

**THE POLITICAL COMPETENCE OF REPRESENTATIVES IN LATIN
AMERICA: AN ANALYSIS OF ELEVEN NATIONAL CASES**

Manuel Alcántara
malcanta@usal.es

Universidad de Salamanca
Spain

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Introduction¹

Studies on politicians' careers have a long history and a central place in Political Science². Some show the possibility of analysing a politician from the perspective of the individual, cultural, social and institutional mechanisms that take him to power and help him stay there. Others explain the effect of one type of political personality or other on the political process itself. Both currents within this literature refer to several aspects, including psychological features (where ambition is particularly important) and other characteristics that together form a list of competences that are more or less essential for any politician. The aim of this paper is to focus on this second group of aspects and undertake an analysis of political competence for a group of 11 countries in Latin America which are different in size and political development, in terms of the quality of democracy. The empirical investigation is based on the replies of a selection of Representatives from the last legislatures in these countries³. As in this study we do not consider psychological explanations, first of all we shall explain the pertinence of the use of the term “competence” rather than “professionalization” or “quality”. We continue by defining an index of political competence. To conclude we aim to relate this competence with the quality of democracy, following a concept measured by different authors⁴.

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Competence versus professionalization and quality

Studies on the role of politicians vary from analyses that underline their professionalization to investigations on the quality of their actions. In the case of the former, Weber (1967: 95) established that the professionalization of politics depends on two inter-related situations that combined living “for” politics and living “from” politics. For his part, Sartori (1992: 180) supported a definition of a professional politician in a strict sense as one that simply did not have another profession. In other works, politicians have been analysed, more specifically, from the point of view of their work as candidates (Poutvaara y Takalo, 2004), as candidates promoted by interest

¹ Please note that it is a very preliminary version of the final work. I am grateful to Cristina Rivas for the statistical treatment of the data and to Claire Wright for the translation of the text.

² For a review of the literature on this topic, see Martínez-Rosón (2008b).

³ See PELA (1994-2008).

⁴ The following indexes are used: *IDD-Polilat* (the Konrad Adenauer Foundation), *The Economist Intelligence Unit* (EIU) and the index of Levine y Molina (2007)

groups (Wittman, 2005) or as parliamentarians (Martínez-Rosón, 2008a). According to the replies from Latin American Representatives, very few dedicate themselves exclusively to politics therefore the professionalization of the political class considered here is rather different from Sartori's ideal.

In terms of the quality of Representatives' actions, Weber himself (1967: 153) highlighted the key qualities for any politician. He referred to passion (in terms of a passionate commitment to a cause), a sense of responsibility, and control (a capacity to keep a distance from people and events). More recently, competence and honesty have been established as two dimensions of quality (Caselli y Morelli, 2000). Clearly, passion, control and honesty are difficult factors to measure and imply a high level of subjectivity, which means that they are not particularly useful for the purpose of comparison. For example, honesty is linked to fulfilling standards with an ethical component in the social environment in which the politician works - something that can change quite substantially from one country to another. The "ambition" component presents similar difficulties (Martínez Rosón, 2008b).

On the other hand, quality is generally related to a politician's ability to satisfy the expectations of a determined group, whether it is the population in general, the political class itself or specialist external observers. This leads us to the question of the definition of expectations and how to measure to what extent they are met.

The term "competence" is defended in this paper and is a result of elements that together make up the skills that are needed to carry out political tasks⁵. It is rather different from the vision of Caselli and Morelli (2000), which associates competence with the search for an optimum balance between offering vital public goods and a minimum level of fiscal income. In this sense, the PELA study helps us to elaborate an index that captures this concept, based on Representatives' replies to the questionnaire. Two components that make up the series of skills necessary for a Latin American politician to carry out his role are his level of education and the *cursus honorum* of his political career.

⁵ In this sense it is near to the idea defended by Martínez Rosón (2008a:236), according to which quality is the group of personal skills that give the legislator the necessary competence to carry out his or her obligations.

The political competence index

The political competence index used in this paper is measured on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 is minimum competence in political leadership and 100 is maximum competence. The index is made up of two factors: education and political career. Each factor has been given a different weight bearing in mind that they affect a person's political competence in different ways. For this reason, greater value is given to a the parliamentarian's experience or political career than his education (given that the education level of the Representatives in the eleven countries analysed here is in the vast majority of cases university studies, which means that we could not establish considerable differences between countries.) The variable that constitutes the **education** factor is the Representative's level of studies and accounts for 35% of the total weight of the index. For its part, the **political career** factor accounts for the remaining 65%. This factor is made up of five variables: parliamentary experience (measured by the number of times that a Representative has been elected), the number of years in politics⁶, experience in popular representation, experience in appointed posts and party experience. Experience in roles of popular representation, appointed posts and party experience are made up of two variables: the number of roles carried out and the importance of these roles. These five variables are given the same importance and therefore each one of them represents 13% of the total weight assigned to the political career factor (65%)⁷.

TABLE 1: Political competence index by country (average)
(Scale from 0 to 100)

Country	I. Political competence
-Costa Rica	45.36
-Dominican Republic	45.50
-Nicaragua	45.17
-Chile	44.66
-Mexico	41.62
-Colombia	41.51
-Peru	38.81
-Guatemala	38.12
-El Salvador	37.67
-Honduras	36.39
-Bolivia	27.60

⁶ The years of militancy in a political party have been grouped into thirteen categories: between 0 and 5 years; 6 and 10 years; 11 and 15 years; 16 and 20 years; 21 and 25 years; 26 and 30 years; 31 and 35 years; 36 and 40 years; 41 and 45 years; 46 and 50 years; 51 and 55 years; 56 and 60 years; 61 and 65 years and over 66 years.

⁷ In the case of Costa Rica, the "political career" factor is calculated with four variables as in this country it is not possible for Representatives to be re-elected.

Table 2 establishes five groups according to the Representatives' level of political competence (0-20: very low quality; 20-40: low quality; 40-60: medium quality; 60-80: high quality; 80-100: very high quality). However, in later analyses we join the categories of low and very low on one hand and high and very high on the other hand (in fact no individual fits in the "very high" group). In this way, three groups are formed, which are more efficient for carrying out further analyses due to the greater number of cases in each category (Table 3).

TABLE 2: Distribution of Representatives by political competence and country (%).

Country	I. Very low competence	I. Low competence	I. Medium competente	I. High competence	I. Very high competence
-Bolivia	31.3 (30)	55.2 (53)	13.5 (13)	.0	.0
-Chile	2.2 (2)	31.1 (28)	55.6 (50)	11.1 (10)	.0
-Colombia	4.0 (4)	34.7 (35)	58.4 (59)	3.0 (3)	.0
-Costa Rica	1.8 (1)	33.3 (19)	50.9 (29)	14.0 (8)	.0
-El Salvador	11.1 (8)	43.1 (31)	44.4 (32)	1.4 (1)	.0
-Guatemala	2.1 (2)	59.8 (58)	35.1 (34)	3.1 (3)	.0
-Honduras	11.0 (10)	56.0 (51)	30.8 (28)	2.2 (2)	.0
-Mexico	2.3 (3)	47.7 (61)	45.3 (58)	4.7 (6)	.0
-Nicaragua	.0 (0)	33.3 (23)	63.8 (44)	2.9 (2)	.0
-Perú	6.5 (6)	46.7 (43)	42.4 (39)	4.3 (4)	.0
-Dominican Republic	1.1 (1)	28.0 (26)	66.7 (62)	4.3 (4)	.0

* Recodification of the political competence index from 0 to 100 into five groups: (0-20: very low quality; 20-40: low quality; 40-60: medium quality; 60-80: high quality; 80-100: very high quality)

TABLE 3: Distribution of Representatives by political competence and country (%), (grouping together the categories very low/low and high/very high).

Country	I.Low or very low competence	I.Medium competence	I.High or very high competence
-Bolivia	86.5 (83)	13.5 (13)	.0 (0)
-Chile	33.3 (30)	55.6 (50)	11.1 (10)
-Colombia	38.6 (39)	58.4 (59)	3.0 (3)
-Costa Rica	35.1 (20)	50.9 (29)	14.0 (8)
-El Salvador	54.2 (39)	44.4 (32)	1.4 (1)
-Guatemala	61.9 (60)	35.1 (34)	3.1 (3)
-Honduras	67.0 (61)	30.8 (28)	2.2 (2)
-Mexico	50.0 (64)	45.3 (58)	4.7 (6)
-Nicaragua	33.3 (23)	63.8 (44)	2.9 (2)
-Peru	53.3 (49)	42.4 (39)	4.3 (4)
-Dominican Republic	29.0 (27)	66.7 (62)	4.3 (4)

A priori, it is easy to presume that a Representative's age is closely linked to his or her experience and number of years in politics. The eleven countries analysed here support this hypothesis: there is a significant relationship between a Representative's age and

his level of political competence⁸. Therefore, it can be said that the older a Representative is, the more politically competent he is. Table 4 shows political competence index by age groups.

TABLE 4: Distribution of Representatives by political competence and age (%).

Political competence index	Under 35 yrs old	Between 35 and 40 yrs old	Between 41 and 50 yrs old.	Between 51 and 60 yrs old.	Over 60 yrs old.
Low or very low competence	72.5 (74)	61.3 (111)	46.6 (173)	43.9 (107)	33.8 (27)
Medium competence	27.5 (28)	36.5 (66)	49.9 (185)	49.6 (121)	53.8 (43)
High or very high competence	.0 (0)	2.2 (4)	3.5 (13)	6.6 (16)	12.5 (10)

Education and political career as separate aspects of political competence

In this section we analyse two factors that make up the political competence index. To do this, we calculate an education index and a political career index, both on a scale from 1 to 100.

The education index consists of the Representative's level of studies.

For its part, the political career index is formed by five variables: parliamentary experience; the number of years in politics⁹; experience in popular representation and the importance of the posts carried out; experience in appointed posts and their importance; and party experience together with the importance of the tasks carried out. These five variables that make up political career are of equal importance and therefore will all have the same weight in the index, that is to say 20% of the total¹⁰.

TABLE 5: Education and political career indexes by country (averages) (Scale from 0 to 100).

Country	I. Education	I. Political career
-Bolivia	66.93	6.35
-Chile	83.61	23.64
-Colombia	87.62	16.52

⁸ The coefficient or correlation between these two variables is 0.222 and is significant with a confidence level of 0.01.

⁹ The years of militancy in a political party have been grouped into thirteen categories: between 0 and 5 years; 6 and 10 years; 11 and 15 years; 16 and 20 years; 21 and 25 years; 26 and 30 years; 31 and 35 years; 36 and 40 years; 41 and 45 years; 46 and 50 years; 51 and 55 years; 56 and 60 years; 61 and 65 years; and over 66 years.

¹⁰ In the case of Costa Rica, the "political career" factor is calculated with four variables as in this country it is not possible for Representatives to be re-elected.

-Costa Rica	80.26	24.97
-El Salvador	65.63	22.33
-Guatemala	74.23	18.52
-Honduras	63.46	21.63
-Mexico	80.08	20.59
-Nicaragua	88.41	21.66
-Peru	80.98	15.98
-Dominican Republic	83.33	25.01

TABLE 6: Distribution of Representatives by education and country (%).

Country	Very low	Low	Médium	High	Very high
-Bolivia	5.2 (5)	20.8 (20)	10.4 (10)	28.1 (27)	35.4 (34)
-Chile	.0 (0)	3.3 (3)	5.6 (5)	44.4 (40)	46.7 (42)
-Colombia	.0 (0)	1.0 (1)	8.9 (9)	28.7 (29)	61.4 (62)
-Costa Rica	1.8 (1)	5.3 (3)	.0 (0)	56.1 (32)	36.8 (21)
-El Salvador	2.8 (2)	13.9 (10)	22.2 (16)	40.3 (29)	20.8 (15)
-Guatemala	.0 (0)	4.1 (4)	21.6 (21)	47.4 (46)	26.8 (26)
-Honduras	2.2 (2)	25.3 (23)	3.3 (3)	54.9 (50)	14.3 (13)
-Mexico	.0 (0)	1.6 (2)	7.8 (10)	59.4 (76)	31.3 (40)
-Nicaragua	.0 (0)	.0 (0)	.0 (0)	46.4 (32)	53.6 (37)
-Peru	1.1 (1)	3.3 (3)	8.7 (8)	44.6 (41)	42.4 (39)
-Dominican Republic	.0 (0)	.0 (0)	9.7 (9)	47.3 (44)	43.0 (40)

* Re-codification of the index of education from 0 to 100 in five groups: (0-20: very low quality; 20-40: low quality; 40-60: medium quality; 60-80: high quality; 80-100: very high quality)

TABLE 7: Distribution of Representatives by political career and country (%).

Country	Very low	Low	Medium	High
-Bolivia	95.8 (92)	4.2 (4)	.0 (0)	.0 (0)
-Chile	43.3 (39)	45.6 (41)	11.1 (10)	.0 (0)
-Colombia	68.3 (69)	28.7 (29)	3.0 (3)	.0 (0)
-Costa Rica	49.1 (28)	24.6 (14)	21.1 (12)	5.3 (3)
-El Salvador	44.4 (32)	50.0 (36)	5.6 (4)	.0 (0)
-Guatemala	63.9 (62)	27.8 (27)	8.2 (8)	.0 (0)
-Honduras	49.5 (45)	39.6 (36)	11.0 (10)	.0 (0)
-Mexico	53.9 (69)	40.6 (52)	5.5 (7)	.0 (0)
-Nicaragua	52.2 (36)	44.9 (31)	2.9 (2)	.0 (0)
-Peru	64.1 (59)	29.3 (27)	6.5 (6)	.0 (0)
- Dominican Republic	31.2 (29)	64.5 (60)	4.3 (4)	.0 (0)

* Re-codification of the index of political career from 0 to 100 in five groups: (0-20: very low quality; 20-40: low quality; 40-60: medium quality; 60-80: high quality; 80-100: very high quality)

In this case, there is also a significant correlation between age and political career¹¹. Furthermore, it can be said that the older a Representative is, the longer his political career will be. However, there is no relationship between a deputy's age and his level of education.

¹¹ The coefficient of correlation is 0.366 and is significant with a confidence level of 0.01.

In any case, there does seem to be a correlation – albeit a very weak one – between a Representative’s level of education and political career, with a coefficient of 0.081 and a confidence level of 0.05. Therefore, it could be said that those individuals with greater education also have greater political experience.

TABLE 8: Distribution of Representatives by political career and age (%).

Political competence index	Under 35 yrs old	Between 35 and 40 yrs old	Between 41 and 50 yrs old.	Between 51 and 60 yrs old.	Over 60 yrs old.
Very low	83.3 (85)	74.0 (134)	55.8 (207)	44.3 (108)	27.5 (22)
Low	16.7 (17)	24.9 (45)	39.4 (146)	43.9 (107)	47.5 (38)
Medium	.0 (0)	1.1 (2)	4.6 (17)	11.9 (29)	22.5 (18)
High	.0 (0)	.0 (0)	0.3 (1)	.0 (0)	2.5 (2)

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DATA FOR BOLIVIA

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence
Level of party militancy		
-High	55.6	25.0
-Medium	29.6	41.7
-Low	14.8	33.3
Level of participation		
-Intense and constant	61.0	16.7
-Only in elections	30.5	75.0
-Infrequent and marginal	8.5	8.3
Voting discipline		
-Always	14.5	15.4
-Depends on the topic	60.2	53.8
-Never	25.3	30.8
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	48.2	61.6
Average number of relatives in politics.	.61	.62
Average level of education of parents.	2.78	3.81
Average age of interviewees.	42.27	50.15

DATA FOR CHILE

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	10.0	2.0	11.1
-Medium	33.3	28.6	22.2
-Low	56.7	69.4	66.7
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	13.8	2.2	10.0
-Only in elections	69.0	67.4	80.0
-Infrequent and marginal	17.2	30.4	10.0
Voting discipline			
-Always	.0	4.1	.0
-Depends on the topic	76.7	83.7	100.0
-Never	23.3	12.2	.0
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	70.0	62.0	60.0
Average number of relatives in politics.	1.17	.68	.70
Average level of education of parents.	3.78	3.73	3.55
Average age of interviewees.	45.10	49.36	58.30

DATA FOR COLOMBIA

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	7.9	19.0	33.3

-Medium	48.6	32.2	33.3
-Low	43.2	48.3	33.3
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	5.4	15.3	33.3
-Only in elections	62.2	62.7	66.7
-Infrequent and marginal	32.4	22.0	.0
Voting discipline			
-Always	66.7	50.8	33.3
-Depends on the topic	17.9	45.8	33.3
-Never	15.4	3.4	33.3
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	51.2	54.2	100.0
Average number of relatives in politics.	.68	.58	2.00
Average level of education of parents.	3.50	3.19	2.33
Average age of interviewees.	41.97	46.41	51.33

DATA FOR COSTA RICA

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	35.0	41.4	12.5
-Medium	45.0	31.0	62.5
-Low	20.0	27.6	25.0
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	45.0	41.4	12.5
-Only in elections	50.0	48.3	62.5
-Infrequent and marginal	5.0	10.3	25.0
Voting discipline			
-Always	25.0	27.6	37.5
-Depends on the topic	55.0	55.2	62.5
-Never	20.0	17.2	.0
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	40.0	69.0	75.0
Average number of relatives in politics.	.85	.79	.88
Average level of education of parents.	2.40	2.83	2.81
Average age of interviewees.	45.45	52.59	55.00

DATA FOR EL SALVADOR

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	57.9	62.5	.0
-Medium	34.2	18.8	100.0
-Low	7.9	18.8	.0
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	57.9	67.7	100.0
-Only in elections	26.3	25.8	.0
-Infrequent and marginal	15.8	6.5	.0
Voting discipline			
-Always	69.2	43.8	.0
-Depends on the topic	15.4	37.5	100.0

-Never	15.4	18.8	.0
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	43.5	59.4	100.0
Average number of relatives in politics.	.64	1.00	3.00
Average level of education of parents.	2.14	2.92	4.00
Average age of interviewees.	48.00	48.66	68.00

DATA FOR GUATEMALA

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	40.7	23.5	.0
-Medium	28.8	38.2	66.7
-Low	30.5	38.2	33.3
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	33.9	29.4	.0
-Only in elections	47.5	50.0	66.7
-Infrequent and marginal	18.6	20.6	33.3
Voting discipline			
-Always	25.0	58.8	33.3
-Depends on the topic	53.3	35.3	66.7
-Never	21.7	5.9	.0
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	35.0	47.1	66.7
Average number of relatives in politics.	.81	1.03	2.00
Average level of education of parents.	2.81	3.00	3.00
Average age of interviewees.	44.58	49.06	44.33

DATA FOR HONDURAS

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	63.9	46.4	50.0
-Medium	26.2	50.0	.0
-Low	9.8	3.6	50.0
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	41.0	21.4	50.0
-Only in elections	52.5	71.4	50.0
-Infrequent and marginal	6.6	7.1	.0
Voting discipline			
-Always	9.8	7.1	.0
-Depends on the topic	31.1	57.1	100.0
-Never	59.0	35.7	.0
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	73.8	78.6	100.0
Average number of relatives in politics.	1.16	1.61	1.00

Average level of education of parents.	2.77	3.00	3.00
Average age of interviewees.	47.98	49.32	61.00

DATA FOR MEXICO

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	27.4	22.8	33.3
-Medium	41.9	31.6	16.7
-Low	30.6	45.6	50.0
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	50.8	45.6	50.0
-Only in elections	39.7	35.1	33.3
-Infrequent and marginal	9.5	19.3	16.7
Voting discipline			
-Always	14.3	23.6	16.7
-Depends on the topic	58.7	45.5	50.0
-Never	27.0	30.9	33.3
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	42.2	57.9	50.0
Average number of relatives in politics.	.52	.88	.67
Average level of education of parents.	3.22	3.53	3.08
Average age of interviewees.	42.41	43.56	46.33

DATA FOR NICARAGUA

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	73.9	61.4	.0
-Medium	21.7	22.7	50.0
-Low	4.3	15.9	50.0
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	78.3	45.5	.0
-Only in elections	21.7	40.9	100.0
-Infrequent and marginal	.0	13.6	.0
Voting discipline			
-Always	56.5	45.5	100.0
-Depends on the topic	30.4	43.2	.0
-Never	13.0	11.4	.0
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	60.8	61.4	100.0
Average number of relatives in politics.	.74	1.34	3.00
Average level of education of parents.	2.52	3.25	3.25
Average age of interviewees.	42.52	49.61	67.50

DATA FOR PERU

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	8.3	20.5	50.0
-Medium	37.5	35.9	25.0
-Low	54.2	43.6	25.0
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	12.2	25.6	50.0
-Only in elections	42.9	35.9	25.0
-Infrequent and marginal	44.9	38.5	25.0
Voting discipline			
-Always	25.0	37.8	75.0
-Depends on the topic	45.8	45.9	25.0
-Never	29.2	16.2	.0
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	51.0	61.6	50.0
Average number of relatives in politics.	.76	.97	1.00
Average level of education of parents.	3.25	3.62	2.63
Average age of interviewees.	48.12	46.69	52.75

DATA FOR THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

	I. Low or very low competence	I. Medium competence	I. High or very high competence
Level of party militancy			
-High	81.5	62.1	75.0
-Medium	18.5	24.1	25.0
-Low	.0	13.8	.0
Level of participation			
-Intense and constant	70.8	41.8	33.3
-Only in elections	29.2	49.1	33.3
-Infrequent and marginal	.0	9.1	33.3
Voting discipline			
-Always	44.4	29.0	.0
-Depends on the topic	29.6	46.8	75.0
-Never	25.9	24.2	25.0
Frequently talked about politics at home when young.	59.3	61.3	50.0
Average number of relatives in politics.	.81	.87	1.25
Average level of education of parents.	2.52	2.48	2.50
Average age of interviewees.	45.67	47.53	47.75

DETAILS AND TIMESCALE OF RESEARCH CARRIED OUT

Country	Legislative Period	Interviews carried out	% of the total number of Representatives	Theoretical error	Dates of fieldwork
- Bolivia	2006-2010	98	75.4%	±5.24	August-September 2006
- Chile	2006-2010	90	75.0%	±5.52	August-September 2006
- Colombia	2006-2010	107	64.5%	±5.14	August-September 2006
- Costa Rica	2006-2010	57	100.0%	±0.00	June 2006
- El Salvador	2006-2009	72	85.0%	±4.61	August 2006
- Guatemala	2008-2012	98	62.0%	±6.31	May 2008
- Honduras	2006-2010	91	71.1%	±5.78	July 2006
- Mexico	2006-2009	128	25.6%	±7.13	September-December 2006
- Nicaragua	2007-2011	69	75.0%	±5.89	May-June 2007
- Peru	2006-2011	96	80.0%	±4.70	August-September 2006
-Dominican Republic	2006-2010	94	52.8%	±7.12	October 2006