dimensions. The focus is specifically on the municipal sphere and local elections.

The qualitative research framework was designed with an awareness of the necessity to represent various discourses related to local elections and the variables influencing the voting decision process.

Given the review of various theories on the personalization of the vote and the absence of a theoretical framework in the field of municipal elections, we chose case studies to generate theories in this context.

The case study proves to be a valuable tool for our research, facilitating the recording and in-depth exploration of individual behavior. In contrast, quantitative methods focus on information obtained from surveys using structured questionnaires (Yin, 1989).

Besides being considered suitable for exploratory research (Chetty, 1996), case studies have demonstrated their capacity for theory generation (Gersick, 1988). Furthermore, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967: 30), research aiming to contribute to generating theories with a certain degree of general applicability can be based on a limited number of cases since "a single case may indicate a category or conceptual property, and a few more cases may confirm that indication."

Generalization from case studies is not a "statistical generalization" as in surveys but an "analytical generalization" (Yin, 1998). In this way, the results of the study of one case (or cases) can be generalized to others with similar theoretical conditions.

Nine focus groups were planned, equally distributed across three sampling points, to serve as a case study of the different municipal realities and their hypothetical relationship with the personalization of the vote:

- Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Being a large municipality (more than 200,000 voters) where there have been stages over the years with apparent personal leadership in its municipal representatives; at the same time, there have been stages with an absence of such leadership.
- Santa Lucía de Tirajana: As a municipality of intermediate size (<100,000

voters) with a historical ideological trajectory combined with strong personal leaderships.

- Tegui: Finally, a municipality on the island of Lanzarote, where, for more than 30 years, there has been a change in the mayoralty by candidates with a strong component of personal leadership. Additionally, it adequately represents the figure of the small municipality (<15,000 voters).

Three focus groups were conducted in each municipality, segmented by the age of the participants:

- A group of voters between 18 and 30 years of age.
- Another group is made up of people between 31 and 49 years of age.
- And a third group with voters aged 50 and over.

All the groups had a shared set of characteristics:

- Equal representation by gender (50/50).
- In each age segment, the presence of different situational roles was ensured: students, unemployed, employed, self-employed, responsible for the household, retired, etc.
- Each group had a representation of sympathizers of the main parties present in the municipality.
- All participants had to be regular residents of their municipality and eligible to vote in municipal elections.
- Likewise, to achieve geographic coverage by entities and neighborhoods, each group had the presence of residents in the main neighborhoods and entities of each municipality.

Group attendees were selected and recruited through a system involving a brief questionnaire to determine eligibility. If the individual met the required conditions, they were invited to attend a specific group. Those who accepted were scheduled on a specific day, time, and place, and their contact details were recorded. The entire selection process was carried out in the public streets of the municipality concerned, mostly in commercial areas with high road traffic.

The groups were conducted in specially conditioned rooms during June and July 2018, with an average duration of 120 minutes per group. The more than 18 hours of audio recordings generated were transcribed, forming the main source of analysis.

## **6. Results**

### **6.1 Personalization of the vote in the electoral equation**

In all the conducted groups discussing the voting decision system, a widely supported opinion emerges: 'In local elections, voters prioritize the individual candidate.'

Notably, this opinion remained uncontested during the dynamic exchange of differing views, indicating implicit recognition of the two meanings contained in this proposition:

- It can be observed that municipal elections exhibit significant differences compared to national or regional elections. This observation aligns with findings in studies by Jordi Capo (1991) and Vanaclocha (1997), particularly in their discussions on the role of the mayor. Some noteworthy peculiarities are related to local issues and the perception of improvement in the daily life of neighborhoods (from infrastructure to social life) or in city mobility



(from transportation to entertainment). These differences are statistically confirmed when analyzing various voting patterns at the local, regional, and national levels across the three municipalities.

Graph 1: Electoral results in the 2011 and 2015 Municipal and State elections.



Source: Ministry of the Interior. Electoral Processes.

Electoral Results. Own elaboration.

- And the main difference lies in the importance attributed to the 'personal condition' of the candidate in this type of electoral elections. This importance correlates with the higher level of knowledge and closeness appreciated in them. This justifies assigning greater weight to the personal evaluation of these factors, a point that Freire had already articulated when referring to voting factors (2005).

As we progress in the dynamic exchange of opinions within the groups, this significance becomes relative, when the matrix of vote configuration meaning is opened to other core variables. This can be observed in the discourse of our informants, in the three municipalities consulted.

In each of them, the group dynamics were oriented to promote a floating discourse on the voting decision system at the local level, in such a way that its configuration would be open to its spontaneous conformation from the variables defining the perception of the decision system at the level of each municipality. The analysis of the discourse generated around the perceived evolution suggests that the diagnosis of this evolution is based on the following set of variables:

- The brand (the party)
- Leadership (the candidate)
- The expectation of change in the face of a situation considered detrimental or untenable.
- Conformity with the option taken due to the improvements experienced.

The one that is given priority is the **brand**. This appears as the main resource:

- To be used to make the voting decision when other decisive intervening factors do not play a significant role in the election.
- To rely on when positively evaluating the result of the legislation.
- To return to when expectations of change have been frustrated.

*"Las Palmas has proven to be an electorate prone to vote for the PP." "Las Palmas has been mostly of the PP."*

*"It is something that has been felt in the street and has been reflected in what has happened in the elections...In fact, we have been governed by the PP for*

*most of all these years.”*

*“Here (Santa Lucia) Nueva Canarias has been voted for many years, almost from the beginning (of the democratic municipalities). It seems that most of the people were attached to this brand.”*

The greater weight of the hegemonic brand over the leadership is proven in two specific electoral moments in the case of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria:

- The PP maintains its absolute majority in the City Council when José Manuel Soria is replaced as mayoral candidate by Josefa Luzardo, a young politician with a marked lack of leadership.
- The PP regained the absolute majority after the frustration experienced with Jerónimo Saavedra, despite the candidate presented by the party having a low level of recognition and leadership.

“Pepa Luzardo was elected because voters perceived her as representing continuity with the PP government led by José Manuel Soria during several legislatures.”

“Cardona was not voted for himself. He won the mayoralty because the PP was voted for.”

The brand was already considered as the main variable in the decision-making process by the partisan theory of the Michigan School (Campbell, 1960), although Roche (2008) argues that the vote is considered as a mechanism of affirmation for a social class, reflected in the choice of a specific brand or party.

The second most prominent variable is leadership.

Jerónimo Saavedra's leadership capacity and personal charisma played a decisive role in his election as the mayor of the city in 2007.

“In the case of Saavedra, people voted for the person. He was someone who enjoyed great recognition as a person and as a politician.”

“This allowed him to obtain an absolute majority in a city that had shown a clear tendency to vote for the PP... Something that had happened in other places in the Peninsula, for example in Córdoba with Julio Anguita”.

Obtaining absolute majorities in cities known for voting for opposing political brands is a clear confirmation of the influence that leadership can have in municipal elections. This is evident in Tegui, where there is a tendency to vote differently in general elections.

“In the general elections I vote for the PP, but here (municipal) voted for Oswaldo (Betancort)” (Tegui).

“In the case of Saavedra, people voted for the person. He was someone who enjoyed great recognition as a person and as a politician.”

The affirmation of the candidate's qualities in a municipal election, as reflected by Martínez Fuentes (2010), and their ability to personalize the vote are evident in the strength with which the political leadership of José Manuel Soria emerged as mayor of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria during his first two terms of office, reaffirming the choice of voting for the PP in the city, reinforcing its consecutive absolute majorities to the point that the majority opinion is that this party would not have lost the mayoralty if José Manuel Soria had remained as candidate for it.

“José Manuel Soria secured votes due to the orientation towards the PP, especially after other alternatives failed to demonstrate improvements in the city

within the limited timeframe for their materialization. Once he reaffirmed his political leadership in the initial legislatures, people predominantly voted for him, even those who felt more aligned with other ideologies.”

“His leadership ascended to the extent where he was emphatically referred to as 'the mayor of Las Palmas,' not just within the city, but also across the island and even the province.”

The political leadership attributed to Antonio Morales among left-wing and/or nationalist voters in Gran Canaria as a whole, due to the results obtained in Agüimes, the municipality of which he had been mayor for many legislatures, is argued by our informants as an explanation for the significant increase in the vote for Nueva Canarias, the party to which he belongs, especially at the insular level, but also in the capital.

“I used to vote for CC, but in the last elections I voted for Nueva Canarias. Antonio Morales is a good president.”

“I voted for Nueva Canaria because of the person, because of Morales, I have seen what he did.”

“So did I. I voted for Antonio because I already knew who he was, because I have many friends in Agüimes, and he has done many things there.”

In third place is the **expectation of change**, which is attributed a decisive role in three moments of the evolution experienced:

- Jerónimo Saavedra became mayor of the city in the wake of the disappointment caused by the replacement of José Manuel Soria in the PP with Pepa Luzardo.

“People had voted for Pepa Luzardo because she was perceived as the continuity of the government maintained by José Manuel during several legislatures. But over the years, that perception of continuity was lost, and she was unable to put up with it due to her lack of charisma and management skills. Her permanence became untenable even for long-time PP voters. The expectation of change had spread, the PP did not know how to respond to that expectation, and the PSOE came forward with Jerónimo Saavedra.”

- It gave way to try other alternatives by voting for new parties in the last municipal elections, in view of the loss of support from the usual parties. This led to the loss of the PP's capacity to govern, as part of its usual votes were transferred to a recently formed party in the spectrum of the insular right, Unidos por Gran Canaria, and led to the return of the PSOE in a minority to the municipal government with the support of two emerging political forces: Las Palmas Puede and Nueva Canarias.
- Finally, the return to the brands for which people have been voting after the frustration of the expectations of change is significantly pointed out by our informants.

“From my point of view, looking at this, I think it's normal to take a position in a political party. You will study your options, but they will be in a party... The vote is going to regroup.”

“This is a wave. There are a lot of people who don't know, so they see their safest option in relying on the devil they know.”

“There has been no luck in the change; it has been bad. So, I think we're back to what we already know.”

“Many people will revert to the party they voted for previously.”

As an alternative to this, he points to the emergence of new political leadership.

“And then what do we do? Go back to the same thing?” he asks. “If no new faces appear, maybe.”

“We have a big problem with that and haven't seen really seen any change. The same old people are back.”

“It is very disappointing when there is an election, and you aren't satisfied with your vote, not knowing who to vote for because I don't really know anyone convincing. If I know them, I vote for them; if I don't know them, I vote for the party I have usually supported.”

“You stick to the familiar brand because you don't know anyone.”

“If someone convinces me, I take the step; if not, I go back to where I was.”

Lastly, and as a concomitant variable, **conformity with the chosen option** appears.

In the case of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, this factor only emerges as a concomitant variable to those of brand and leadership. In fact, it only becomes a decisive factor in explaining the evolution experienced in the configuration of local voting in this municipality when the electoral option for the PP is consolidated after the consolidation of José Manuel Soria leadership as “the mayor of Las Palmas”. The successive legislatures in which he remained the mayor of the city reinforce the electoral option chosen by most of the population.

However, conformity with the option chosen co-stars, along with the brand, in the evolution experienced in the configuration of local voting in Santa Lucía de Tirajana.

Delving into the discourse of our informants, it is evident that:

- The shift from the traditional vote to the usual brand, particularly in the case of new parties, or returning to the usual (PSOE and PP) after the frustration of their expectations of change.
- Leadership emerges as a rare occurrence, associated with the expectation of change, or the usual brand when uncertainty prevails about what to vote for.
- The anticipation of change occurs in political crisis stages like the current one, leading to a shift in the vote towards new parties and the projection of the nationalist vote in Nueva Canarias.
- Conformity with the chosen option prevails during times when the perception of improvement is maintained, especially in periods of a charismatic leader's continuity.

In the three municipalities studied, it is confirmed that the candidate/person has had a specific impact on the configuration of the vote in the local elections held in these municipalities in the last decades.

It was the discourse of our informants that clearly revealed a unique difference in the configuration of votes in local elections, highlighting the personal condition of the candidate as the primary distinction.

The opinion that ‘people are voted for at the local level’ is widely supported by the groups.

The progress in the dynamic exchange of groups discussing the perceived/experienced evolution in each municipality has allowed us to gauge the extent of this opinion:

- Leadership/candidate/person appears as an intervening variable in most cases of municipal elections studied.
- The main reason given for this social perception is certainty.

- Hence, the weight attributed to leadership in shaping the local vote increases as population size decreases.

The deepening of our informants' discourse enables us to contextualize the initial persuasion: the leadership/candidate/person shares the explanation (co- causality) of what was experienced with three other elements (the brand, the expectation of change, and conformity with the option taken). In several cases referred to, it does not appear as the dominant factor.

Analyzing the argumentative logics on which the above social perceptions are based allows us to grade the intervention attributed to the leadership/candidate/person on a nominal scale:

- Minority intervention, as seen in the last municipal elections in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, where the leadership has less weight. The lack of notoriety of the mayoral candidates in that circumstance meant that the vote for the brand dominated the configuration of the electoral result. This was evident both in maintaining the electoral ground of the 'usual' state parties and in the electoral pull of some of the new parties. Nevertheless, we verified that the figures of Antonio Morales and José Miguel Bravo de Laguna significantly influenced the increase in the vote for two minority formations, Nueva Canarias and Unidos por Gran Canaria, capturing part of the voters from CC and PP.
- It should be noted that the new current configuration of the electoral spectrum, beyond the two-party system, emphasizes the importance of these minority political formations in the formation of municipal government teams.
- Decisive intervention in cases where attributing local political leadership to a candidate serves to achieve absolute majorities by attracting voters from other ideological positions who vote for other parties in non-municipal elections. This was observed in the consolidation of José Manuel Soria as mayor of Las Palmas in the successive legislatures and in the absolute majority with which Jerónimo Saavedra was elected.
- Decisive intervention occurs when the attractiveness of the leader outweighs that of the brand and:
  - Manages to maintain adherence to its own brand (the PIL of Dimas Martín in Teguiense).
  - Supports the recovery of brand majorities (Oswaldo Betancort in Teguiense).
  - Even allows the candidate to change the brand while maintaining electoral majorities and/or mayoralties (Juan Pedro Hernández in Teguiense, Gladys Acuña in Yaiza, and Pedro Martín in Santa María de Guía).

## **6.2. The qualities that shape local political leadership**

The analysis of the qualities that define local political leadership requires an examination of its unique conditions, the personality traits outlined by reviewed theories, and the sequence of personality dimensions within local political leadership.

### **6.2.1. The distinctive nature of local political leadership**

The first point to emphasize is that the personality dimensions in the referenced theories, as noted by Rico (2009), are inherently multidimensional. The second observation is that they fail to account for the distinction between local elections and broader electoral processes, overlooking a critical element: the proximity of the candidate politician to the citizens.

The absence of this closeness to the people, citizens, and neighborhoods of the city emerges as the primary reason for the limited involvement of political leadership in shaping the outcomes of the recent elections for the City Council of La Palmas de Gran Canaria. Conversely, the memory of Nardi Barrios, a former mayoral candidate,

lingers in the recollections of our informants, with her social recognition closely tied to her efforts to maintain proximity to the people and address their concerns.

“Nardi used to visit neighborhood associations regularly to understand their situation and gather their demands.”

Proximity, the ability to connect with people and create a sense of closeness, stands out as the principal quality attributed to the former mayor of Santa Lucía de Tirajana, Silverio Matos, who continues to be acknowledged as the primary social/local leader in the municipality. The absence of this quality is highlighted as the main setback in the generational transition in the mayor's office and as the primary shortcoming of the new mayor and new candidate for Nueva Canarias.

*“The previous mayor was very approachable; he greeted you, you could talk to him like with any other person. The current one doesn't that far, he lacks the same approachability”* (Santa Lucía de Tirajana).

*“I perceive him as approachable, and he gives me a sense of kindness and attentiveness, instilling confidence in me”* (Teguise).

Oswaldo Betancort's image as the best mayor of Teguise in recent decades and his recognition as the new local political leader are fundamentally linked to being perceived as a person close to the people.

The recent municipal elections for the City Council of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria offer another important lesson: the lack of sufficient notoriety makes it impossible to assess leadership and its impact on electoral processes. The absence of notoriety or recognition translates into the impossibility of projecting personal attributes and political attributions to the candidates, as well as establishing any assessment of their political trajectory.

*“I don't even know who the new mayor is”* (in reference to Augusto Hidalgo, the current mayor of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria).

Therefore, candidates' notoriety and proximity to citizens emerge as the primary personality conditions for recognizing political leadership at the local level.

### **6.2.2. The personality conditions indicated by the above theories**

The systematization of elements listed in Table 1, summarizing the fifteen theories outlined above, highlights the following hierarchy:

- Competence and integrity/honesty are the two variables most emphasized by the different leadership theories.
- The candidate's leadership and charisma also achieve high relevance when probing the dimensions of personalization.
- Empathy is cited by some authors in studies of first-order elections, as are sociodemographic and personal characteristics. Although present, they are not central in personalizing the vote in municipal elections.

The analysis allows us to conclude that competence is a personality dimension that appears consistently in the assessment of local political leadership. The discussion above enables us to advance in the understanding of this variable in three ways:

- As formation/preparation/training. This “value”/meaning is attributed to the new political leaders, who represent generational renewal at the local and/or insular

level. This was the case of the new mayor of Santa Lucía de Tirajana, the new mayor of Tegui, and all the new politicians contributing to generational renewal in Lanzarote.

- "She (mayor of Santa Lucía) is a technician. She is a hard worker, more of a manager than an approachable person".
- "Oswaldo, I think he's a lawyer or something" (Tegui).
- As the political trajectory experienced by the candidate. This was the case of Jerónimo Saavedra when elected mayor of Las Palmas of Gran Canaria. It is said that he has been everything in Canarian politics, and even in the Government of Madrid.
- "It is that Jerónimo (Saavedra) has been everything, even Minister."
- As the management capacity proven by the results achieved and the improvements perceived in the municipalities. We have seen this in the cases of José Manuel Soria as mayor of Las Palmas, Dunia González as mayor of Santa Lucía de Tirajana, and Oswaldo Betancort as mayor of Tegui.

The integrity of the candidate is cited in some of the cases studied, serving as a dimension that leads to the withdrawal of part of the vote accumulated by the brand or leader/candidate due to three main reasons:

- Party switching: We have seen how a portion of CC's voters are willing to reconsider their vote if their candidacy were led by a political figure who carries the stigma of being a turncoat.
- Corruption: The PIL, Dimas Martín's own brand, experienced a progressive loss of votes as the leader was affected by successive court rulings.
- Lack of transparency. Informants point out instances when assessing the Tegui mayor's response to the demand for accountability by an opposition party.

It should be noted that this dimension operates more automatically when certain news items significantly impact local public opinion. In such cases, it tends not to be present in the assessment of political leadership, as reflected in our informants' discourse: 'For the time being, there is no reason to doubt... So far, nothing has been known in that sense.'

As mentioned earlier, the dimension of integrity appears ambivalently in these cases. Although it devalues the image of the leader and the adherence of the vote of a part of his electors, another part of his electorate maintains the defense of the leader based on his positive aspects. The case of Dimas Martín is archetypal in this sense.

Dimas Martín himself emerges, among the cases studied, as the local leader to whom our informants attribute the greatest political charisma. This attraction is mainly based on the recognition of his enormous capacity for conviction, both at a collective and personal level: 'People went to listen to him and ended up convinced of what he told them... Even some who went to the town hall very angry because they felt harmed by him left there so happy with the explanations he had given them and ended up having a coffee together.'

Empathy is not directly referred to, although it could perhaps be considered as a personality dimension included within closeness.

In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, gender stands out as a personality dimension that contributes a special value to the election of Dunia González as mayor of Santa Lucía de Tirajana. Age, which was especially important in the election of Oswaldo Betancort as mayor of Tegui.

### **6.2.3. The sequence of personality dimensions in local political leadership**

Among all the cases studied, Oswaldo Betancort stands out, especially in terms of the social perception of a local political leader. The discourse of our informants enables us to reconstruct the perceived evolution from the time he was elected as the



CC candidate for mayor of Tegui until his consolidation as mayor in his second term. The analysis of this evolution allows us to assert that three types of elements/variables/qualities play a role in the social construction of the image of a local political leader:

- Personal qualities such as age, demeanor, disposition, and response attitude response towards others.
- Political correctness: his proximity to the citizens, the places where they live, and the problems that affect them; his accessibility and approachability as a local governor.
- The results achieved and the perception of improvement in the city.

The varying incidence of these types of variables over time enables us to establish a dimensioning of the weight of each of these factors in the analyzed trajectory, establishing a sequence in three moments/sections. Even though explicit references to the three types of variables appear in each of the sections, the analysis leads us to confirm that:

- In the first section, references to personal qualities dominate: someone young with new ideas and future projection; with an affable, kind, gentle, sweet, correct, and elegant manner; to whom people feel close. The image of Oswaldo Betancort in this initial moment is dominated by meanings of good guy, good people, good disposition... being a good person and being close.
- The second section is dominated by references to his political correctness; the confidence he transmits as a politician, and his accessibility as a local governor: hardworking, willing to listen anywhere, directly accessible, personally attentive, present when needed. The image of Oswaldo Betancort in this second moment is dominated by a key meaning: he is for the people.
- In the third section, references to the results of the management as mayor and the perceived improvements in the municipality and the government team gain special relevance: countering the feeling of abandonment in some areas of the municipality (Costa Tegui, Caleta de Famara), significant improvements in infrastructure, even some hinterlands and villages are yet to benefit, highlighting the action of the government team as a whole, and the efficiency of some members in managing municipal affairs. The image of Oswaldo Betancort in this third moment is confirmed as the best mayor the city has had in a long time.

“A good person and close to people.”

“A leader who is at the disposal of the people”.

“The best mayor the city has had in a long time”.

## 7. Conclusions

The study of electoral behavior at the local level was scarcely explored until a few years ago within the field of political science. This holds true for many democracies with extensive histories, including Spain. The perception of the local level as primarily an administrative rather than political environment, coupled with more limited resources compared to autonomous communities and the central government, has relegated local elections to the background in electoral behavior research. Additionally, the intrinsic difficulty of rigorously investigating (and, above all, generalizing) the over 8,000 municipalities currently existing in our territory, the challenge of obtaining aggregated and fully comparable data, and the complexity introduced by parties and coalitions unique to specific municipalities further complicate the analysis of municipal elections.

Nevertheless, the relevance of city councils has surged in recent decades, partly due to negative events such as political corruption. This growth is attributed to the significance of budgets, especially in provincial capitals, and the increasing prominence of mayors, extending beyond the local sphere. Notable examples include



the current mayors of Barcelona or Madrid; as observed in the cases studied, figures like Oswaldo Betancort, the Mayor of Tegui, who has gained insular prominence.

The conducted research has revealed that in the social discourse on the decision-making process of voting in municipal elections, the binomial brand/party-leader/candidate, as asserted by theories on first-order elections, is also present at the local level. However, voters' discourse introduces two additional variables that qualitatively explain their behavior: the expectation of change and conformity with the option chosen in the past.

- The expectation of change functions as an operant variable, which becomes prominent when there is a desire to explore new alternatives (“to try something different”); to compensate for the disappointment of a failed election; or to overcome a situation of previous impasse. This argumentative logic has been experienced with the emergence of Podemos and its satellite brands in thousands of municipalities in 2015; and its anticipated adjustment according to the most recent studies of voting intentions.
- Conformity with the chosen option, however, is a concomitant secondary variable that reinforces the choice of the brand/party or candidate/leader when the improvement in the perception of the municipality is positive.

Regarding the candidate/personal leadership variable, the analysis of the three cases studied assigns this variable three degrees of importance:

- It is an intervening variable in all the cases studied. The candidate in municipal elections plays a central role in the voting decision process.
- The candidate is decisive in local scenarios where he/she is instrumental in securing absolute majorities, attracting voters who, in state elections (and even regional and/or insular elections) opt for other acronyms.
- And it is decisive when the appeal of the local leader surpasses that of the brand he represents, sustaining it and even validating the shift to other political acronyms. This was confirmed in the recent municipal elections in Yaiza or in Santa María de Guía.

The multidimensionality of personal leadership, as predicted by various theories on personalization, is affirmed in municipal elections. The candidate's competence, integrity, and honesty are reflected in the voters' discourse when discussing municipal elections. However, qualitative research introduces two additional variables to be considered:

Firstly, notoriety, as highlighted by Riera (2017) in relation to the municipality's size, although our informants prioritize notoriety as an essential variable for personal loyalty, irrespective of the municipality's size. In marketing terms, I cannot vote for a candidate if I am not even aware of their existence. In short, I cannot vote for a candidate based on their personal leadership if I have no knowledge of their person (I can vote for the brand, but not for the candidate).

Secondly, the candidate's proximity to the electorate, which operates at three different levels of personal leadership:

- Personal: Limited to the most immediate aspect, the initial image (“He is young”, “he is good people”) which may be accompanied by basic knowledge or experience with the leader (having attended the same school, having mutual friends, having chatted on occasion, etc.).
- Political: This is the subsequent stage of closeness associated with the leader's attention to other people's personal issues (“He listens to you”, “he cares”, “he tries to solve your problem”). It does not reach the level of management but rather the ability to address specific issues or problems requiring a timely response.
- Perceived improvement: This emerges in the discourse on the political leader when their performance positively influences perceived improvements in the

municipality, and the leader is held responsible for this achievement.

The research has delved into the personalization of the vote in municipal elections, identifying the variables that influence the decision-making process of the local vote beyond the candidate. It has also explored the multidimensionality of these variables from the perspective of local elections, a task of particular interest given the recently concluded municipal elections in 2019, which allows for the empirical validation of the presented findings. This task has been accomplished through the application of quantitative methodologies to verify the hypotheses outlined here.

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