The importance of "contextual intelligence" in political leadership audience perception

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Rocío Zamora
UNIVERSITY OF MURCIA, SPAIN

José Carlos Losada
UNIVERSITY OF MURCIA, SPAIN

ABSTRACT: This article empirically measures the role of "contextual intelligence" (Nye, 2008) to evaluate effective political leadership based on intuitive factors dealing with political situations over time. This study includes a case study that analyzes the importance of the use of contextual intelligence related to the leadership of the president of the Murcia region (Spain), Ramón Luis Valcárcel, one of the most popular presidents who served as a Spanish regional leader for the longest amount of time. Data were gathered from three representative surveys conducted in three consecutive regional election campaigns (2003, 2007, 2011) to measure the extent to which Valcarcel's leadership public perceptions were associated with his strategic link to specific issues and attributes. Results showed correlations between his public image and perceptions about public prioritized issues each time and attributes connected with citizen expectations demonstrating the effectiveness of the contextual factors for constructing political leadership along time.

KEYWORDS: political leadership, contextual intelligence, priming, public opinion, local elections, political communication

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INTRODUCTION: THE STRATEGIC CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Political leadership studies have paid little attention to the exogenous variables of the leader, such as social political context (Rico, 2005, 2009; Canel, 2006; Yukl, 1999; Miller et al., 1986). In fact, contemporary political context is more and more characterized by the preponderance of personal aspects against organizational or ideological ones, in favour of a permanent effort by building strong leaderships inside parties. Theories of transformational and charismatic leadership provide important insights about the nature of effective leadership. However, there is open debate among scholars about their capacity to explain effective leadership (Yukl, 1999).

A good number of scholars have discussed that Spanish political communication is more focused on personification than institutional strategies (Losada, 2005;

Canel, 2007; Zamora et al., 2009). In this sense, candidates have managed to marginalize the remainder of present actors in political settings, especially ideology and in good measure, their own political parties.

In this way, the leader is becoming the unique internal reference for militants and supporters of the political organization. Once the leader is confirmed, he or she becomes the fundamental axe around which the modern political communication is developed, embodying the vision that he or she is capable of mobilizing the militants of achieving followers and in the end, of obtaining votes. That is to say, one is a leader only in the measure in which others value them (Rico, 2005).

It is not possible to separate (more than in artificial form) the construction of the leadership or its assimilation in the shape of citizens' public perceptions. They are both parts of the same process and it is not possible to understand them individually. The perception that citizens have of a specific political leader depends on factors (controlled or not) that guides that leader (and the party that is supporting him). Yet, that same leader tries to handle elements within his/her reach to bring back the situation towards the most favorable image held by the citizens.

There have been many authors, from concrete empirical studies, that have tried to create a series of categories that have helped to recognize the attributes valued in a political leader. These studies operate from the premise that an exhaustive list of categories exists or attributes that function like settings that can be utilized to project a determined visibility of the candidate on the part of the citizens' responsibility for evaluating it (Avolio, Gardner, 2005; Canel, 2006; Miller et al., 1986).

In this sense, the connection between construction and reception around these attributes is fundamental, since it would make no sense to undertake a voluntary strategy to try to be positioned unfavorably in citizens' minds. Because of this, the main step is recognizing which can be the fundamental dimensions for the receivers of political information, because it is possible to build a prominent public image and a clear leadership only from the knowledge of its demands and sensibilities.

In this way, citizen knowledge should be the starting point in creating a closed catalogue from their associations that characterize a political leader. That is to say that the same citizens are responsible for determining exactly which are the human, professional, rational or emotional categories which they consider valuable for recognizing political leaders.

The research carried out to date, on the nature and number of attributes that characterize the political image of the political leader, nevertheless has omitted the lack of existing tuning in this type of work. Rico (2005, p. 6) claims that, "inevitable utilization of labels with different possible readings to define the factors supposes an additional bond at the precise moment of general conclusions from the works published." At any rate, there exist a good number of consolidated empirical references that summarize the different approaches of the study to the figure of the political leadership. Through the proposal of a system of categories,

they try to classify the way in which citizens value their politicians. Some of the most important dimensions in the perception of political leader personality are mentioned in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions in the perception of political leaders' personality

Author(s)	Dimensions
Miller and Miller (1976)	Competence Confidence Responsibility Leadership Appearance and socio-demographic characteristics
Kinder et al. (1979)	Competence Integrity Idiosyncratic
Markus (1982)	Competence Integrity
Kinder (1986)	Competence Leadership Integrity Empathy
Miller et al. (1986)	Competence Integrity Reliability Charisma Appearance and socio-demographic characteristics
Lodge et al. (1989)	Competence Integrity
Stewart, Clarke (1993)	Competence Responsiveness
Caprara et al. (1997)	Energy/Responsiveness Honesty/Trustworthiness
Funk (1999)	Leadership Integrity Empathy
Pancer et al. (1999)	Charisma Competence Integrity
Brettschneider and Gabriel (2002)	Competence to resolve problems (issues) Leadership Personal attraction Integrity
Caprara et al. (2002)	Energy Friendliness
Newman (2003)	Competence Integrity

Ohr and Pscarsson (2003)	Competence Leadership Trustworthiness Empathy
Clarke et al. (2004)	Competence Responsiveness
Nye (2008)	Emotional intelligence Capacity of communication Capacity of vision Organizational ability Machiavellian political ability Contextual intelligence
Zamora et al. (2009)	Ambition, ability to fight Physical aspect Capacity to reach goals Coherence Competence Credibility and trustworthiness Oratory Efficacy Good team Political experience Ideology Friendliness Territorialism

Source: Rico (2005) and own considerations.

By considering all of these classifications we can deduce two general ideas. On the one hand, a good part of the authors do not distinguish among professional aspects (capacities) and the personal aspects (values) of the leader, as well as among rational (arguments) and emotional (feelings) in the appraisal of political leaders.

Besides, it should be noticed the scarce reference to contextual and environmental (or situational) variables in the appraisal of the leader. In the systems of categories shown above, scarce references to the consideration of external variables exist, like essential elements in the appraisal of the political leader. We are referring to the no personal variables, that is to say, contextual or environmental, that can have some influence on public judgments.

In this way, political or economic environment perception can be crucial for evaluating political leaders, and will become key elements from which an appraisal of a political leader will be emitted — especially when the leader has been responsible for its management. In part, the idea of including this contextual aspect among the qualities for evaluating a political leader was already firstly observed by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) and has been recently more developed (Scheufele, Scheufele, 2012).

The founders of the priming theory proposed the hypothesis of the activation or priming. Both authors set the importance of the context or political environment

perceptions to measure public judgements priorities. In fact, as priming theory suggests, the extent to which mass media offered greater attention and media coverage to a concrete matter that defines the socio-political context, which allows citizens to prior evaluate a political leader from their actions.

There are a few scholars who have pointed to the importance for a political leader to be empathetic with the political context or situation (Kinder, 1986; Funk, 1999; Ohr, Pscarsson, 2003). In this sense, political empathy can serve as an attribute or indicator which can be a key factor for citizens to feel listened to by a political leader, so that it shows him or her to be worried about people and by extension, of those that will be the beneficiaries of their politics (Page, 1978).

More recently, Nye (2008) has suggested what he calls "contextual intelligence" applied to political leaders. Although this term originates from international relations, its identification with the intuitive capacity of diagnosis that helps a leader to fit in tactics with intelligent objectives, and to produce strategies in different situations allow us to also apply it to political leadership theory. Thus, any leader who wants to be recognized should be capable of making a good judgment of the moment or political situation around him and to adapt his strategies to public problems and corresponding solution expected by citizens. In Nye's words:

> […] Leaders with contextual intelligence have the capacity to offer a meaning or to set a route defining the problem to which is faced the group. They understand the tension among the different values that impact in a question and they know to find the equilibrium between the desirable thing and the feasible thing (2008: 102).

CONTEXTUAL INTELLIGENCE AS A QUALITY TO ESTABLISH A SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The existence of "contextual intelligence," as an important attribute for an effective political leadership, forces us to rethink in a different perspective to interpret this phenomenon. Thus, an approximation exists to understand political leadership in an intrinsic, personal way. That is to say that the leader is capable of being associated inside some of the personal aspects that citizens value more positively in a politician. In fact, the focus of most scholars' contributions have been based on "personal characteristics" of political leadership, which is based on the idea that an individual will only become the leader from their personal or charismatic attributes and not for any other reasons (Kinder, 1986).

But there is a second way to contemplate leadership: from an external point of view. This is what Rico (2009, p. 112) calls "situational leadership," defined as "the perspective that denies the existence of innate qualities or specifics behaviours that assure the success of leadership (conductible perspective) and that will advance these changes according to the situation." To what he adds […] "these situational factors are related, mostly, with current aspects of the social, political, and economic setting in which the leader unfolds his actions."

Other related authors, such as Nye (2008) consider this orientation as one of the fundamental elements to understanding the way in which political leaders are evaluated by their citizens. From his point of view, the perception of the social, economic or political context has a direct influence on public opinion and, specially, on voters' judgement of their leaders. Nye recalls (2008) that the contextual influence works in two different ways. First, context includes a leader's ability to identify social tendencies and to adjust their tactics and leadership style to them. Second, context or environment can influence in the way in which particular attributes associated to the leader can be perceived differently as social tendencies change. That is to say, citizens modify their public perceptions by considering the prominent attributes of the leader, according to the social and political context changes.

For a complete and adequate approach of political leadership, two dimensions should be recognized. First, the subjective dimension of political leadership has as much to do with the capacities of the leader as an individual. Second, the objective dimension of this phenomenon refers to its linking with the reality that surrounds him, with specific and concrete problems or needs. Thus, consistency among both dimensions — capacities of the leader and conditions of the environment in which political decisions and actions are developed — will be a determinant to consecrate a permanent leadership across time.

The evaluation of political leadership depends on both dimensions. The current study presents a case study of the effects on the construction of political leadership in such a way that political leadership evaluation is not limited to specific personal or behavioral leader aspects. Rather, political leadership is evaluated in relation to social and political events in which the leader is inevitably immersed. Our task will be to empirically measure to what extent both aspects can explain voter perceptions of the political leader on who we projected our case study: the president of the Murcia Region, Ramón Luis Valcárcel.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological design of this research was based on a case study, in which the evolution of the political leadership of the president of the region of Murcia, Ramón Luis Valcárcel, was the main object of research. The reason to choose this politician in particular, besides his public recognition in the regional context (as one of the main conservative Partido Popular regional leaders) and his high responsibility in Europe (since 2012, president of the Commitee of the Regions of the European Union) had to do with his continuance as president of the Autonomous Community of the Region of Murcia (from 1995 to the present). This special circumstance permits us to establish some evolution and comparative results from which to verify the hypothesis presented.

Our empirical design included a sample of public perceptions from Murcian citizens, gathered during eight years of his political commitment. Thus, we have covered the last three regional elections from 2003, 2007 and 2011. For that purpose, we used three different random surveys that took place during the two official weeks of prior electoral campaigns to the regional elections of 2003 (from 12th May to 23rd May 2003), (from 14th May to 25th May 2007) and (from 15th May to 20th May 2011). Each survey included a similar set of closed questions in order to allow possible comparisons among data. We considered that this type of methodological design, based on surveys aggregation, is adequate since our purpose has been to register the pubic judgements on repeated occasions, as well as to examine the evolution of public opinion.

The main objective of this empirical design was to understand to what extent situational or contextual factors could influence the way citizens define the political leader. Thus, in this work, two basic questions have been used to explain public perceptions and this would constitute the two dependent variables of our study. First, we measured the *popularity* that Valcárcel reached among voters in each time of analysis, a question that was measured based on the quantitative popular support that he received from the citizenship (formulated in a scale of 0–10 (0 being very low and 10 very high) — tell me what scoring you would give Ramón Luis Valcárcel). Second, we have measured political leadership in a more qualitative term, based on the *main attributes* that voters used to define or to identify this political leader when they were asked openly in the following form: "If you had a friend who does not know Ramón Luis Valcárcel, how would you define him?"

In parallel, we also identified a set of explanatory factors or independent variables from which it could be useful to observe significant differences: gender, age, level of studies finished, professional situation, ideology and intention to vote.

As we pointed out, the hypothesis that supports this work was that the contextual or situational factors of each electoral campaign (based on some particular campaign issue or political fact) had a direct influence on political leader public judgements (affecting both components: his popularity and his public characterization) beyond the own personal attributes of the candidate. Thus, we expect that citizens' priorities with specific issues form the social, political and economic context which each time will be indispensable to understand the way in which they perceive the political leader and therefore, the way in which they define their leadership.

Once the data were gathered and computerized, we proceeded with the statistical processing with statistic software program SPSS Statistics 17.0. The analysis carried out included analysis of simple frequencies, as well as crosstabs, to measure the relation among different variables of a categorical nature, and we used the statistical chi-square to verify its degree of statistical meaning.

The main results of the empirical study are shown below. Firstly, paying attention to the evolution of the public perceptions related issues priorities of each campaign. Then, measuring Valcárcel's public judgements across time, based on popularity associated to the candidate and perceived political attributes.

FINDINGS

Evolution of the public perceptions related issues salience: From the "Water problem" as a priority to the "Economic Crisis."

The evolution of Ramón Luis Valcárcel's public image and his growth as political leader cannot be understood without paying attention to the specific circumstances that have defined each of the five legislatures in which he has been at the head of the Region of Murcia government.

Among the peculiarities that can characterize these political periods, in terms of thematic priorities, Valcarcel's political speeches have been mostly linked to explanations, arguments and proposals around the water problem. His strategic association with this priority issue managed to generate a priming effect (Iyengar, Kinder, 1987) that fortified his identification with a "fighter man," worried about the main problem of his territory (Zamora, 2010; Zamora, Ruiz, 2010). Thus, for many political and media analysts, this association with the Water problem across time has been, without doubt, the main reason for his electoral success.

Since his first (1995–1999) and second legislature (1999–2003), the water problem has been present as a political priority in his political speech, adapted to the socio-political context of that moment. He maintained a position that will become a common denominator in the following legislatures: his bet on the water transfer measures, from rich-water regions to poor-water regions, in order to bring about a final solution to the water shortages that characterize the driest regions of Spain. In this way, he positioned against other alternative solutions to the water problem, like desalination plants. As can be shown in Figure 1, when citizens were asked for the most important problem in the region, the water problem was also at the top of the ranking in the public agenda. It was specially associated with the "Valcarcismo," or the time this politician occupied the presidency of the Region of Murcia since 1995.

On his way to the third legislature (2003–2007), Ramón Luis Valcárcel presented his candidacy to the regional elections with the firm purpose of maintaining and/or expanding the majority of votes. As main guarantees, he was able to rely on excellent economic results — the unemployment figure was the lowest in the Region of Murcia's history — important projects of development like the international airport and the water transfer from the Ebro river, and the endorsement of the national direction of his party, Popular Party (in fact, José María Aznar had recently become President of Spain at that time). In terms of priorities of issues, the water shortage

continued to be the main problem, and the National Hydrologic Plan, designed by the central government of the Popular Party, the most viable solution. At that time, the transfer from the Ebro river received the endorsement from the central government of José María Aznar, but it was still necessary to wait for financial assistance from the European Union.

The prominence of political speech on the water problem during the 2003 electoral campaign, highly covered on print regional dairies, also penetrated into the public agenda, as Figure 1 shows. In fact, more than half of the individuals (50.5%) identified the water problem as the main regional problem, whereas fewer respondents identified problems such as unemployment (11.7%) or housing (dwelling) problem (4%).
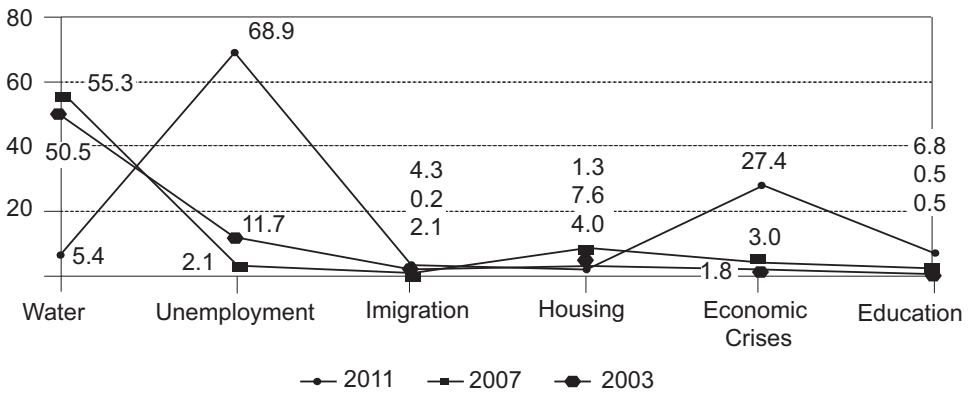

Figure 1. The main problems according to public perception in the Murcia Region (in %)
Source: research data.

The electoral results gave victory once again for the Popular Party and the "Valcarcismo" (56.3% of the votes) with a simple majority. Ramón Luis Valcárcel became the second political leader most voted in the Spanish state, only behind José Bono, who obtained 57.86% of the votes in the Castilla La Mancha community.

At the beginning of this third legislature an electoral turnout was produced at the national level in Spain, due to the victory of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), with José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero as main political leader, during the polemic general elections of March of 2004 and just a few days after the Madrid Bombing attack and their consequences on social protests (Zamora, 2006).

From this moment, a new phase of change began when Rodríguez Zapatero promised not to carry out the water transfer from the Ebro to poor-water regions. In fact, the revocation of the National Hydrologic Plan was considered as an "external attack" to the Murcia Region's interests, which caused a "rally round the flag" effect on Valcárcel's leadership.

The strategy of the Murcian socialist party (PSOE-RM) was adjusted to erode regional Government credibility and to defeat the Popular Party, pointing to diverse political corruption cases that were linked to this party, and especially its leader. All this caused a substantial attitude change towards Ramón Luis Valcárcel. Valcárcel refused the national decisions affecting the water problem solutions (most related to the desalination in detriment of the water transfers) and defended corruption accusations coming from the Murcian socialist party.

In this context, Ramón Luis Valcárcel was presented for re-election in the 2007 regional elections, attempting to reach his fourth legislature (2007–2011). Once more, he tried to sell himself as the great defender of the water transfer, and had some economic indicators in his favour. His political speech on the water battle and especially on the water solutions penetrated again to the electorate, occupying a prominence that reduced importance to other public matters like urban development corruption. So that, as observed in Figure 1, during 2007, the problem of water continued to be the most important issue in the public agenda for a majority of individuals (55.7%).

On May 27th 2007, the Popular Party of Murcia renewed the simple majority in the region with 58.49% of the votes. During this fourth legislature, the parliamentary Camera tried to approve a water pact that was not finally carried out, due to differences between the two main political groups. The inclusion inside the agreement for the need of water transfer from the Ebro river to the murcian Segura River caused the main point of failure to make an agreement among all parties.

During the second part of this legislature, Valcárcel's government was forced to make unpopular decisions due to the economic crisis and its consequences on unemployment figures, as well as the problems of the regional public deficit. These decisions were expressed in the "Law of Extraordinary Measures for the Sustainability of Public Finances," which was approved in December 2010, and that entailed drastic cuts for public works.

Inevitably, these measures became key matters during the electoral campaign in May 2011. For the first time during the "valcarcismo" regime, citizens perceived the unemployment rate (68.7%) as the main problem in the Murcia region, followed by economic problems (27.4%). Thus, the water problem was marginalized to one of anecdotal importance (5%), as Figure 1 shows.

In spite of the hardness and intensity of these critical times, with constant social protests on the streets against Valcárcel's cuts policy and the rise of the citizens "indignant" movement of 15M. During the 2011 electoral campaign, Valcárcel again achieved victory, with an even greater margin of voter support (59% of the votes). Once more, the leader of the Popular Party in the Region of Murcia won at the ballot box for a fifth consecutive time (2011–2015) with an overwhelming and historic victory. In fact, that was the major percentage of votes harvested by a political leader at the regional level in Spain, making Ramón Luis Valcárcel the most popular regional president in Spanish political history.

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Evolution of Valcárcel's popularity: Decline of power?

With the intention of knowing the popularity of the president of the Region of Murcia, we used the question: "On a scale of 0–10, 0 being the lowest and 10 the highest, what score would you give to Ramón Luis Valcárcel?" A first descriptive analysis showed some quite acceptable scores, in spite of already having been president for several years. Concretely, in 2003, Valcárcel obtained an average score of 6.78 points on a 0–10 scale, while in 2007 this score decreased slightly to 6.27 points. He even went as low as 6.20 points in 2011, as Figure 2 shows.
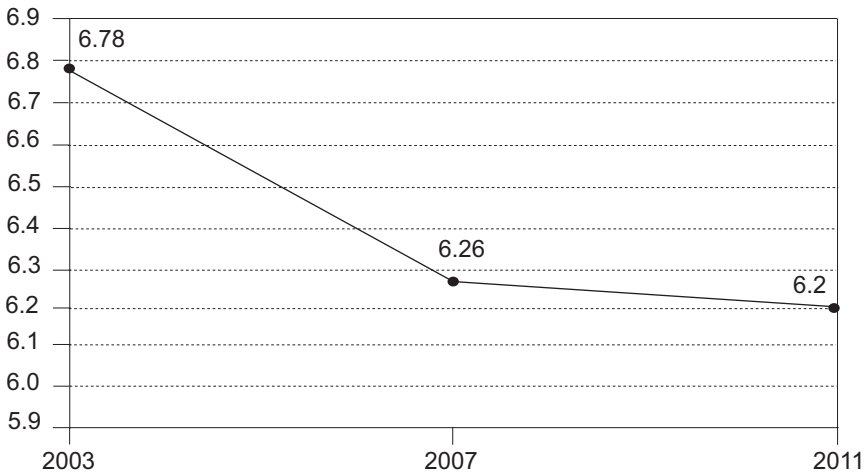

Figure 2. Evolution of Valcárcel's average popularity (scale 0–10)
Source: research data.

Subsequently, an analysis of variance was carried out (ANOVA of one factor) to identify differences in the average popularity in each of the years included in the study, while satisfying the necessary criteria for applying this technique with reliability. Thus, once carried out, the test of homogeneity of variances through the statistic indicator of Levene (2.412), (meaning = 0.090), ANOVA applied a single factor with one that the null hypothesis was rejected. This analysis allowed us to identify certain trends to recognize a slight descent in his popularity when we consider the three moments of measurement. His political weariness or fatigue after such a long time as a political leader can explain this decrease in popularity.

In order to qualify these findings, different segmentation analyses (Classification and Regression Trees or CRT) were carried out for each period. These analyses allowed us to identify if any significant sociological profile exists associated to the president of the Region of Murcia scores. The model included the degree of popularity of Ramón Luis Valcárcel (ordinal) as a dependent variable and different independent variables that were considered (gender, age, education and the professional

situation). Results showed that factors such as professional situation, education level and age were the variables that discriminated in the model corresponding to 2003 data, a similar situation to that obtained from 2007 data (the professional situation, followed by education level and gender). Finally, in 2011, the professional situation resulted again as the most significant factor discrimination, followed by age. All these data underlined the importance of the factor of professional situation in relation to Valcárcel's popularity evaluations. Particularly, when we tried to identify the social profile linked to Valcárcel's evaluations, we could not identify a similar sociological profile in Valcárcel's evaluations across different periods. This indicates that contextual or environmental circumstances were also important in the support that this political leader received through the years.

Evolution of the attributes that characterize Valcárcel's public image

The second task of this empirical analysis has to do with the evolution of his public perceptions based on attributes or associated characteristics linked to his leadership. For this purpose, we took as reference the attributes list that has been recognized in previous research conducted around this regional political leader (Zamora, Losada, 2011). In the three periods of analysis, we included the following question: "If you had a friend who doesn't know Ramón Luis Valcárcel, how would you define him?" Answers obtained in this open question were subsequently codified until completing a closed list of six attributes or characteristics: leadership, honesty, competence, personality, ideology and personality. At the same time, in order to establish the manner of individual judgments, we registered the positive, negative or neutral tone terms from each answer.

As Figure 3 points out, during the first period of analysis, in 2003, Valcárcel's leadership was the main attribute mentioned among respondents (22.7%). In fact, it was perceived mainly as positive (66.3% of cases). In second place, this political leader was characterized by his political competence (21.7%), also perceived as a positive attribute in most cases (68.2%). Thirdly, another noticeable attribute was his personality (14.6% used it to define him) that was considered attractive for the majority (89.0%).

During the 2007 campaign, when Valcárcel already had been consolidated as regional leader after twelve years as head of the region of Murcia government, we found a different characterization. On this occasion, his personality was more noticeable (22.8%), closely followed by his honesty (22.3%). Both attributes were considered mainly in positive terms, although one out of four people who defined Valcárcel in terms of honesty used a negative tone. Explanations for this result could be related to the multiple mediated accusations of political corruption that affected his leadership just before and during the electoral campaign of 2007. Valcárcel's political competence was also often mentioned (16.2%) as an attribute that increased to be considered in negative terms compared to previous elections.
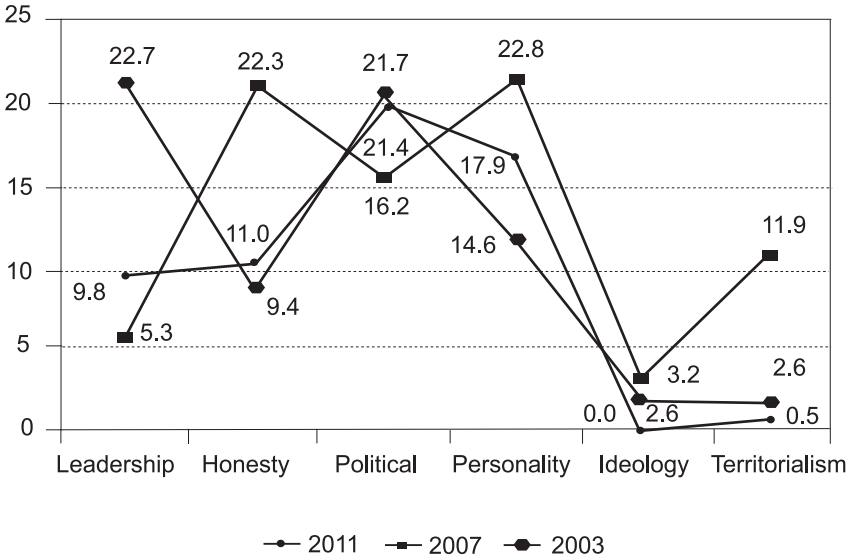
Figure 3. Evolution of the attributes used to define Ramón Luis Valcárcel (in %)

Sources: research data.

Finally, during the 2011 electoral campaign, the most significant attribute that respondents used in relation to this political leader was his competence (21.4%) once again. Although one out of four individuals judged him in negative terms, mostly news coverage was framed in positive terms. To understand this result we take into account the political context of this moment, clearly defined by the unemployment problem and the economic crisis, demanded a capable leader to solve these problems. In second place, his personality (17.9%) was also understood mainly as attractive for almost six in every ten people. Finally, his honesty was also considered (11%).

Furthermore, we used crosstabs to measure the relations between main attributes associated to Valcárcel and the independent variables of our study: gender, age, education, professional situation, ideology and voting intention. We found statistically significant relations in practically all the crossings carried out in each of the three periods, with a few exceptions (which affected the professional situation and gender in 2007).

The results show that men were seen as more suitable than women in the capacity to appreciate Valcárcel's leadership in the 2003 campaign, while women more focused on his competence. These differences were not detected in 2007 and 2011.

In relation to age differences, in 2003, almost all the age segments emphasized his leadership, with the exception of young people. For them, they mostly underlined his competence and personality. In fact, his personality was also mentioned among all age segments during the 2007 campaign, with the exception of the segment

around 55 years old which defined him more in terms of honesty. Furthermore, in 2011 Valcárcel's personality continued being mentioned among young people, although the rest of the groups emphasized his competence to solve problems, due to special circumstances (economic crisis).

Results also showed that in 2003, education influenced public perceptions. Although leadership was the most cited answer, those individuals with low or no studies underlined his personality, and those with some studies pointed to his competence. In 2007, people with a low educational level reported honesty more frequently than his personality. These differences were also projected in 2011 when that same segment focused on his personality instead of his competence.

The professional situation factor also differentiated among respondents' answers related to the main attributes linked to the president of the Murcia region. Thus, during the context of the Water battle in 2003, while retired people, the unemployed, students and housewives mentioned his competence or his personality. Most of the workers, regardless of whether or not they were self-employed, emphasized his political leadership. In 2011, nevertheless, with the change in political circumstances, they all practically underlined the importance of his competence as the main attribute.

One of the most interesting variables to observe differences was political ideology. The most extreme ideological positions, those positioned to the right, emphasized his personality (in this case, framed in positive terms) and those positioned to the left emphasized his competence (in this case, framed in negative terms). However, moderates viewed his leadership as the more noticeable attribute of this politician in 2003. In 2007, his honesty became one of the key characteristics. For extreme positions, evaluations were linked to lack of honesty (left extreme sector) and high considerable competence (extreme right sector). Finally in 2011, greater coincidences were found among all ideological sectors insisting on competence as the more relevant attribute, except for some central positions that underlined his personality.

Finally, another key factor was used to interpret differences in citizen judgements: voting intention. Thus, similar behavior between left wing Socialist Party (PSOE) voters and Izquierda Unida (IU) voters. For both, Valcárcel's competence (in negative terms) was more noticeable in 2003, while his personality was the most important characteristic in 2007 (also in negative terms). Only in 2011 a different answer was found among opposition party voters: personality was more noticeable for PSOE voters and competence was more relevant for IU voters. Popular Party voters, which made up the majority of the individuals included in the study, emphasized Valcárcel's leadership in 2003, his honesty in 2007 and his competence in 2011 (always in positive terms). It is worth paying special attention to those individuals who are recognized as undecided voters and for who Valcárcel's leadership was more noticeable in 2003, while his personality was even more relevant later on.

All these presented results referred to Valcárcel's public perceptions during the eight years included in this analysis point to significant differences by

sociodemographic variables (age, gender, professional situation, studies) as also to ideological factors (voting intentions, ideological scale). These differences, nevertheless, varied across time, something that could demonstrate the importance of the political context or situation when the citizenship assesses its political leaders. In other words, the specific circumstances or contexts marked the way in which citizens judge their politicians in addition to ideology or sociodemographics.

DISCUSSION

In times in which political personalization marks the strategy of political actions, it is necessary to research the way in which parties and politicians' construct their leadership. The present study is based on the interest in understanding factors that build political leadership, considering not only "endogenous factors" but also "exogenous factors" to the leader. In that sense, this research study emphasizes the importance of the associate-political context and its links to the public problems of each political moment in order to understand public judgements related to popularity and characterization of the political leader.

The analysis of public judgements related to the president of the region of Murcia, Ramón Luis Valcárcel, measured in three different electoral moments (regional campaigns of 2003, 2007 and 2011) has permitted us to test empirically these ideas in a dual manner. First, the popularity of Ramón Luis Valcárcel remained almost intact for more than 8 years, a fact that can be explained, in part, by his positive and significant capacity to be associated with the public priorities in each historical moment. This association pointed to the Water problem and its management. Later on, he was evaluated under his behavior and decisions in relation to the economic crisis. In both cases, leadership of the president of the region of Murcia was not affected by time or even by the historic evolution of the events.

Besides, the second way in which leadership comes conditioned by "contextual" factors can be defined by the way in which citizens recognize and identify attributes or characteristics linked to the political leader that are considered prominent in each moment from the changing social circumstances. In our case study, at first, the priority attribute had to do with Valcárcel's leadership (2003) but, subsequently, it was derived from his honesty and personality (2007) and, finally, his competence (2011). This evolution of public judgements can be explained perfectly when we consider the political events that marked the political agenda — and the social agenda — during each one of those periods.

With these explanations, extensively justified with empirical data and derived from three opinion polls specifically conducted for these studies, it is possible to demonstrate that situational factors have a direct influence in the construction of political leader public perceptions. Therefore, contextual dimension has an increasingly significant weight in citizen assessments.

The necessary link of the political leadership public image with citizen priorities in a determined moment support the hypothesis of the activation or priming formulated by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) which links the public judgment of a politician with thematic priorities expressed in media coverage. This proposition is also linked to the idea of "contextual intelligence" recently mentioned by Nye (2008) as one of the most important qualities that a political leader has. Future researchers should contemplate leadership, not only from an internal perspective, but from an external point of view, which we have called "situational leadership," which denies the existence of innate qualities or specific behaviors that assure the success of the leadership (perspective conductible). Such a shift will advance these changes according to the situation or the context.

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