Local media and the "political brand": Candidates attributes portrayed on local media and their consequences on public perceptions

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ABSTRACT: Mass media portraits are key factors for a candidate running for local and regional elections, where low name recognition demands mass media coverage in order to build his "political brand." Attribute agenda-setting effects are more usual in these circumstances where media focus on certain candidate aspects could play a key role in the social learning of political candidates. This paper focuses on the role of local media in setting the "political brand" of two main candidates during 2007 regional elections in Murcia (Spain) underlining either emotional aspects for a more "human" candidate or professional aspects, trying to see the relevance of media content analysis (print and broadcasting) on public opinion, by using a survey ($N = 818$) conducted during the campaign.

KEYWORDS: personalization, political brand, electoral campaigns, attribute agenda-setting, local media

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PERSONALIZATION TREND AND THE POLITICAL BRAND

In a broad sense, personalization of politics refers to a development in which political leaders become the main anchor of interpretations and evaluations in the political process (Holtz-Bacha *et al.*, 1998, p. 241). This means that personalization can refer, firstly, to a stronger concentration on candidates instead of parties or other institutions (*personal setting* rather than *institutional setting*), but, secondly, the personalization trend can also underline that it is not only persons *per se*, but it is their personal, non-political characteristics that become more relevant (*human* or *non-political personality* traits rather than *professional traits*).

Some scholars have pointed out that besides the end of partisan and social identities the other explanation for the personalization trend is the television implementation as the main political information source (Shmitt and Ohr, 2000). The visual character of television and its picture-oriented style of presentation increase personality frame, rather than abstract ideas or programs, so that electoral campaigns

have definitively focused on candidates as political leaders (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Keeter, 1987). Media, and specially television, portray not only persons, but their personality traits; their non-political or even private lives become the focus of attention. In this situation then "aspects of credibility and the humanization of politicians seem more important than e.g. the professional capability of a politician" (Sarcinelli, 1999).

By focusing on candidates, instead of issues or political programs, a debate around the process of political personalization claims that political personalization, at least from a normative perspective, has negative consequences for democracy, because the complexity of political processes is reduced to achievements and standpoints of individual politicians, instead of a reinforcement of rational opinion-building and decision-making (see e.g. Kaase, 1994; Holtz-Bacha *et al.*, 1998; Keeter, 1987) by seducing people to make superficial judgements based on candidates' styles and looks, pointing to votes "on feeling" (Keeter, 1987, p. 356).

This study underlines the effect of personalization phenomenon on electoral campaigns taking into account Holtz-Bacha *et al.* (1998) suggestions about the political communication research areas which are subject of studies on personalization: personalization of election campaigns strategies, personalization of media reporting and personalization of voting-behaviour.

When personalization is considered related the communication strategies focusing on the candidates, the political brand becomes a crucial aspect because the candidate turns into a product that needs to be sold to the citizens as relatively independent of their parties (Brettschneider and Gabriel, 2002). In the context of media's reporting research, the personalization phenomenon implies that media also increase their attention for candidates compared to the attention for political parties, and that political candidates are increasingly portrayed in light of their personality traits compared to their issue positions. Finally, related voters behaviour, the personalization would include a more and more importance of candidate aspects in the voting decision rather than issue aspects (Fuchs and Kühnel, 1994).

Under these parameters, candidate brand is, finally, the result of a participative process among spin doctor efforts for branding definition, the mediation process which affects that political brand, and its perceived image among citizenship. As Losada (2009) suggests, there is a part who define the political brand identity (spin doctors), but there is another part (media and receivers) that interpret the final sense of the brand (Losada, 2009).

Reviewing the literature related to the candidate brand building process, we found that communication scholars have tried to explain the political image building process usually assuming that there are four or at least five categories that work as attributes of a political candidate image, represent "substantive" aspects of the candidate's image, mainly pointing to personal qualifications and character: competence, charisma, reliability, personality, leadership, etc.

In Table 1 there are listed some results of the empirical research conducted in different contexts, on the political personalization and its public perceptions, where the set of main candidate traits is also shown. Most of these studies have used a similar methodology consisting in factor analysis where some grouped procedure is included. However, public responses were derived, in some cases, from a closed standard set of attributes or, in others, from an open questions survey of some candidates images. For that reason, there is no coincidence in the number and type of attributes that define the political brand.

Table 1. Empirical studies dealing with the political personalization and its public perceptions

Authors	Set of attributes
Miller & Miller (1976)	1. Competence 2. Trust 3. Responsibility 4. Leadership 5. Appearance and sociodemographics
Nimmo & Savage (1976)	1. Leadership 2. Integrity 3. Empathy
Kinder *et al.* (1979)	1. Competence 2. Integrity
Markus (1982)	1. Competence 2. Integrity
Kinder (1986)	1. Competence 2. Leadership 3. Integrity 4. Empathy
Miller *et al.* (1986)	1. Competence 2. Integrity 3. Responsibility 4. Charisma 5. Appearance and sociodemographics
Lodge *et al.* (1989)	1. Competence 2. Integrity
McCann (1990)	1. Leadership 2. Competence 3. Integrity 4. Empathy
Stewart & Clarke (1992)	1. Competence 2. Receptivity
Caprara *et al.* (1997, 2002)	1. Energy 2. Sympathy

Tab. 1 – cont.

Funk (1999)	1. Leadership/Competence 2. Integrity 3. Empathy
Pancer *et al.* (1999)	1. Charisma 2. Competence 3. Integrity
Brettschneider & Gabriel (2002)	1. Competence to solve problems (issues) 2. Leadership 3. Personal attractiveness 4. Integrity
Caprara *et al.* (2002)	1. Energy 2. Sympathy
Newman (2003)	1. Competence 2. Integrity
Ohr & Oscarsson (2003)	1. Competence 2. Leadership 3. Honesty 4. Empathy
Clarke *et al.* (2004)	1. Competence 2. Receptivity

Source: Rico (2009).

Due to that multidimensional character of the political brand definition, a relevant question related is how we can group the set of substantive attributes that are more relevant in the political brand building process. In that sense, Brettschneider and Gabriel (2002) have stressed that it is actually complicated to distinguish between political and non-political traits. They suggest that the criteria could be operationalized on a continuum with two opposite endpoints: *performance-related* features (like leadership qualities and professional/problem-solving competences) and *appearance and family* circumstances. In fact, the distinction between *political* and *personality* traits does not work in practice because, by one hand, personality attributes evaluation is not independent of political considerations and, at the same time, personality attributes have political consequences.

Canel (2006) differentiates the image of an electoral candidate under *biographical* features, *personal* characteristics, *professional* qualifications, *ideological* stands and *communication* skills. Taken together, she underlines that the political image is projected which appeals both to *emotional* aspects or elements demonstrating a more "human" candidate, as with those *social* elements which help to establish a connection with voters, in addition to *professional* features which a candidate shows himself as able and intelligent to assume power.

These categories have also been considered for analyzing media influence on some political candidate's attributes salience. From a methodological perspective,

most of the above studies, even focused on the main candidate's substantive aspects that build the political brand, do not pay too much attention to citizen responses – expressed in their own terms – about which attributes really define a political leader brand. By contrast, researchers have usually used a proposed and closed set of precoded attributes derived from a confirmatory factor analysis, but sometimes highly far away from citizens political brand perceptions. In order to extend the intuitive analysis of the political brand, more implication from citizen responses should be considered.

All these differentiations among the political brand components, however, are quite difficult to be distinguished in practice. In some way, the context and other ideosincratic aspects are key factors for understanding the type of attributes that are, finally, more relevant for the candidate evaluation. Mass media information flow offers, in each particular context, the more accessible traits to evaluate a candidate (Zaller, 1992), so that the relevance or influence of some attributes among others depends more on a question of media salience or visibility, as Agenda-Setting theory suggests.

LOCAL MEDIA SETTING THE AGENDA OF ATTRIBUTES

The concept of agenda-setting has been widely adopted from nearly forty years as one of the most promising approaches to explain media effects. Agenda-Setting theory suggests that media coverage sets the public agenda by making certain issues and not others salient (for a discussion of the evolution of this theory, see McCombs, 2005).

Because agenda-setting works by increasing media salience, it is related to another cognitive media effect – priming – which refers to "change in the standards that people use to make political evaluations" (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p. 63). The priming hypothesis states that (much like agenda-setting) mass media make some issues more salient than others, and that this heightened salience influences the public's judgments of public policy, public officials, and candidates for public office (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). The integration of priming and classical agenda-setting has led researchers to develop a two-level theory of agenda-setting. This new development of agenda-setting encompasses not only the transfer of an issue but also the transfer of an attribute of a certain issue/object from one agenda to another; these are called the second-level or attribute agenda-setting effects (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001; McCombs, 1994) which have been recently examined.

The attribute-agenda setting explanations, as an extension of priming effect, can help to understand the political brand building process, pointing to the fact that, after the strategic definition of a political brand, how mass media underline certain candidate attributes making them more salience affect public perceptions of that candidate, as many empirical studies of attribute agenda-setting effects have shown

(Takeshita and Shunji, 1995; Bryan, 1997; McCombs, Llamas, López-Escobar and Rey, 1997).

As McCombs explains, attribute agenda-setting is "the influence of the descriptions in the press on the public's image of the candidate" (McCombs, 2005), considering that an attribute is "a generic term encompassing the entire range of properties and traits that characterize an object" (McCombs, 2004). Among those attributes, McCombs distinguishes between micro- (lower level traits) and macro-attributes (set of micro-attributes), where the concept of frame refers only to the macro-level of the attributes, because "frames are organizing principles incorporating and emphasizing certain lower level attributes serve as efficient bundling device of micro-attributes and, in turn, can be thought of as macro-attribute" (McCombs, 2005).

The political brand building process, from this point of view, should rest on micro-level attributes, considering that we refer to those singular or particular candidate's traits – like personal characteristics or professional qualifications – that are highly underlined in the media and, as the attribute agenda-setting shows, "provide an agenda of attributes from which voters' images of the candidates are formed" (Weaver *et al.*, 1981, p. 162).

Agenda-setting effects, specially on the second level of the theory (attributes setting), are more usual in local contexts where how media portrayed candidates, based on certain attributes of traits, could play a key role in the social learning of images of political candidates. In fact, candidates in local contexts suffer from low name recognition unless they receive media coverage, so that they depend on regional and local media for building their own "political brand." In the attribute agenda-setting literature, cultural aspects are more and more important in order to explain public opinion formation. Taking into account those cultural aspects to measure media influence there exist different agenda-setting studies dealing with the local level (Takeshita and Shunji, 1995; McCombs, Llamas, López-Escobar and Rey, 1997; McCombs, López-Escobar, Llamas, 2000). Most of these Spanish studies found attribute agenda-setting effects on candidate public images considering "the match between the media agenda and the public agenda increased monotonically with greater exposure to political information, both in the press and the television" (McCombs, 2004). For affective descriptions of the candidates "the match between affective descriptions of the news media is also significant in all case but not in the case of making no use of political information in the media" (McCombs, 2004).

In this study we part from these findings trying to apply it to the political branding process, paying attention to that "substantive" dimension, where the media selection of some attributes has cognitive media effects on how people evaluated the political candidates, appealing to *emotional* traits demonstrating a more "human" candidate or to *professional* features, which candidates show themselves as able and intelligent to assume power.

HYPOTHESES

In order to examine whether the mass media attribute agenda of a political candidate will be associated with the public attribute agenda we set the following hypotheses, corresponding to the attribute agenda-setting hypotheses:

(H1) The degree of emphasis placed on certain attributes of an issue (or subject/candidate in our case) in the news influences the priority accorded these attributes among the public.

(H2a) The media's agenda for positive attributes of a given candidate will be associated with the public's agenda of positive attributes.

(H2b) The media's agenda for negative attributes of a given candidate will be associated with the public's agenda of negative attributes.

Besides analysing the role of local media in setting the "political brand" of each candidate, in this paper we also want to measure what type of frame containing a group of attributes – personality or political frame – was more salient in the media and in public's mind.

(H3a) We assume that public opinion mostly uses more emotional than rational terms for candidate description (then, using more personality attributes), so that,

(H3b) when mass media portray a candidate description in more rational terms (then, using more rational attributes like professional or political attributes), the attribute agenda-setting effect is not so evident.

METHOD

To replicate the findings about the attribute agenda-setting in an election context, an extensive study, combining telephone survey, focus group and content analysis, was conducted during the 2007 regional elections in Murcia Region (Spain). In those elections, only two parties had genuine chances to form the regional government: the conservative Popular Party (PP), headed by the current regional president, Ramón Luis Valcárcel, and the Socialist Party, led by the leader of the regional opposition, Pedro Saura.

Focus group

The suggested methodology was presented in two different phases. Firstly, we used an exploratory focus group in order to obtain opinions from a group of citizens about their own definitions of electoral candidates running for that elections campaign. In this way, by using this method we attempted to overcome some operational limitations (shown in the theoretical part) when the process of categorization or candidates attributes that composed the political brand, based

on that substantive dimension of the political image, was suggested by the researcher, instead of to create a catalogue that would respond perfectly to voters' reasoning.

Starting from these considerations, we obtained a set of categories, that were grouped in two frames for the political brand building process: the *emotional* frame, which includes attributes demonstrating a more "human" candidate, with social values, and the *professional* frame, under which a candidate shows himself as able, prepared and with the necessary background and resources to assume power.

Table 2. List of categories/attributes

Personality frame	Professional frame
Physical aspect: Candidates' physical appearance or the subjective evaluation that was meant for them.	**Ability to deliver promises:** The attributes which define the candidate ability to clearly transmit a message and identity to the public are included here.
Integrity: All associations with candidates' ethical and moral matters, as well as the trust or mistrust which they may provoke in the public.	**Coherence and compromise:** The candidate fulfils promises, is faithful to ideals and therefore shows responsibility and seriousness. Otherwise, they will appear as opportunists with no true or important ideals.
Communication skills: Candidates' oratory, language and clear and convincing expression, creation of clear and efficient speeches or the correct use of expressive resources.	**Ambition, fight:** Work capacity. Otherwise, the candidate will appear as a lazy politician, with no energy, weak in opinions and lacking ability to confront the problems and demands of society or his own party.
Politics/Ideology: Associations with political and/or ideological evaluations of the candidate, assessments of political affiliation.	**Competence:** Candidate's knowledge in order to carry out work as a public administrator: education and training, ideas, job skills, good politician, good administrator.
Territorial adhesion: Candidates' bond with the region, the connection with the "community values and goals" as a plus with voters.	**Head of a team:** The ability of a candidate to surround himself with the proper group of collaborators.
Likeability: The fact of delivering a "good" or "bad" impression, consciously or not.	**Efficiency:** The candidate will be judged on ability to get the job done and even by knowing what he wants, otherwise if he does not produce results he will be seen as incompetent.
	Political experience: Everything which values the candidates' experience in positions of responsibility (Government or Opposition…) or inexperience, and therefore any naïvety which may be linked to that.

Source: author's elaboration.

Content analysis

Following the focus group impressions, a media content analysis was conducted for all news dealing with coverage of the two candidates running for regional presidency, during the two weeks of the official campaign (between the 14th and the 26th of May 2007). The universe of newspaper news (excluding opinion articles, editorials and letters to the editor) was 224 news articles coming from the two main regional newspapers: *La Verdad* (30,000) and *La Opinion* (10,000). For the television, a total 173 news items were selected from all the five regional broadcasting companies in Murcia: TVE (public), Television Murcia (private), Canal 6 (private), Popular TV (private) and 7 Region de Murcia (public).

Four coders who were graduate journalism students identified and coded every assertion about the two candidates, which appeared in newspaper articles and television news during this period of nearly two weeks. The inter-coder reliability reached .86.

Overall, the codebook specified the list of 13 different substantive attributes concerning each of the candidates included in our study, where affective aspects (item tone) about how the candidate was presented in the news (positive, negative or neutral) were also registered. Other questions related to the main topic associated with each attribute were even included.

Telephone survey

In order to measure public opinion responses, we carried out – using a technique – a regional opinion ($N = 818$) during the same two weeks prior to elections. To carry out the survey we created a questionnaire made up of 23 questions, asked by telephone to a representative sample of citizens in the Region of Murcia with a margin of error of $E = +/-3.5\%$ and a trust level of 95.2%. Phone numbers were selected using systematic random sampling from the most recent regional phone directory, and the respondent household selection was randomly determined by asking the next person whose birthday was coming next.

In this study, we considered opinions given about two aspects that work as dependent variables of our study. For the substantive dimension, we ask respondents to define political leaders (*If you have a friend that doesn't know "candidate X," what would you tell him about "candidate X"?*). The answers were coded following our set of attributes (see Table 2). For the affective tone, the respondents' position on an extra variable was derived from their own answer tone given to each candidate description.

As independent variables, we considered social demographics (profession, age, sex), inertial traits (ideology), media consumption (exposure), environmental opinions (assessment of the political and economic situations) and motivational views (trust in politicians, involvement, etc.).

All the data from the media content analysis and the public opinion survey were included in a join data base. Rank-order correlations were used to test the attribute agenda-setting effects in each case.

FINDINGS

Preliminary analysis

Among the 818 respondents to the survey, 50.4% were male and 49.6% female. In terms of age, 39.2% were younger than 34 years old, 33.5% were aged between 35 and 54, and 27.3% were older than 55 years old. Over 63 percent of the respondents had some college degrees.

One of the first pieces of evidence consolidating the results obtained from this study is the more widespread trend of members of the public to show little interest in political matters. In fact, two thirds of the respondents claimed to have low interest in political affairs, which leads us to think that there is a serious problem with the political class in Spain, mainly due to some political scandals cases that have been recently widely represented on media stories.

As regards media consumption, data showed that 45% of the respondents read the newspapers at least two or three days per week, while 46.9% follow the television news also more than two or three days per week. Although not too relevant, data showed how Internet use as a political information source is increasing: in particular, within the electoral process, 10.5% of those asked during these elections claimed to use the Internet as an information source.

When the media content was analyzed, firstly, the personalization hypothesis was confirmed, considering that 46% of the news on the candidate was main subject of the print news and, with more evidence, 71.1% were the broadcast news. In concrete, Valcárcel (the candidate running for the re-election) received 42.9% of the print report and the 50.6% of the television content, while Saura (the candidate running for the political change) got a 33.5% of print content and the 34.1% of the television content.

Attribute agenda-setting

Focusing on the attribute agenda-setting, Tables 3 and 4 show main media attributes represented for each candidate. From the list of 13 attributes, we see that those traits more related to political aspects were also those of more salience in the print and television news.

Related the affective tone, both politicians received a highly positive portray, where Valcárcel appeared positive in the 69.8% of the print content and the 53.9% of the television, and Saura did the same in the 75% of the print content and the 53.3% of the television.

Table 3. Main media attributes for **Ramón Luis Valcárcel** (PP)

Print news	TV news
1. Efficiency	1. Efficiency
2. Competence	2. Ambition, fight
3. Ability to deliver promises	3. Integrity/Ability to deliver promises

Source: author's elaboration.

Table 4. Main media attributes for **Pedro Saura** (PSOE)

Print news	TV news
1. Efficiency	1. Head of a team
2. Integrity	2. Ambition, fight
3. Competence	3. Efficiency

Source: author's elaboration.

By contrasting the media attribute agenda with the public attribute agenda, overall, the resulting candidate portraits are (see Tables 5 and 6) in some way different. In fact, those attributes which were more related to the candidate personality (and also more emotional) were more salient in the public agenda than in the media agenda, confirming (H3a) statement.

Table 5. Main public attributes for **Ramón Luis Valcárcel** (PP)

1. Integrity
2. Experience
3. Territorial adhesion

Source: author's elaboration.

Table 6. Main public attributes for **Pedro Saura** (PSOE)

1. Ideology
2. Sympathy
3. Integrity

Source: author's elaboration.

When we focused on the affective tone in the public agenda, by contrast, only Valcárcel received highly positive evaluation (62.8%) while Saura was evaluated mostly in negative terms (35.2%).

In order to analyze the attribute agenda-setting effect, rank-order correlations of Spearman's between substantive media agendas and the aggregate public agenda were calculated with the 13 attributes listed in Table 2. At the same time, media

evaluations of each candidate (positive, negative or neutral) were also correlated with public evaluations. As shown in Table 7, correlations for the two public agendas were calculated separately. Correlations were also calculated for each candidate – Valcárcel and Saura.

Table 7. Spearman's correlation between media attribute agenda and public attribute agenda for each candidate*

	Substantive		Affective	
	Print content	TV content	Print content	TV content
Valcárcel (PP)	(sig .14) −.05	(sig .14) .05	(sig .48) −.02	(sig .42) .02
Saura (PSOE)	(sig .99) .00	(sig .60) −.02	(sig .44) .03	(sig .36) .03

* Significant correlations ($p < .05$).
Source: author's elaboration.

As Table 7 shows, insignificant correlations ($p < .05$), neither substantive nor affective, were found after the statistical analysis, so that we could not confirm our hypotheses (H1, H2a, H2b). A possible explanation for these results pointing to a lack of correlations between media and public can rest on the H3b hypothesis, which is indeed confirmed, underlining that when mass media portray a candidate description in more rational terms, using more rational attributes like professional or political attributes, competence, etc., as in our study, the attribute agenda-setting effect is not so evident, because public opinion mostly builds its candidates image based on more emotional or personality traits.

CONCLUSIONS

Our aim with this work was to study the political brand building process based on certain variables through which citizens define political candidates. By using the Electoral Campaign in the Region of Murcia held in May 2007 as a case study, we tried to find a system of categories based not on previous research or the opinions of researchers, but on the real opinions of citizens, attempting to create a group of attributes that were bottom-up. Our research allowed us to find 13 attributes grouped into two frames: professional/political frame and personality frame.

A media content analysis (print and television) was conducted in order to see the relevance and salience of these attributes in the news. At the same time, a public opinion poll was also conducted for the same goal. To examine the second level of agenda-setting proposition different statistical analyses were conducted. However, insignificant correlations were found between media and public agenda.

Although the personalization phenomenon was clear, the role of local media in setting the "political brand" of each candidate was not so clear. In the cases where local media make professional or political traits more salient than personality traits,

agenda-setting effects result less evident. A possible explanation is the fact that citizens mostly build their candidates image based on more emotional or personality traits. Besides, in the local context there are other factors that can influence the political brand building process, like the interpersonal communication, the personal experience, etc. that can also play an important role as main political image sources.

Future research should be done in order to replicate these findings in other circumstances, like, for example, cases in which local media portray not such a professional picture of the candidates and, instead, show a more personality view. At the same time, from a methodological point of view, the empirical design including till 13 attributes can be too exhaustive for finding significant correlation between media and public agenda. May be a further confirmatory factor analysis should help to detect the worthy attributes that match better for our aim while they are still derived from bottom-up gathering methods.

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