Mayoral leadership as a ‘life-long’ career

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Abstract

Political leaders are usually elected for a fixed term with little – if any - security of tenure. One would therefore expect them to be susceptible to regular challenges and their position to be tenuous. This may well be the case for most, but there are also leaders who face little competition for the office and regularly succeed in their bid for re-election. This paper is based on a study of a select group of Norwegian mayors who have been able to make their jobs an almost life-long, ‘tenured’ career. How is such security of office possible, given the basic rules of democracy pertaining to political competition, effective opposition and regular elections? Is it possible to identify certain leadership styles, strategies and brands of politics that account for such longevity in office? Our overall objective is to identify and highlight some of the factors that shape and sustain mayoral careers, especially long-term ones, in an institutional setting where the shaping of the role is very much a matter for the incumbent.

Introduction

Judging by the amount of academic research on mayors, this particular role stands out as an important – and arguably powerful - one. Questions pertaining to their career paths, powers, leadership styles, motivations, and ambitions constitute a significant part of local government studies (Bäck, Heinelt and Magnier 2006; Schaap and Daemen 2012; Svara 1994). At the core of much of this ‘mayoral research’ is the question of the preconditions of efficient political leadership and how these may vary with the basic structures of local government and the political environments of mayors (Goldsmith and Larsen 2004; Pressman 1972; Svara 2003). Given that mayors are elected for a fixed term with little security of tenure, one would expect them to be susceptible to regular challenges and their position to be tenuous. This may well be the case for most but there are also mayors who face little competition for the office and regularly succeed in their bid for re-election. These are usually seasoned, strong and close to ‘tenured’ politicians who have virtually made the office of mayor their personal property, rarely threatened by a hostile take-over. What are the foundations of such long-term careers? How is such security of office possible, given the basic rules of democracy pertaining to political competition, effective opposition and regular elections? Is it possible to identify certain styles, strategies and brands of politics that account for such longevity in office?
In order to answer these questions we have conducted a study of a select group of Norwegian mayors who have made their job a long-term career, providing leadership continuity and stability – and putting their personal stamp on the office. They are a rare breed, indeed. Only 27 out of the 428 Norwegian mayors currently in office have served – or will serve – for at least 16 years (4 consecutive election periods) which arguably qualifies as a long-term career in local government. Given that Norwegian mayors enjoy few formal powers (Willumsen 2012), and their role is ill-defined, the question of what (else) that makes the office attractive becomes interesting. To begin with, few formal powers mean there is little the mayor *has* to do but much that he *can* do. There is, in other words, room to manoeuvre that a clever and dedicated politician can exploit to make the job both interesting and important, as well as a platform for mustering the support and trust of his constituency. The question, then, is whether and how such political latitude is utilized in ways that help sustain long-term mayoral careers. Put differently: how do these mayors define and shape their role as political leaders, and to what extent is their performance affected and sustained by the responses of their constituency or salient stakeholders such as local citizens, party comrades, members of the opposition, business executives or municipal administrators?

Our overall purpose, then, is to highlight some of the factors that shape and sustain mayoral careers, especially long-term ones, in an institutional setting where the shaping of the role is very much a matter for the incumbent. A basic assumption – or hypothesis - is that we are dealing with political leaders who truly enjoy their job, have a talent for building viable coalitions and command popular support and trust of a magnitude that make them almost immune to competition. There is perhaps a potent combination here of personality and context, of personal characteristics (motivation, charisma, ability, energy), civic engagement (popular support and trust), and local political traditions and culture (party histories, cross-party collaboration, an efficient and capable administration) that provide for the continuous
support of salient stakeholders in both the local community and the ‘machinery’ of local
government.

The role of mayor: between formal rules, social norms and personal
preferences

Political behaviour, roles and relationships are embedded in institutional contexts that
constitute constraints as well as incentives. According to the old institutional school in
political science, behaviour is largely determined by the formal rules defining the ‘content’ of
political and administrative positions. The strategies and choices of political leaders – mayors
included - will thus be strongly affected by the tasks and duties assigned to their role and the
rules and procedures for their execution. How the office of mayor is formally defined
determines his priorities and decisions (Mouritzen and Svara 2002). Neo-institutionalists,
however, hold that political behaviour is shaped as much by expectations, norms and routines
“institutionalized rules, duties, rights and roles define acts as appropriate or inappropriate”.
What is appropriate behaviour in any given context or role is defined, not only by the
standards and formal rules of the institution itself, but also by the norms and values held by
professional groups within it as well as the norms and expectations prevailing among its
stakeholders, constituents or clientele. From a rational-institutional perspective, institutions
are conceptualised as a set of rules and incentives that affect behaviour by establishing the
conditions for rational action – understood as the calculation of self-interests and the
maximization of personal preferences. A rational-institutional approach to the interactions of
institutions and individuals tends to emphasize individual preferences and interest-based
choices at the expense of formal and social norms (Searing 1991).

Combining, or integrating, perspectives that emphasize alternative explanations of
political behaviour - formal rules, social norms and self-interest respectively – enables us to
view politicians as embedded in institutional contexts that constrain their choices, while at the same time treating them as purposive actors with independent standpoints and personal preferences (cf. Searing 1991, 1252). Searing’s distinction between *position roles* and *preference roles* is pertinent here. The former requires the performance of many specific duties and responsibilities, and are clearly defined and institutionally constrained. *Preference roles*, on the other hand, are associated with positions less constrained by formal rules and with few *specific* duties and responsibilities. There are few things the incumbent is *obliged* to do but many things he or she *can* do. These are, in other words, roles more easily shaped by the preferences of the incumbent as well as by his interactions with constituents and other stakeholders. The preferential character of the role as mayor, then, enables the incumbent to fill it in ways that may increase the prospects for a long and successful career.

**The Norwegian Mayor**

What are the formal powers – and institutional constraints - of Norwegian mayors? Very few, it seems. They are authorized to chair the meetings of the council and the executive committee and decide their agenda. They act as the municipality’s legal representative and signs official documents on its behalf. Given its limited number of specific duties and responsibilities, the office of mayor is a typical preference role. This is somewhat surprising, even paradoxical, given the prominent and positional role of Norwegian municipalities within our government structure. They are – as decreed by state law - important providers of public services and play a crucial role in implementing the welfare state (Bennett 1993; Goldsmith 1990; Leemans 1970; Lidström 2003). Their significance in that regard has even led observers to speak of the welfare municipality rather than the welfare state (Kjellberg 1988; Nagel 1991). They run primary schools, kindergartens and homes for the elderly and disabled, provide social and technical services, decide certain environmental issues, organise planning processes and maintain local infrastructure – most of which are also decreed by law.
wonder they employ about a fifth of the work force and their aggregate running costs amount to 18% of mainland Norway’s gross domestic product (Norwegian statistics 2013).

In principle, though, Norwegian municipalities enjoy considerable latitude as to what functions or tasks to undertake since their powers are ‘negatively limited’. There are few, if any, legal impediments to the undertaking of new tasks – provided these have not been assigned by law to other institutions. Due to this, municipalities are free to adopt policies and implement projects in order to generate, say, economic growth and community development (Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2010). They develop strategies and provide the infrastructure needed to attract new businesses and combat population decrease; they build arts and cultural centres and support activities such as sports, festivals, concerts and exhibitions. The successful implementation of such growth-related projects requires the ability to build and maintain networks, which tends to be an important part of the job as mayor (Berg and Rao 2005; Leach and Wilson 2000). In Norwegian municipalities the mayor’s network will include not only the local business community and potential business partners outside the municipality, but also government institutions and neighbouring municipalities. Access to institutions and decision-makers at higher levels of government is vital in order to attract public investments, and cooperation with other municipalities can generate regional development and facilitate the co-production of municipal services.

Attending to these broad, largely self-imposed, responsibilities one would expect mayors to be highly sensitive to the voice of their constituents, be they individual citizens, civic groups, business leaders or municipal administrators, and to cultivate their relationships with key stakeholders outside the municipal domain. If so, the role of mayor is likely to be shaped through interactions with his constituents as well as with groups and institutions within his personal and political network. To be successful and long-lasting, a mayor must command considerable personal authority and respond to the demands and expectations of his
constituents and mobilise his broader network when necessary. The Norwegian mayor is – for all practical purposes - not just the formal head of the municipal organization, but also the leader of the local community with the responsibilities that follow.

Given that this is a full-time job, there is certainly more to it than just the wielding of its rather limited formal powers. As the ultimate representative of his local community the mayor is expected to involve himself in matters well beyond his formal powers and not limit himself to the role of ‘president’ of the council (Baldersheim 1992; Willumsen 2012). Goldsmith and Larsen (2004) suggest that mayors also have a role to play as territorial representatives, not just symbolically but in managing or negotiating a complex environment (assisted by the administration). As there are no legal impediments to the undertaking of new tasks, most municipalities - led by the mayor – tend to encourage and support community development and stimulate business activities (Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2010). What we suggest is that how they wield their informal powers, i.e. the ways in which they interact with salient stakeholders such as local residents, civic groups, the opposition, business interests and government agencies – could be a key factor in deciding their length of tenure.

Three cases of mayoral tenure.

Our data have been collected through in-depth interviews with mayors, chief executive officers and representatives of the opposition in 6 of the 27 municipalities led by mayors who have served – or will be serving – for at least four election periods. The selection of municipalities was made in order to achieve some variation on variables such as size, location, industrial structure and the mayors’ party affiliation. The sample is not necessarily representative of the 27, and our findings – needless to say - cannot be generalized in a statistical way (George and Bennett 2005). An additional reason to be cautious in this regard is that only three of the 6 cases are reported here. That said, we think these are interesting, illuminating and illustrative in their own right, constituting different, yet strikingly similar,
tales of successful mayoral careers. What follows is an attempt at three mayoral ‘portraits’ – fuelled by personal and political observations of the mayors themselves, their chief executive officers and politicians from the opposition.

**Likeable 'burgermeister' and efficient politician: Mayor X**

Mayor X is at the helm of a medium-sized municipality (approx. 10 000) – basically a town that has gone from (almost) bust to boom in a fairly short span of time. Its political organization is the council-manager form with an administration that counts some 1200 employees, services and part-timers included. Historically, fisheries has been the backbone of the local economy, with a large, technologically advanced processing plant and its fleet of trawlers being the mayor employer since the 1950s. Fisheries are less important to-day, and the municipality, and the mayor in particular, is currently struggling to preserve at least some control of the plant and its facilities in the face of pressures from major shareholders to eradicate its local affiliation. The municipality lost some 1500 jobs during the 1990s due, in particular, to reduced activity in the fisheries and organizational reforms in public services such as telecommunications and the postal service. There was also a substantial out-migration, especially of young people unable to find work locally. In the words of the mayor:

“*Had you come here during the early 1990s you would have seen a run-down town*”.

The turning point economically, came with the detection by Statoil of rich reserves of natural gas some 140 km off the coast, crowned by the decision of Parliament in 2002 that the gas should be landed and processed locally – before being shipped to the markets. To make a long story short, the outcome has been an economic boom. There has been an influx of people employed by the gas processing plant, especially in its construction phase, a substantial strengthening of municipal finances, albeit accompanied by a higher rate of borrowing, a much improved local infrastructure and better municipal services. The formerly “run-down”
city centre is being rehabilitated with a new cultural and arts centre as a highly visible manifestation of a town in transition.

The context – and framework for the exercise of political leadership - is thus a municipality where managing growth currently seems to be a major challenge. An enviable position, most would say, strengthened by the fact that the mayor’s party commands a solid majority in the council. However, before growth can be managed, it must be initiated. On this point mayor X has clearly benefitted from an extensive network built during several “stints” in national politics – as state secretary – both before and after being elected mayor - and as deputy member of Parliament. He is also a member of the national council of his party. He has thus, in his own words, acquired “some knowledge of how things work at higher levels of politics.” This stood him in good stead in his work to get the government’s ear and influence Parliament’s decision in 2002 to build a huge industrial facility for processing natural gas in his own municipality. The mayor is an active and efficient lobbyist according to his chief administrative officer (CEO), with a strong interest in industrial growth - and “extremely adept at the political.” A more general, slightly intangible, spinoff from his stints in national politics is an extensive network – both nationally and regionally. “If I want to see somebody important, that’s no problem”, he says. According to his chief administrative officer he often succeeds in talking directly to government ministers, the prime minister included. He could even have been a government minister himself, had his wife allowed. Surprisingly, he has never seriously contemplated a career in national politics. He obviously values the experience but “I always thought that I should return home. I missed the people, kind of.” And the people obviously missed him too, if personal popularity is anything to go by.

His leadership style is consultative and consensus-oriented with an emphasis on reaching out to the opposition on issues deemed important to the local community. He characterizes himself as a good listener, but “when a decision is made I enforce it
emphatically.” In this he has the solid and competent support of the municipal administration. He enjoys an excellent working relationship with his CEO. They are a good team based on a mutual understanding of where the line should be drawn between their respective turfs.

Although there has been the odd confrontation “we have a tone that surprises most people coming here”, says the mayor, adding that the CEO’s work is like a lubricant in the municipal machinery as well as the glue that holds the administration together. They collaborate closely in preparing the annual budget, and there are no attempts at keeping certain things secret. Mutual trust and some sort of power sharing are important, but in budgetary matters the CEO’s voice is usually decisive. “I tell him that my budget proposal is a legally protected intellectual achievement that he just has to accept” the CEO says, laughing.

Given the solid majority his party commands – it currently holds 19 out of 29 seats in the council - the mayor is clearly a powerful figure, and one would perhaps expect that most issues are decided before they reach the executive committee or the council. Not necessarily as both he and his party have changed their positions, even on salient issues as a consequence of inputs from the opposition. There is also considerable headroom within the party and council members do not always have to toe the party line on issues where they beg to differ. The mayor’s role as consensus-builder is also recognized, albeit reluctantly, by the opposition as the representative we interviewed admitted that the mayor is indeed a unifying force and figurehead.

Feeling strongly about his identity and loyalties, the mayor has extended his duties well beyond what is normally expected. His secretary wonders when he sleeps. “He is here when I arrive at half past six and stays long after I’ve gone home for the day. He barely sees his family.” His working day starts at 5.30 am – clearing rubble from the street on his way to work – and normally lasts until late into the night. He attends political meetings as well as social and cultural events – regularly one or two meetings every night. He is – as even
members of the opposition willingly admit – always available. He is active on Facebook (more than 5000 friends), and is, on average, contacted by between 50 and one hundred citizens daily – in person or via e-mail! “No message is insignificant to him. He is a workhorse and very concerned about the feedback he gets”, says his CEO. Our interviews leave little doubt as to his great personal popularity. “He is likeable, easy to get along with. He is there for everybody. People are fond of him, and so am I”. Not bad, coming from a political opponent at the other end of the ideological spectrum. Needless to say then, the mayor greatly enjoys his job, virtually breathing politics round the clock, week-ends included. “I think it is great fun; it’s almost like a way of life”. He rarely goes on holiday and thinks himself lucky to have a wife “who travels the world on her own”. He gladly admits that he could not have filled the job the way he does without the acceptance and support of his spouse.

The basic ingredients or foundations of the mayor’s long career can perhaps be summarized in words such as: a strong work ethic, personal popularity, political efficiency and a resigned and largely inefficient opposition. What we have here, then, is an interesting and potent mix of likeable ‘burgermeister’ and efficient politician. The mayor is a prominent and efficient representative of his community with strong bonds to his constituency and excellent connections upwards. He comes across as a gentle giant with a low-key charisma, enjoying the trust and confidence of his ‘subjects’ as well as being well liked by his political opponents. His party’s firm grip on power – both currently and historically – is an obvious asset, not necessarily of his own making, as is the industrial growth fuelled by gas in particular. His comprehensive network at various levels of government provides great opportunities for lobbying which the mayor certainly knows how to utilize – delivering the goods in the process. In addition, a weak and largely inefficient opposition means little competition for the office – making the mayor close to invulnerable. The fact that no one
bother or dare to challenge his position may constitute a democratic deficit, but there are no signs that this is a serious concern locally.

**The first of his kind: Mayor Y**

Mayor Y leads a fairly large (approx. 18,000) and fast-growing municipality bordering the second largest city in Norway. The municipality has experienced a more or less continuous growth in population during the last 10 years or so, mostly due to ‘immigration’ from its larger neighbour. Traditionally, farming and fishing have been the economic backbones of the municipality. There are few jobs that require professional qualifications, and the new ‘immigrants’ are by and large commuters. However, the growth in population has increased the demand for housing with rising property prices as a result. As the influx of new inhabitants consists of mostly young families, the building of new schools and kindergartens and providing other services is a major challenge. In the words of the chief executive the municipality is “well run but debt-ridden”. Debt has been incurred, inter alia, from the building of a new culture and arts centre, a home for the elderly and an indoor swimming pool since “most of these projects have been financed with credit cards” to quote a representative of the opposition. A large chunk of land has been bought near a major artery and there are plans for attracting new businesses and encouraging industrial development. To achieve this, the municipality has developed its own strategy of reputation building. Visitors to the city hall are met by the municipality’s special logo placed across the entrance. The council’s method of reputation building is well thought through: its strategies are detailed and expressed in very practical terms, and summarized in a small business card like folder.

Municipal politics, then, is largely about coping with growth. The council currently holds representatives from 7 parties, with the mayor at the helm of a two-party coalition commanding a slim overall majority. The mayor started to take an interest in politics as a high school student, and became a registered member of his party as a youngster. Politics ‘proper’,
though, he entered almost by accident. Shopping for beer at the local supermarket he was approached by the owner and asked whether he would consider standing as a candidate at the upcoming local election. Although he accepted, he did not really contribute to the party’s election campaign. With his name far down the list, he never expected to get elected. Receiving a substantial amount of personal votes, he was, and at the age of 22 entered the council as its youngest member ever. Having marked himself as a talented politician, he found himself as the party’s top candidate at the next election, after which his career took off as his party became the largest on the non-socialist side.

He did not become mayor, though, until after the next election in 1999, when his party doubled its share of the vote. A majority was built through a coalition with the Conservative Party, which – according to the mayor – has been “a happy and long-lasting collaboration.” His party, a controversial player and underdog in national politics, had not had a mayor before. As the party’s first, he received a lot of media attention and met with great expectations within the party. According to himself, he saw this as a great opportunity to demonstrate that his party could govern, given the opportunity. The municipality has been hailed as the ‘political showroom’ of his party which - for a period at least – made him a national celebrity and earned him the nick-name as ‘the wizard of Os’.

However, his career has not been without its ups and downs. Having been elected as member of the county council (a position he still retains), deputy leader of his party and probably heading for a seat in parliament, he made a personal mistake that was widely covered by the national media. He admitted his mistake, resigned from his position as deputy leader and shelved his plans for a parliamentary seat. His political partners in the Conservative party wanted him to withdraw from his position as mayor, which he did not. Interestingly, the local community supported him and the role of mayor provided a platform for resurrecting his career and re-building his reputation, pulling himself up by his bootstraps.
as it were. And it worked, except for the fact that his ambition to seek higher political office has been abandoned, at least for now.

Views on his role as mayor differ somewhat. Representatives of the opposition recognize his ability, drive and personal popularity, and his willingness to build consensus, but also characterize him – perhaps unfairly - as a “bell-weather politician” who tends to lay low on difficult and controversial issues. His priorities are questioned and he is criticized for not doing enough to attract new businesses, and for being too preoccupied by housing and services. Among his own the tone is more enthusiastic – as one would expect. In the words of a fellow party member, the mayor “is there for the community. Nothing is too small, nothing is too big”. Both he and several others described the mayor as a genuine work horse, always available and a keen participant in local arrangements and events.

Others characterize him as a highly pragmatic politician who wants the very best for the community, and recognize his efforts and ability to initiate and successfully negotiate and lobby for projects that have proved highly beneficial to the local community. He does not toe the party line, and there are few traces of the market-based solutions that have been the trademark of his national party. A representative for the ‘socialist’ wing of the opposition had to admit that “my biggest headache as a member of the opposition is that his policies have become so similar to those we have pursued for almost a hundred years. I really have to exert myself to show the differences.” He added, for good measure, that “I often say that his party is the largest social-democratic party in our municipality.” The mayor, in other words, has shed much of the liberalist ideology of his mother party, tilted his local party towards the middle, and adopted ideas and policies that can best be described as social-democratic.

His CEO shares many of these assessments, emphasizing the mayor’s consensual approach to politics. The mayor understands that process is important, and that you must engage your political opponents to be efficient. The CEO describes his relationship with the
mayor as excellent. Ideally, politics and administration should be separate domains, but there is a tacit understanding here of the importance of engaging politicians at the early stages of municipal projects. This is done through project groups composed of both politicians and administrators, a ‘design’ or ‘method’ that informs the former about the work of the administration and generates respect for its contribution and expertise. He also emphasizes the mayor’s willingness to experiment and his innovative bent, mentioning the municipal home for the elderly as a case in point. This was conceived as a joint venture with private actors running one half of it, the municipality the other. This is an alternative to either privatizing the whole unit or keeping it a public responsibility. Clients/users are questioned regularly in order to compare the performance of the two ‘halves’. As a model of public-private collaboration that combines ‘privatization’ and municipal ‘governance’ in delivering a public service, it has received much publicity and been copied by other municipalities. This is a mayor willing to experiment as well as compromise. To him, what works is more important than what is ideologically correct.

Summing up, mayor Y is a local lad who has ‘survived’ by being pragmatic, playing down ideology and dissenting from the party line when that has been deemed necessary. He has been adept at building a viable coalition in the council, engaged himself in local affairs beyond the realm of politics, thus earning considerable personal popularity and trust – both among citizens and fellow politicians on both sides of the aisle. He has worked well with the current CEO, and made some bold and unconventional decisions that have eventually paid off. In addition, his innovative bent and unexpected moves made him a political celebrity, at least for a period as, of course, did his personal mistake but then in a negative sense.

**From minor player to prominent politician: Mayor Z**

Mayor Z is the only female in our sample, and leads a mid-sized municipality (approx. 13 000) bordering a larger and major city in the region. Historically, the local economy has
been based on forestry and other industries, and population growth has largely been a result of industrial demand for manpower. As of today, the municipality has a varied economy of services, retailing and crafts-based businesses. In spite of the lumber plant – a traditional economic backbone - filing for bankruptcy recently, the municipal centre is growing, both in terms of population and business activities. There are challenges, of course. Expenditures on social services are high and there are too many people on disability allowances. Educational levels are low, and few youngsters go on to university or other institutions of higher education such as regional colleges. Municipal politics has an interesting and unusual historical legacy in the co-existence and close cooperation of the religious lay-movement and the labour movement, a legacy instrumental in generating the current collaboration between the Christian Peoples Party and the Labour Party in the council. Being both a Pentecostal and a member of the Labour Party is not unheard of, although less common today than it used to be in an age where both movements were “arenas for the little man” to quote the municipality’s CEO.

The current council holds representatives from 5 parties, with the mayor leading a two-party coalition commanding a clear-cut majority. The mayor entered local politics in response to a request to accept a nomination as no. 22 on the party’s list at the local election in 1987. Contributing actively to the election campaign, she received enough personal votes to reach the no. 12 spot, and the status as deputy member of the council. She got involved in party work and met as a (deputy) member of the council several times. From then on, “it just took off”. She was elected to the council at the next election, and in spite of being far down on the party’s list of candidates she came in second best due to personal votes. “At that point they (the party) just did not know what to do with me”. At the 1999 election she was asked to top the list of candidates, was duly elected and eventually became mayor – a position she has held since. She is also the chair of the county branch of her party and member of the party’s
national council. Her standing in the party is such that she was nominated in second place on its list of candidates for this year’s (2013) parliamentary election. She is not, however, too keen on a parliamentary seat, and thinks the role of mayor is just as exiting. “Local politics is about finding practical solutions, national politics is often more about scoring rhetorical points”.

Until being asked to top the party’s list, she had not contemplated making politics a career. The experience, however, has been rewarding – not least because she was allowed to start her mayoral career “quietly and cautiously”. She soon realized that “engaging in local politics could make a difference. You could contribute. To me it has also been enormously important that people have believed in me.” And the urge to contribute is just as strong as before, and she is not thinking of resigning. So far, she has had no serious competitors for the office, but is quick to point out the advantages of incumbency. “Most people know the mayor, but have little knowledge of other politicians.”

She is not overly concerned or constrained by the party’s program in her role. “I’m the mayor for everybody in the municipality, and I shall administer the will of the majority”. Party politics as such is a matter for the group leader in the council. She hastens to add though, that she is committed to the party’s program and that no politician should place herself above the party. That said, she quickly points to a couple of salient issues where she has not toed the party line and supported positions she felt were good for the community. Her ethos of being everybody’s mayor is confirmed by a representative of the opposition who characterizes her as a “unifying and highly visible figure”. She takes part in a broad range of local events, rarely says no when asked but tries to separate politics and her private life. That, in fact, is not always easy as the role of mayor tend to be a 24-hour job. The media has become more aggressive and politicians - leaders in particular - are more exposed than ever before. As mayor you cannot just take off your political robe when the meeting is over. Your
constituents are always keen to talk politics when you meet them on the street or at the local supermarket. Another factor here is the increasing attention to citizens’ rights – especially those pertaining to welfare and social services. “However small the mistake, the media are right at your door demanding an answer. You must always be on the alert, there are no places to hide.”

Both the opposition and the CEO characterize the mayor as consensus-oriented, pragmatic, always looking for solutions. Her relationship with the business community is good; she visits local businesses at regular intervals, accompanied by her CEO and meets with the local business association at least once a month. She sees her role in this regard primarily as a facilitator, someone whose task is to bring people together and make them work as a team. Team work is also at the core of the mayor’s relationship with the administration. She has worked with two CEOs, and goes out of her way in praising the current one. The former CEO was overly preoccupied with what you could or should not do, the current one is forward-looking, focussing on possibilities and prospects rather than on problems and constraints. “That makes a world of difference.” A good relationship between politics and administration is a must since the professional competence and loyalty of the latter are crucial to a well-run municipality, not least economically. This is confirmed by her CEO who appreciates the mayor’s hands-off approach to administrative affairs, her emphasis on budgetary discipline and her ability to separate politics and administration.

Being a female politician and mayor was difficult to begin with even though there was a lot of goodwill around. “You kind of wondered whether this was a wall of goodwill”. What hurt the most initially were remarks to the effect that she did not have a good enough appearance to be mayor! She lacked some confidence initially, and struggled to master the political rhetoric. That said, she thinks the most difficult question for a woman seeking a political career is probably whether you dare or not. Having decided that you do, things tend
to work out better than you expected, especially if you succeed in putting your personal stamp on the role. She now enjoys her work immensely and thinks the role of mayor has been more rewarding than she’d ever imagined. “But I have worked hard, done my best, and that is satisfying.”

Hard-working, energetic, pragmatic, consensus-oriented and highly visible, mayor Z is strikingly similar to the other two in her approach to the job. Her personal popularity was apparent even at the start of her career as getting such a large chunk of personal votes is a sure sign of a well-liked politician. Initially, though, her own party did not quite know what to make of her. Given her personal popularity, the offer of a larger role was almost unavoidable, and duly accepted. Like the other two she is firmly rooted in her local community but not totally averse to a career at the national level. Accepting the no. 2 spot on her party’s list of candidates at the last parliamentary election is a sure sign of that. However, clearly enjoying her job as mayor, a national career is not at all imperative as she already has most of the network that comes with it. Her gender has not been a problem, except – it seems - for some sniggering remarks when she decided to go for the job.

**Conclusion**

Attempting to trace the roots of long-term mayoral careers, we have portrayed three political leaders who differ with regard to personal histories, the challenges they face, the environment in which they work, the (political) baggage they carry, and the party they represent. Yet they exhibit strikingly similar styles of leadership. The ways in which they handle the opportunities offered – and challenges entailed – by their ill-defined role, exhibit some common characteristics that may account for their successful careers and longevity in office. To begin with they share some important personal qualities such as a strong work ethic and enthusiasm for the job. All three seems to have made the office a way of life – with the
personal sacrifices that may entail. They are highly visible in the local community, always available, rarely say no to take part in social events and cultural arrangements. They enjoy considerable personal popularity, even among their political opponents. Politically they come across as pragmatic and non-ideological in their approach, adept at building coalitions and forging compromises across the aisle. Playing party politics is anathema; if necessary they leave this to the local party chair or the group leader in the council. They have an excellent working relationship with their CEOs, based on a mutual understanding of their respective domains. Other trademarks are good connections ‘upwards’, particularly in their own parties, large personal networks that have proved instrumental in attracting both people and new businesses, and some experience from national or county-level politics. The job is not conceived as a springboard to higher office but – with one exception, perhaps – they do not necessarily exclude the possibility of a stint in national politics should opportunity knock. Strong and obvious rivals for the office, in their own party or outside, are virtually non-existent, and all three can probably remain in charge as long as they find the job worthwhile. Fulfilling the (minimum) requirements of the office, these mayors have been successful both in executing their formal duties and adhering to the social norms and stakeholder expectations pertaining to the more informal aspects of their role, possibly with a view to their self-interests as career politicians.

The ultimate key to understanding and explaining the long-term careers of these politicians may, however, lie beyond the realm of politics proper, or outside politics in the more narrow and instrumental sense. The character of the office as a preference role with few formal constraints represents an opportunity to demonstrate abilities beyond the purely political, opportunities that ‘our’ mayors have been adept at exploiting - often in ways that have increased and sustained their personal popularity. What we have in mind here are their abilities as community leaders, unifying ‘father figures’ dedicated to the common interests of
their constituents, with no personal or (party-)political axes to grind. In other words, it is not only what mayors do as the formal heads of their municipal government that matter, but how they fill the role of community leader, how they combine the role of efficient political executive with that of a dedicated ‘head of state’. Our three, at least, are mayors who come across as both ‘prime ministers’ and ‘presidents’.

References:


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