



## Research article

## Reputational assets for local political leadership

Hilde Bjørnå \*

UIT- The Arctic University of Norway, Norway



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## ABSTRACT

In political games, a good reputation is an invaluable asset. Hence, this research intends to expand the current understanding of the determinants of success imperative for the reputation of local political leaders. This article reviews the literature on reputation management, as well as empirical cases, to elucidate the reputational success factors of political leaders. Empirically, this study targets tenured mayors in Norway to distinguish key sources of their political reputation, which can be practically beneficial for political leadership. The theories delineated in the literature regarding political leadership were used to construct a typology containing three constructs to analyse political reputations. The findings in this article reveal that the key elements from behavioural, symbolic, and ethical constructs are important and should act in concert to build a good reputation. Within a system with limited formal political powers, efforts are needed to build soft power networks that provide the capacity to act. Politicians can learn ways to secure their support and enhance their power base from the identified reputational success factors.

## 1. Introduction

Certain political leaders have extraordinarily good reputations and fame that extends well beyond immediate supporters. This reputation is valuable in politics, as it provides a competitive advantage in elections and decision-making processes while improving the viability of transformative agendas.

*American Heritage Dictionary* defines 'reputation' as 'the general estimation in which one is held by the public' (Davies, 1970: 600). Hence, any impression about an attribute or behavioural disposition based on past behaviour is referred to as 'reputation' (Dafoe et al., 2014). Politicians tend to build a good reputation as future dealings are conveniently facilitated with those around them. Although the 'source of greatness' of prime ministers and presidents has been deliberated (Blessing and Murray, 1994; Murray and Blessing, 1983; Needham, 2005), the reputations of political leaders with limited formal powers are poorly understood. This disregard is perplexing, as reputations forged in systems with few formal powers shall probably be dissimilar to those with powers linked with hierarchy, subordination, and asymmetrical relationships. Moreover, little is known about how local political leaders acquire a good reputation.

This article seeks to holistically describe core aspects of the reputation of a good local political leader through a study of individuals who are locally, regionally, and even nationally renowned (i.e., Norway's longest-

tenured mayors). While the literature on political and administrative leadership offers rich insight into different styles, such as 'transformational', 'transactional' and 'bureaucratic' (Elcock, 2001; Hart, 2014; Jones, 1989), evidence regarding national political leaders suggests that the primary source of an individual's reputation is their ability to ensure successful 'transformation' through bold and innovative projects (Bailey, 1978; Emrich et al., 2001; Murray and Blessing, 1983; Winter, 1987). How these and other reputational success factors function as a power base for political leaders remains largely unexplored. An individual's reputation tells us how they are perceived by the public. As political leaders are dependent on followers, this study aims to investigate the reputations of some accomplished and highly admired Norwegian mayors to identify core determiners of reputational success for local political leaders operating within a system that provides few formal powers.

To inspect local political reputations, this article examines variations in three key sources: (1) recognition of achievements, (2) recognition of narratives and symbols forming strong emotional bonds, and (3) recognition of ethical conduct.

Namely, the following two research questions are addressed:

1. To what extent can a sample of tenured mayors be categorised in terms of reputational source utilisation?

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [hilde.bjorna@uit.no](mailto:hilde.bjorna@uit.no).

## 2. What differences can be observed in the use of a source by a sample of tenured mayors?

To answer these questions, three longest-tenured and prominent local political leaders were identified across Norway and a case study was conducted to examine the actual adoption of different types of reputational sources. The results are illustrated with examples together with their implications for practitioners and future research.

The article proceeds as follows. First, the theoretical constructs of various sources in relation to a good reputation are presented, providing a brief account of the literature concerning local political leadership. Subsequently, the institutional constraints surrounding the role of a mayor within the Norwegian system are examined and the methods used in the present study are outlined. The article then introduces three of Norway's longest-tenured mayors since 2001. Drawing on both the relevant literature and empirical findings, this article determines several different reputational success factors for local political leaders.

### 2. Core reputational sources

The notion of reputational sources is partly based on insights from the literature on corporate reputational sources. The theories described in the literature pertaining to political leadership provide general insights that can address how individuals might approach reputation management. From this literature, a typology of reputational sources was devised to analyse political reputations.

The first reputation source is referred to as *behavioural*, where reputations are deemed to be the result of previous actions. Organisations and, in this case, political leaders signal their qualities to followers through histories (Clark and Montgomery, 1998). Thus, when seeking to build a good reputation, it is necessary to adopt a specific type of behaviour over time, follow a consistent production set, and have good quality control policies (Barney, 1991; Dierickx and Cool, 1989). These measures exemplify the recognition of achievement. Emphasising reputation from the perspective of 'what is done' resembles findings on leadership styles in the literature on political leadership. Notably, the transactional style of leadership correlates with the core functions of an institution. Political leaders are expected to comply with their main preferences and maximise their support (Fiorina and Shepsle, 1989; Jones, 1989). The political leader promises good quality in core avenues and receives popular support in return. The second political leadership style is transformational leadership, stating that political leaders not only follow voters' preferences but can also change and set new preferences. There are 'windows of opportunity' to introduce reforms (Keeler, 1993), denoting that it is possible to push for major rather than incremental changes at specific moments (Hart, 2014: 25). Specifically, transformational political leaders imbue change by persuasion, building coalitions, and acting as policy entrepreneurs (Elcock, 2001; Hart, 2014; Jones, 1989).

The second source is *symbolic* whereby general affinities of an individual or an organisation represent reputational resources. Organisations, or in this case mayors, seek to establish congruence between values associated with their activities and the norms of acceptable behaviour in the larger social system to which they belong. They may desire recognition via symbols, values, or institutions that have a strong base of social legitimacy (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). In this endeavour, mayors can attempt to build narratives and stories, representing a reputational resource. Primarily, the symbolic source relies on communication and how it generates positive impressions among media audiences (Deephouse, 2000; Kim et al., 2007). General affinities with a product are considered as reputational resources and sources of identity. Such affinities may be invoked by symbolic behaviour, such as expressions of values and beliefs, which takes into account the concerns of the target population. Thus, building a good repute (i.e., narrative) depends on an intimate knowledge of the local public, including 'who they are' and 'what they want'. Media exposure, the ability to signify uniqueness, and

the management of symbols are considered crucial for organisational reputation (Deephouse, 2000; Grunig, 1993; Kim et al., 2007). The organisation, or the political leader in this study, appears to have unique characteristics, but uniqueness must be well-aligned with the demand for locally legitimised behaviour (Deephouse, 1999). For mayors, creating narratives about themselves, evoking emotions that are cherished by citizens, and taking into account citizens' social identities (i.e., what they can feel part of and be comfortable with) is imperative (see Grint, 2000; Hart, 2014). Moreover, the environment must recognise and believe the narrative as well.

Finally, the third source of reputation is *ethicality*, which is a category derived from the literature on business and market ethics and ethical leadership. An organisation's reputation relies on how ethically or unethically it is perceived to conduct business (Bendixen and Abratt, 2007). Violation of moral norms and values and the generation of undesirable outcomes might allow the organisation to be perceived as unethical (Fan, 2005; Brunk, 2010). Hence, responsible ethical conduct is a critical prerequisite for building and protecting reputation (Middlemiss, 2003). Ethical leaders have clear values and principles and can contribute to the betterment of society (Maak and Pless, 2006). Therefore, traits, such as fairness, honesty, trustworthiness, and taking responsibility, are paramount (Piccolo et al., 2010). Moreover, ethical leaders tend to build and sustain good relationships with all relevant stakeholders and encourage respectful collaboration. To this end, ethical leaders, in our case mayors, discover that their core task is motivation and contriving 'a web of inclusion' for different stakeholder groups (Maak and Pless, 2006; Zhu et al., 2014).

Consequently, this paper examines the degree to which mayors' good reputations are based on elements in the above-mentioned constructs (i.e., behavioural, symbolic, and ethical) together with their variations. Also, a history of actions was examined, specifying whether a high quality of service was offered to the locals. Their pursuit to be recognised via values and emotions, cherished and legitimised by the target public, was evaluated in tandem with their ability to show good moral conduct and sustain relationships. These elements can likely lead to personal trust, which in turn secures votes.

### 3. Evidence on local political leadership

Certain trends are predominant in the research on local political leadership (Aarsæther and Mikalsen, 2015; Kjær, 2013). Specifically, creating typologies of leadership styles is quite common (e.g. Larsen, 2001; Kotter and Lawrence, 1974). Furthermore, an emphasis on political leadership being conducted within relational, structural, and institutional frameworks is noticeable, together with determining conditions, such as local leaders' formal powers, community size, and political-administrative infrastructure (e.g. Bäck, 2005; Heinelt et al., 2018; Mouritzen and Svara, 2002). Besides, European researchers concentrated on the political and legal frameworks of the local government (Leach and Wilson, 2002), different mayoral forms and reforms (e.g. Bäck et al., 2006; Larsen, 2002; Steyvers et al., 2008), and classifications of local government systems (Heinelt et al., 2018).

What political leaders tend to do in office is also focused. James Svara (1990) introduced the concept of facilitative leadership, denoting a mayoral role that underlines interaction, communication, and collaboration. Likewise, Svara (2003) concurs that facilitative leaders are visible, supportive, consensus-oriented, and inclusive (i.e., effectively communicate and collaborate with municipal officials and the public). Moreover, they are committed, benevolent, supportive, and excel in obtaining the benefits of cooperation (Bjørnå and Mikalsen, 2015). Notably, Clarence Stone (1989) reviewed urban regimes in the United States, arguing that in cases with limited formal authority, the mayor must rely on, and cultivate, informal arrangements to bridge the gap. He claims that local leaders must employ available resources to attain goals and should not resist but rather build 'a capacity to act' (Stone, 1989: 229). This study swayed an entire generation of urban scholars and directed attention

towards governance networks. Accordingly, how political leaders negotiate and get involved with the public and private sectors in loose arrangements to influence decisions and reach common goals garnered substantial interest (e.g., Hambleton and Gross, 2007; Hirst, 2000; Kooiman, 1993; Sørensen and Torfing, 2008). There exist various theories of governance, but as state or local governments are considered less capable of command, an exchange of resources is mandated to achieve goals (Bevir, 2008). The prevalence of so-called development networks in various municipalities has been the subject of many recent Norwegian case studies (see for instance Bjørnå and Aarsæther, 2010; Fimreite and Aars, 2005; Røiseland and Vabo, 2016; Vabo et al., 2004), wherein political leadership was the centre of attention. Such networks can efficiently enable entrepreneurial accomplishments, especially for mayors with few formal powers. Hence, the literature on local political leadership has devoted much effort to what local political leaders have achieved, but rarely evaluate how people feel or whether the leadership repertoire displays some awareness of collective emotions (Hambleton, 2011: 15).

#### 4. The Norwegian mayors

Currently, there were over 350 mayors in Norway. Although Norwegian municipalities differ considerably in terms of population size, which can range from a few hundred to several hundred thousand residents, they all have the same political structure. Therefore, the mayors of municipalities, both large and small, share the same responsibilities. The Norwegian mayor is part of an aldermanic system, an organisational form wherein political positions are assigned among key political parties according to their strength in the local council, which elects the mayor from among its members.

Mayors have limited formal power under Norwegian law. They chair the council and executive committee meetings and set agendas, but in reality, the council is the ultimate decision-maker. Still, mayors have several informal powers. With direct links to the council's chief executive officer (CEO), administration, and the external environment, they often have comprehensive knowledge regarding challenges experienced by the municipality and can influence which projects to prioritise. Mayors can also persuade the council to initiate any project as long as it is not lawfully assigned to other institutions and have a central role in development activities and the establishment of required infrastructure needed to attract new businesses. Additionally, they oversee the construction of arts and cultural centres and facilitate activities, such as sports, festivals, concerts, and exhibitions.

#### 5. Methods

In particular, the study of Norwegian mayors and their reputations is interesting because the legalities against which they shape their leadership roles are comparable. Since mayors can gain good reputations at all stages of their careers, only those who repeatedly acquired widespread support during elections and possessed extraordinarily positive local or regional level reputations were chosen. Thus, this study is typical as it analyses political leaders held in high regard and atypical as it appraises three, among a pool of 11, most re-elected local political leaders in Norway since 2001. Notably, not all well-reputed mayors get re-elected, and the long tenure of some mayors may be attributable to skilful political manipulation and general popularity in their political party rather than among the people. Furthermore, mayors from medium-sized municipalities (in a Norwegian context) were selected because such positions tend to be more susceptible to longstanding party popularity. Altogether, mayors from three different regions of Norway were selected for this study. As this study is exploratory, case selection was implemented randomly. Narrowing down the number of mayors from three different regions did make an in-depth analysis possible, but also resulted in the selection of an exclusively male sample.

The case study for this article was based on two-hour interviews with three mayors, three of their closest work partners (the CEO of the municipality, a member of the mayor's party, and a civil servant from the municipal administration), and one or two representatives from opposition parties. The CEO was interviewed because of the power bestowed by the Norwegian local governments to this position and due to the close association with the mayor. Members from the mayors' party and the opposition were preferred because they have a say in the local government decision-making processes. All selectees had served for many years and were therefore assumed to be well-acquainted with the mayors' political abilities and could verify or correct the mayors' narratives. On the other hand, civil servants were chosen as they could inform about the mayor as a leader of the municipal organisation and as a citizen. Data from the interviews were substantiated through national, regional, and local newspaper reports, and via municipal documents (i.e., plans, council minutes) to verify the mayors' conduct.

All interviews were semi-structured and dealt with the same topics: how the mayors regarded themselves and were perceived by others, what they had accomplished, what made them special, and their relations with different groups. The informants' names and places are anonymised. Various empirical details (e.g. rumours and intrigue) have been deliberately de-emphasized on ethical grounds, though I have sought to provide the most relevant information about each case. The empirical section of the article presented below focuses on mayors' municipal contexts, their primary goals, what they had given attention to over the years, their skills, and recognition.

#### 6. Three mayors and reputations

##### 6.1. Mayor A

The first mayor is from what has traditionally been a Labour (*Arbeiderpartiet*) municipality in the north of Norway, comprising over 10,000 inhabitants. When Mayor A entered politics, the main challenge of this municipality was developmental. The population was waning, and pivotal institutions and businesses were non-operational. Mayor A was elected after two periods as a council member. His tenure as a mayor lasted for 20 years, interrupted by a few years in the national government.

Mayor A described himself as a person who cares about the good of the municipality and the local region. He says, 'I listen to people, but when a decision is made, I am firm'. He is a political entrepreneur who achieved 'the impossible' – a reference to his central role in the completion of a colossal power plant project during the first decade of his tenure, which relied on skilful networking. The project was successful and helped in reducing population decline. He has a large network and takes pride in being available to municipal residents. In his first term, he wanted to improve internal service provision in the municipality, which resulted in increased budget deficits, as confirmed by municipal reports. The dissatisfaction of the CEO at the time led to his replacement, but nowadays, the relationship with the CEO is much better: 'we are a team; we know our limits, but sometimes, we do get involved in each other's tasks' (interview with CEO). According to the mayor, the CEO 'works like oil in machinery'. Mayor A has also focused on traditional developmental efforts, such as within the fishery industry, and has initiated the construction of a rather grand cultural centre (sources: municipal minutes and reports, several newspaper reports). Therefore, he claims to have devoted significant time and energy to the prosperity of the entire region.

While describing himself, the mayor stressed that he gets to work between 5 and 6 a.m. every day and that he sometimes spends his spare time fixing the livestock fencing surrounding the city as cattle ruin people's gardens. He often wanders the city streets looking for people to talk to and is known for picking up litter. He has over 4000 Facebook friends, maintains an 'open door' policy, and responds to all email personally. Besides, he attends sports and cultural events for youth

almost every day of the week and knows and converses with everyone. He is a strict teetotaler and has led a stable, scandal-free personal life.

Both the comments from the representative of the main opposition party and the municipality's current CEO highlight that Mayor A enjoys immense popularity. As the representative from the opposition party put it, 'People, even the opposition, love him'. Mayor A's party frequently receives a majority of votes in elections, and he is known as an entrepreneur and a strategist with tremendous work capacity. Further, his uniqueness as an early riser, fence-fixer, litter-collector, and 'people person' forms a basis for his reputation (sources: informant from an opposition party, CEO, and another employee). Audits reveal that the quality of services provided by the municipality is good (but expensive) compared to other local governments, which is also evident in local government minutes and reports. With a strong media presence, Mayor A is regarded as a defender of the local region, beyond the specific interests of his municipality, and the media articles supported the outcomes of interviews. The popularity of the Norwegian mayors was gauged by a rating bureau in 2015 and Mayor A topped the list, with a score much higher than the runner-up. He usually takes risks by setting out demands to the national government, yielding strong local support in the process. He is described as a builder of alliances (source: regional newspaper, 1999), meticulous, and a hard worker (source: regional newspaper, 2019). He also contested national regulations concerning fishery policies, generating national media reports (source: national newspaper, 2014), which led him to be perceived as a champion for regional interests (source: regional newspaper, 2014).

### 6.2. Mayor B

Mayor B's municipality is a 'commuter municipality' situated in the south, with more than 20,000 inhabitants. His entry into politics was during considerable political turbulence. Norway witnessed a significant shift in support for the Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*), which had previously been deemed a protest party and not taken very seriously. The Progress Party secured considerable support in Municipality B, but other parties assembled a 'rainbow coalition' to keep it out of power. The population, in general, did not respond well to the move to keep the Progress Party out of power. Mayor B became a top Progress Party candidate after spending a single period as a council member. He was elected mayor after organising an alliance with the Conservatives (*Høyre*) and has served for 20 years with relatively few interruptions.

Mayor B portrays himself as someone who wishes to develop the municipality by 'doing things differently'. He commenced an internal reorganisation of the municipality and engaged in the instatement of a new CEO, which he describes as a 'difficult process'. Currently, he has a very good relationship with the CEO, stating 'He has involved us (the administration) in the entire development of service provision processes, allowing the politicians to see how we work, facilitating trust between politicians and the administration' (interview with CEO). According to him, the role of mayor is all about finding new solutions and 'thinking outside the box'. His creativity attracted national attention when he organised trips for senior citizens from the municipality to the Mediterranean and when he established both a publicly owned and a privately owned care enterprise for elderly residents in the same large building. These two enterprises began to compete and started providing very good services (source: many reports in national and regional newspapers, municipality reports). He is also hailed as a champion for citizens with disabilities (source: municipal reports, national, and regional newspapers). Through a strong presence in the community and media, he is able to participate in many sports and cultural events. In addition, he developed a large network comprising local, regional, and national connections and initiated a branding strategy for the municipality, which can be summed up as: 'We want to create results, we listen with respect, we are enthusiastic and will support anyone who seeks to accomplish something, and we do what we say'. Mayor B has maintained a good relationship with his party and the opposition. 'Instead of enforcing a

proposal, he prefers consensus and often partakes in discussions to gain broader support. He is very good at letting the opposition have a say in meetings' (interview with the CEO). 'His heart resides in the region, and his prime aim is to do the best he can for the municipality' (interview with a politician in Mayor B's party). In his first term as mayor, however, Mayor B endured a personal scandal involving a young woman. This case plagued his political career for two decades (source: several reports in local and national newspapers). He is open about the incident and was 'forgiven' in the sense that he was re-elected as mayor. Afterwards, no other illegitimate behaviour was witnessed.

Although the representative from an opposition party commented that Mayor B 'is, without doubt, a good politician', we also heard fewer positive evaluations regarding the mayor. It became clear that the mayor and our 'opposition informant' were not on very good terms. Nevertheless, it was also evident that Mayor B is perceived as an extraordinary and respected innovator. He dares to do unique things, brings new perspectives, and is a very good networker (sources: CEO, a representative from the opposition party, a representative from mayor's party, many local, regional, and national newspapers).

### 6.3. Mayor C

Mayor C's municipality is in southeastern Norway, containing approximately 20,000 residents, and is characterised by commercial activity, commuting, and agriculture. No significant challenges were evident when Mayor C first took office. He became interested in politics due to his involvement in local sports and became a mayoral candidate for the Labour Party after two periods as a council member. Later, he manoeuvred his party to take over from the Centre Party (*Senterpartiet*) and has served as a mayor for 25 years.

Mayor C considers himself working in the best interest of the municipality by being available to the public. He describes himself as a good co-operator who is willing to hear others and a visible figure in the media and community. He states, 'I like to talk to people, and I can hardly remember any uncomfortable conversations'. He cares about the 'little man's problems', listens to people, and wants to help them navigate the municipal system when they disagree with administrative decisions. The national government invested heavily in a major project in the municipality during his early years as mayor, while he was focusing on sports facilities and healthcare, and the national investment made the community more prosperous. After initiating the construction of a new library, he now concentrates on elderly care, schools, and daycare. Mayor C has a stable personal life and was never involved in any personal or professional scandals.

People around him describe him as a people-person: 'He's a sweet, nice, and lovely man' (informant from the opposition party). Several informants commented that he gives so much time to everyone that it becomes difficult for him to go shopping with his wife. He is described as mild and gentle, who is very visible in the media but is not an entrepreneur or innovator (sources: a member of the opposition party, CEO, member of own party). The CEO of the municipality, however, reported that the interference of the mayor makes his job more difficult: 'Politicians here, including the mayor, do not respect that I have a say in administrative affairs. They micromanage my work and administrative decisions'. Council minutes and the mayor confirmed that he often interferes in administrative decisions on many occasions, together with political colleagues. He wants to be hands-on and act in the best interest of the people. There is a close relationship between Mayor C and a few other senior leaders in the council; they listen to each other and take care of each other's interests (sources: mayor, CEO, member of mayor's party). 'I have had deputy mayors from all parties, except the Progress Party, and have cooperated with all of them. We agreed on policies' (Mayor C).

While Mayor C has a good internal network within the municipality, he is not known to have solid regional and national networks. The media articles supported the findings from the interviews. He has been referred to as the most beloved mayor in the region (source: regional newspaper



2017) and is cherished for his extraordinary effort for the community, undertaking numerous political assignments. Most of the media reports provide the same information as reported by Mayor C. Others describe him as a very good cooperater and networker. In 2019, he was described by a regional newspaper as a mayor who always met and helped people desiring an audience. The propensity to help people has contributed to a close alliance between the mayor and citizens. The local newspapers also confirm that the mayor is an excellent cooperater and honour him for the good municipal service provision and ranking. He is referred to as jovial and sociable, and there are some nice descriptions about him in letters to the editor from satisfied citizens. In a regional newspaper published in 2015, Mayor C received credit for a substantial investment in a major project of the municipality during his early years as mayor, and he is portrayed as someone who listens and cares about citizens, with an affinity towards sports and culture.

## 7. Reputational success factors

Empirical data validates that there are several different paths to a good reputation, and the inclusion of more mayors in a widened study would reveal more paths. Empirical material from case studies, in terms of the three categories of reputational constructs outlined earlier, has been organised below.

### 7.1. Behavioural category

For national political leaders, the primary source of an individual's reputation is their ability to ascertain a successful transformation through bold and innovative projects (Bailey, 1978; Emrich et al., 2001; Murray and Blessing, 1983; Winter, 1987). In a system that provides the mayor with limited powers, this study indicates that a good political reputation will mostly hinge on having ambitious and bold ideas and championing revolutionary and innovative projects through transformational leadership (e.g., Mayor A and Mayor B). The findings prove that a reputation-based focus on the relevant institution's core functions (i.e., transactional leadership) might serve as the basis for a good reputation (e.g., Mayor C). The mayors rely on a behavioural reputational source as both transactional and transformative leadership styles are included in the behavioural category. There are, however, differences observed in the utilisation of the behavioural source, leading to different networking strategies. The big and bold projects and innovative ideas depend on both external and internal networks, while the core function approach is contingent on internal polity networks to accomplish tasks and secure support over time. These mayors are within a political system that restricts them; therefore, successful completion of a project relies predominantly on their ability to build 'soft powers' and a power-to role within networks (Bjørnå and Aarsæther, 2010: 307).

### 7.2. Symbolic category

This category highlights that leaders need to build an image that provides a good reputation. A mayor must pay attention to questions of identity when defining their stance or when justifying their proposed strategies (Miles and Cameron, 1982; Porac and Thomas, 1990). Mayors should present themselves as having unique characteristics wherever possible, but unique personal and political behaviour must be balanced against compliance with local standards and definitions of legitimate behaviour (Deephouse, 1999). Overall, followers must have a favourable impression and perception of the mayor (Hall, 1992; Rao, 1994), and verbal and non-verbal communication and visibility in the media is a core necessity (Deephouse, 2000; Scammell, 1999). Successful communication and strong media presence facilitate followers to actively empower their leader. What matters here is being perceived as remarkable, recognisable, likeable, and admirable. These cases denote that all mayors employ a symbolic reputational source. Nonetheless, there are dissimilarities in the use of symbolic sources that yield different forms of

uniqueness. Mayor A is unique as he is an early riser, fence-fixer, litter-collector, and a 'people person' deemed defender of the local region. The distinctiveness of Mayor B lies in his ability to find new solutions and 'thinking outside the box'. Mayor C is noteworthy because of his jovial nature. Moreover, there is a difference between utilising symbols to reflect local identities and local 'meaning' (e.g., Mayor A) and employing them to form images that are meant to create identities (e.g., Mayor B).

### 7.3. Ethical category

In the context of local politics, the ethical category demonstrates that a mayor's reputation will not simply be determined by past performance and the projection of an ideal image. Rather, the ethical category includes the importance of being perceived as leaders that cooperate to achieve a common good (Maak and Pless, 2006). The results exhibit that all mayors strived to contribute towards the betterment of society using an ethical source, albeit in different ways. Mayor A was a defender of the region, Mayor B was an innovator of services for elderly and disabled citizens, and Mayor C was a defender of the common folk vis-a-vis the bureaucratic system. The ethical category integrates the importance of moral behaviour and developing and maintaining good relationships with all relevant stakeholders, such as citizens, the administration, politicians in their party, and the opposition. All the mayors strive to maintain relations with citizens, participate in society, and be easily accessible. Here, one case suggests that a single immoral act can be forgiven if it is not repeated over time (e.g., Mayor B). Regarding the relationship with the administration and fellow politicians, one should assume their essentiality in a system that provides the mayor with few powers. Holistically, all three mayors had good relations with fellow politicians, although with one exception (e.g., Mayor B). The relationship with the administration is not simple; the empirical findings (e.g., Mayor C) signify that this relationship can be strained, at least during their tenure. Only one of the mayors (e.g., Mayor A) made full use of the potential embedded in the ethical category, but even he experienced a tense relationship with the administration in his early days. Politics involves tensions between persons and groups of persons, especially in political systems that provide leaders with few formal powers. When interests clash, it is opportune for a political leader to prioritise the relationship with the targeted electorate, as they are the ones that secure their position. Hence, building good relations with citizens is the most critical success factor in this category.

### 7.4. Critical determinants of success

When analysing the empirical material from cases in this study, references were sought to justify the actions of the mayors, the use of symbols and narratives, and the ethical aspects related to their careers. Through this approach, it was possible to isolate several determinants of success associated with constructs (i.e., behavioural, symbolic, and ethical) for establishing a locally favourable political reputation in this system. However, these success factors are not exhaustive, as further cases might reveal additional sources. Accordingly, the most critical success factors for the mayors' good reputations in a system with few formal powers are:

- The development and success of goals related to bold projects or good service performance;
- The development of soft power networks across traditional boundaries;
- The communication and development of values that are sensitive to local identities;
- The creation of a narrative about the uniqueness of personality;
- The development of close relations with citizens;
- Hard work for the community.

Knowledge and understanding of reputational success factors are important. For a mayor, a good reputation is a powerful asset in a local political game. Moreover, a mayor's good reputation extends to local

government institutions. Highly respected and accomplished mayors ensure a good reputation for local government in the wider political system, paving the way for increased autonomy, authority, and responsibility (Carpenter and Krause, 2012).

Regarding the literature on local government, further exploring the foundations of the popularity of local political leaders would be highly beneficial, and distinguishing critical reputational success factors offers a novel contribution. Some of the success factors found are well-known from previous studies of political leadership. For instance, success with big projects or services has been discussed in relation to transformational and transactional leadership (Elcock, 2001; Hart, 2014; Jones, 1989), and the importance of networks has received considerable attention (e.g. Hambleton and Gross, 2007; Hirst, 2000; Kooiman, 1993; Sørensen and Torfing, 2008). Ethical leadership is accentuated by researchers (Brown et al., 2005; Zhu et al., 2014) but has not been extensively related to its implications for political leadership. Narratives about their unique personality and the development of values that are sensitive to local identities are less discussed. The inclusion of all these success factors is integral in the literature on political leadership.

Methodologically, the reputation analysis of the three mayors was not straightforward and involved three general challenges. First, the mayors interviewed could perpetuate a carefully planned self-presentation, as it is in their interest to present a good image and downplay flaws. Thus, they may manipulate the discourse on their reputation (Goffman, 1959). Second, opposition members may be politically inclined to give a negative impression about the mayor. Third, administrative personnel might express loyalty and portray a favourable image to outsiders because of their power relationship with the mayor. The author is aware of these challenges and has reflected upon the answers given by informants and how such factors might impact them (Richards, 2014). The article involved an additional methodological challenge whereby various empirical details were deliberately de-emphasised on ethical grounds, even though the most relevant information about each case was sought.

## 8. Conclusion

This study contributes via 'behavioural, symbolic, and ethical' constructs for studies on politicians' reputation. The findings in this article reveal that the key elements derived from behavioural, symbolic, and ethical constructs are important and should act in concert to build a good reputation. This study argues that accomplishments are pivotal for a political reputation. Within a system with limited formal political powers, efforts are needed to build soft power networks that provide the capacity to act. Moreover, the study argues that a good reputation incorporates the creation of a unique personal narrative – one that allows the politician to be identified through values or identities that have strong social legitimacy. Such narratives can vary significantly. Particularly, local values, innovative ideas, and a jovial attitude have been reflected in this study. Lastly, this study reasons that building good relations with citizens and hard work for the community matters the most in terms of a good reputation.

These reputational success factors may be relevant for politicians at higher political levels. Nevertheless, politicians can learn ways to secure support and enhance their power base through reputational success factors identified in the present study. More research addressing the narratives of political leaders about their unique personalities and the development of values that are sensitive to local identities are particularly interesting topics for further investigation.

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

Hilde Bjørnå: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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### Data availability statement

The authors do not have permission to share data.

### Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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