

Political career and political capital

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Abstract: This is a theoretical proposal for the study of political careers from the perspective of three different moments (beginning, development and conclusion) according to the use of political capital made by politicians. Different patterns of political capital as well as their impact on political trajectories are studied; the weight of time and economic resources (political income) are also considered. A politician is somebody elected through an electoral process and/or nominated by someone elected; it is also the case of any organic member of an institution, e.g., a political party. Regardless of the case, this individual must receive a salary for such activity.

Key words: political careers, political capital, elites, professionalization of politicians.

Resumen: Se trata de una propuesta de naturaleza teórica para el estudio de las carreras políticas desde la perspectiva de la existencia de tres momentos diferentes (entrada, desempeño y salida), en conformidad con el uso del capital político que gestionan los políticos. Se abordan teóricamente distintos patrones de capital político así como su impacto sobre las trayectorias políticas seguidas. El peso del tiempo transcurrido y los ingresos recibidos por la actividad política son igualmente considerados. Político es aquella persona que es elegida en un proceso electoral y/o que es nominada en un puesto de confianza por alguien elegido, también lo es quien tiene un cargo orgánico en una institución como un partido político. A ello debe sumarse recibir una remuneración por esa actividad.

Palabras clave: carreras políticas, capital político, élites, profesionalización de la política.

Introduction¹

The present work,² whose nature is speculative and leaves empirical evidence for future analyses aside, has as a study goal to develop some aspects previously exposed on a politician's profession (Alcántara, 2012 and 2013); now focusing on the logic of a career under a dual supposition. In the first place, it is considered that current politics offers sufficient empirical evidence to state that people who devote to politics do so for sufficiently long periods over which they perform their activity in various posts, this way this allows referring to the existence of a career.

Secondly, political activity's permanence over time is carried out by means of a classic strategy to capitalize various assets, diverse in nature, that are comprised under the name of political capital. In this supposition, moreover, the potentially accumulated political capital is a factor that can have an explanatory nature when understanding the mechanisms to leave politics, as well as the new niches after leaving politics behind, as aspect that is scarcely approached.

In their interaction political career and political capital acquire the character of dependent variable configuring a specific object of study that has certain tradition, however they also become explanatory independent variables of the acting of the whole political system, and in the end, of its quality. Both standpoints are at present interesting owing to the existing social criticism to the so called professional politicians and the consequential intent of political regeneration, based on the personnel change politics lives at present.

The political career supposes a three-stage process: beginning, development and conclusion. It is not possible to understand a political trajectory in an integrated manner disregarding these three stages. Even if it is true that the pristine instant of entrance, following the neo-institutional logic of *path dependence* is the one that has called the most attention when studying the political profession, remaining in the same perspective is blatantly insufficient.

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2 The first version was presented at Congress of Spanish Association of Political Science (AECPA), held in Seville, 2013. Likewise, its relation with the research project "Congruencia política y representación: élite parlamentaria y opinión pública en América Latina" [Political congruence and representativeness: parliamentary elite and public opinion in Latin America], funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. Ref.: CSO2012-39377-C02-01.

Focusing on the selection processes and on the very beginning of a political career does not give an account of the becoming of that individual who entered politics in their subsequent relation with various institutional mechanisms, as neither does it adequately inform on the incentives, obstacles and opportunity structure, which by and large every political system offers.

The political career is a process that gathers, in the core of an entanglement of institutions, personal concerns which, as pointed out by Max Weber (1967), mix ambition and vocation, at once with gradual circumstantial rearrangements, the fruit of negotiations, success and failure, and chance as well. The political career, on the other hand, has a longitudinal character that holds various rearrangements derived from political life, giving an answer to its purpose at all times.

The political career demise, or else, leaving politics, is its par excellence explanatory point; it verifies or disavows both the subject's initial appointment and the existence of systemic patterns that injuriously influenced various trajectories. The way a politician concludes their task is also an indicator of the political life of the system they were part of.

After the introduction, this work of propositional nature is divided into four parts. In the second section issues related to the conceptualization of political capital are approached; then, the model to study political career based on three stages: entrance, development and conclusion is presented; in section four, the weight of time as substrate for political capital as well as the economic factor in political career are analyzed; finally, conclusions related to the relation between political capital and political career are restated.

Political capital

To explain the entrance of people in politics, frequently emphasis has been given to the weight of socialization factors (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2011), the institutional character (Siavelis and Morgenthern, 2008), or theory of ambition and the advantages of incumbents (Botero, 2011). From that moment on, the following steps in politics are a combination of the existing institutional framework that configures a determinate structure of opportunities with individual impulses driven by ambition, either discreet (satisfied once a post is obtained), static (remaining in the post is the objective) or progressive (the end is to climb up the ladder) (Schlesinger, 1966: 10). In a quite tentative manner, there are also steps in the field of life sciences, where genetics (Hibbing *et al.*, 2014) and neuroscience (Westen, 2007) are beginning to have noticeable advancement.

As a complement, an approximation that can shed light on the process implied by political career is to use the concept of political capital on the basis of its exploitation over the span of any political life. Bourdieu's (1981: 18-19) contribution in this respect is fundamental, as it distinguishes the existence of two sorts of political capital: personal and delegated.

Personal political capital is based on the fundamental idea of being "known and recognized", in virtue of possessing notability and popularity owing to have certain specific qualities. The origin of this sort of capital mixes issues of biological nature with other produced by a sort of osmosis of the social environment where the individual grows. In their development, there may be at first a personal political capital, noticeably as a consequence of a slow and continual accumulation over life, by means of performing different activities in different fields which imply gaining experience. However, there may be another heroic or prophetic political capital, in the Weberian line of the charismatic, in which the potentiation of emotional links is the decisive indicator this intuitive distinction, necessarily complementary, fully agrees with recent works in the field of neurosciences that defend with solid empirical evidence that any competence and skill are based on the conformation of cognitive castings generated in the brain (Goldberg, 2007).

On the contrary, the capital delegated from a political authority is the product of a limited and provisional transference of a capital wielded and controlled by an institution and only by it. Therefore, such capital follows a particular logic according to which investiture is an act of virtually magical nature by means of which the institution officially consecrates the official candidate. The link between this sort of capital and institutional maturity is evident; this way, in situations of indubitable deinstitutionalization a clear reduction of it is noticed. On the contrary, highly institutionalized political systems offer high levels of capital from delegation, being able to alleviate deficiencies, if any, in the personal political capital.

In scenarios of evident institutionalization personal and delegated political capital are in constant interaction. It is understood that over their active life, the politician has a rather extensive baggage of personal assets under the figure of attributions and qualities, which join with institutional aspects of the political system in a cumulative process.

All this is part of a sort of depository of political capital, which Joignant (2015) defines as a varied set of resources that have an origin inside and outside the political sphere, in Bourdieu's terms, and which are recognized as valuable by agents and political analysts, and which because of that they can be invested on the political arena. This concept's ambiguity will convey

serious difficulties when a determinate operationalization allows measuring it and because of this strategies to discern and apply methodological approximations of qualitative nature (*fussy sets*).

In the path of political capital decomposition, Joignant (2012: 601) adopts two forms of accumulation: the primitive and the strategical. In the former, political capital is gathered early in the family and at school; whereas in the latter, capital is accumulated at entering politics and depends on the trajectory's duration. These two ways of capital accumulation are complemented by other sorts of capital that can be acquired outside politics and at any given moment can be reconverted to enter, reenter or remain in politics (Joignant, 2012: 602). This entangled relation occurs in a feedback process, which is the drive for a race guided to a good extent by ambition, even though vocation cannot but be present, in which patterns defined either by election or appointment or by a combination of both.

The idea is that the politician over the whole process and in the bosom of the institutional opportunity structure where they move capitalizes such scenario that varies over time to further their advancement and conclude it as satisfactorily as possible for their interests. These can be material, spiritual, or a combination of both. The former translate the egotistic search for a noticeable improvement of their economic status, while the latter intend to meet the initial altruistic vocation of social service and commitment or other endeavors of hedonistic nature or even megalomaniac.

From a standpoint centered on the leadership that restricts the analysis to a less generalizable sector of politicians, Bennister *et al.* (2014) have focused on designing a typology they call leadership political capital centered on the political resources leaders have and leaving political capital as mere networks of horizontal relationships. These authors start from the existence of two sorts of resources of *hard power*, exercised by means of rules, facts and punishments, and *soft power*, based on persuasion, consent and loyalty, taking two dimensions of political acting into account, *representation* and *performance*. This produces four parts of leadership political power such as command, accomplishment, approval and morale, referred to the size and zeal of the coalition from which they receive support.

To sum up, political capital is the addition of personal political capital and environmental political capital. The first gathers the abilities proper to the politician in function of strictly individual factors, even intimate, that include talent as well as certain physical disposition which are projected in a range of knowledge and aptitudes useful, if not indispensable, for political activity. But also, social relational factors concur, which become

the politician's reputation, either with the citizenry or the rest of politicians. Moreover, they gather material and symbolical individual resources.

The second comes from the political sphere and the goals the politician accomplishes over their career. The environment, which has a different nature in function of its institutionalization degree, is composed of collaborators, experts, advisers and even councilors. They create the politician's image, communicational strategy, and provide them with new ideas and ways to approach the daily political tasks; this second sort of capital also comprises material and symbolic resources.

Results refer to the concrete achievements over the career and can have a cumulative character; they can be measured. Indeed, electoral support, indexes of support and approval (or rejection), media valuing, as well from research centers, civil observatories or think tanks configure supplies with which a reputation index can be produced to complement the character, by and large, intangible of this sort of approvals.

In this range of constitutive variables requires parsimony at the time of formulating a model that might serve as a frame to undertake a comparative study, as this is a scenario in which the gap between political theory and political practice broadens as in no other. The excessive metaphorical power of the term political capital can be controlled when it is applied to a concrete analysis schema, as performed in the following section, in which the individuals' trajectories become the dependent variables. Here, we make an alternative approximation to this sort of studies instead of the one carried out by means of relating agency and capabilities.

Political career

In the dawn of the XXI century it could be stated, as pointed out by Wright (2013: 452) for the United Kingdom, that the politician with no political career had virtually disappeared from the British scenario. This is a statement can be extended to other countries of the so called developed and consolidating democracies.

In my opinion, anti-political movements early in the new century, which lasted over the next decade fostered by various economic-financial crises, in spite of supposing a strong criticism to the *status quo* and a denounce of the professional politicians, did not go against the idea of political career. Even if it is too soon to have sufficient empirical evidence, it seems clear that what occurred in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, where there were deep transformations in the political class' composition, the new one

power in 2015 has evinced the development of a concrete political career in its classic terms.

In a simplified manner, every political career makes room for the crossing of people, who follow it, with diverse capabilities that mold as they advance in it. As advocated in the previous section, political capital is a good conceptual thread; moreover, political careers occur in concrete places and times in which rules profusely mutate. Following a canonical model rooted in occidental culture and reflected in the classic theatrical logic, these trajectories have three acts which instead of being approach, confrontation and resolution are beginning, development and conclusion.

The proposal presented below tries to combine, through the incorporation of capitalization mechanisms, the two canonical approximations to the study of politicians that are gathered in the partisan approximation, where it is the structure of competitions what matters,³ and in the approximation to leadership (Coller and Santana, 2009; Blondel and Thiebault, 2010), where what weighty is the role of specific individuals. It is, therefore, the proposal of a dynamical approximation in a sphere in which there has been research from various interests in the Spanish (Jerez, 1982; Coller, 1999; Uriarte, 2000; Botella *et al.*, 2011; Coller *et al.*, 2016) and Latin American cases (Botero, 2010; Diamint and Tedesco, 2013).⁴

The beginning of political career

In every political career's commencement individual assets, which the politician has and are their original capital, conjugate with the entrance to institutional mechanisms, which not always are partisan in nature. Any individual who enters politics, in addition to the phenotypical elements that constitute their dispositional background,⁵ has a capital that can come from five sources that are not excluding but can be additive. This circumstance makes their operationalization more complex, save some method based on Boolean algebra is applied.

3 Theoretical aspect noted by Katz and Mair (1992) and the backbone in the work for the Spanish case of Linz *et al.* (2000) or Jerez, Linz and Real-Dato (2013).

4 There are also national monographic studies among which we can mention for Argentina: Carizo (2002); Bolivia: Romero Ballivián (2009); Brazil: Avelar (2001) and Samuels (2003); Chile: Cordero and Funck (2011); Mexico: Camp (1995); Peru: Dargent (2009); Uruguay: Chasquetti (2010); Central America: Martínez Rosón (2008).

5 There is increasing empirical evidence as proved by Xia *et al.* (2015), which defines how decisions to vote are influenced by "first impressions" the electors have of the candidate that are "constructed" in the orbitofrontal cortex of our brains.

The first is strictly political and comes from the investiture process that grants an adscription to a concrete political formation, whose fundamental interest is to recruit personnel for its ends. The original political capital is acquired by means of militancy, voluntary work in the partisan bosom, both in the democratic normality in which political activity is public and from having been a repressed militant by being linked to opposing organizations, whose activity by-then clandestine had been proscribed.

The second comes from the acquired training level and possibly completed with certain professional experience, such as engineering, medicine, finance, management or law. These end up providing technical *expertise* which open the way toward politics owing to their functionality. In this group, State senior public functionaries who reach these positions by means of merits are also included (Ramió, 2012). This argument is based on the usefulness for political life of people with great professional experience that contributes to better understand and solve problems (Joignant and Güell, 2010).

The third comes from having high levels of popularity from the practice of an activity with broad social exposure. In the present spectacle society, artists, sportspersons or social communicators, whose image constantly appears in daily life, have an efficacious appeal at the time of capturing votes. It is intended, therefore, that noticeability is transferred to the party or directly used by the politician as an introduction from the sphere of public life to that other of politics.

The fourth comes from familial legacy as a consequence of being part of a lineage with background and experience in political life which provide the candidate with symbols, contacts and networks (Joignant, 2014). But also, one has to bear in mind certain congeneric predisposition, as in addition to the last name there is also a genetic legacy predisposed to leadership, as it has been underscored in recent works.⁶ All of this supposes an asset of great value in political life.

The last comes from sufficient incomes to afford the entrance, basically the electoral campaign. The popular argumentation is that politicians are wealthy people whose fortune will prevent them from corrupting, as they do not have to worry about their future.

The individuals who have any of these sorts of capital end up entering into politics largely through socialization in partisan life, which takes them to follow the rather canonical career design by the party, going through

6 In virtue of the association of leadership with rs4950, a nucleotide polymorphism that resides in a neuronal receptor gene (CHRN3) (De Neve *et al.*, 2013).

different steps, or are coopted, both by the party or a leader with proper trajectory for concrete posts, in this case the step where the previous move is skipped.

This differentiation agrees with Joignant (2012: 608), who distinguishes two subspecies: the so called militant political capital, with “resources acquired by the agents by means of immersing into political life for lengthy periods of time, without holding leadership positions inside the organization”; and, the so called oligarchic political capital, which “consists in the acquisition of know-hows and skills originated over the course of militant trajectories not necessarily lengthy, but which led to holding first-line posts inside the party”.

In parallel to these two entrance mechanisms, there is a third option reserved for those who do not have a strictly political original capital and whose profile is electoral-individual, since they are people who entered politics by electoral means and whose active is of popular order or noticeability or who have a technical asset as only background. The former will fall in the category called *outsiders*, while the latter technocrats.

This way, Joignant (2012: 605) refers to the existence of “two sorts of *technocratic* capital: in the first place, “pragmatic technocratic capital”, in which symbolical resources of rational nature prevail without observing political components in them; and secondly, “political technocratic capital”, in which a incipient political subspecies of capital is indeed noticed, in this case in the shape of partisan militancy, which can be rather passive.

Political career development

The development of political career is a function of the use of determinate strategies to capitalize the position in the public sphere and the inertia of express continuity mechanisms. Political capital varies over time, in addition it may be different for politicians who perform similar roles and in like manner, for the politician with different roles. Deep inside, political capital is the reputational credit that a politician receives from three different spheres such as electors, partisan partners and the media by means of the politician’s image configuration. These factors’ nature makes them have an intangible character which does not allow measuring them, so the utilization of quantitative techniques for their analysis is complex.

Once the political careers starts, those who intend to have a lengthier trajectory unfold strategies to capitalize their position, which admits three possibilities: in the first place, there exists the option to remain loyal to the

party in which they started their career, expecting to move through successive stages gaining experience and power, which increases their capital; secondly, they can change party, either because it disappears or they find another that offers better progress possibilities and in which they feel more comfortable according to ideological-programmatic postulates; and, in the third place, remain independent

In like manner, the mechanisms of continuity are three: the incorporation into electoral processes by means of which the career consolidates in the representative sphere; the appointment to positions of trust, which supposes a handicap in the autonomy as they depend on others' decisions; and a combination of both, which means the leap from the Lower Chamber posts to other in the Executive.

In this scenario, institutional aspects, such as the electoral systems, have to be taken into account since there is an enormous difference between those of majority, in which individual capital plays a larger role as they are direct elections, in which the electorate perfectly identifies the candidate, and those proportional, principally is candidacies are hindered and blocked, if this is the case the party's fiduciary character acquires a preponderant role.

We also have to bear in mind the sort of political regime to the extent that in many other presidential regimes it is not possible to align a post in the legislative and in the Executive. In any case, the existence of infra- and suprastate levels that scaffold the career is another scenario to consider (Real-Dato and Jerez, 2009).

As noticed below, there also exists the possibility to define a political career by "leaping", in which the politician leaves and reenters political activity preserving the level of accumulated political capital. In this case, a "revolving door" process takes place, according to which politicians move to the private sphere to later return to political life.

The conclusion of the political career

The conclusion of every political career offers the possibility to integrate the possessed capital, profited or not, with the very exit mechanisms. In the balance of the political career, and independently if its conclusion had been foreseen or not in a certain way by the actor, concur different situations that can be separated by means of a very simple classification criterion: whether the politician utilized their career to improve their employment situation (thereby, economic) in relation to the initial moment of the career.

The politicians who definitively retire or who return to the initial post they held do not capitalize, in economic terms, their political careers, even if they might have accumulated a huge amount of spiritual nourishment and moral satisfaction and political retirement normally implies higher incomes than the average citizen's.

On the contrary, those who change job to one utterly different from the one they had before entering politics and whose economic and labor conditions are better economically capitalize the political capital accumulated over time; secondly, those who start developing an activity whose performance has a sort of political link; and finally, those who transfer it to third parties such as spouses or relatives.

This scenario of profitability of accumulated political capital concurs with the existence of five exit mechanisms, leaving death and permanent disability aside, those with the most interest are: voluntary retirement, electoral defeat, lost of trust from people who postulate them and which can be situated at the popular and political levels, and disqualification.

Time as a substrate for political capital and the economic factor in the political career

Every political career has a time window over which the political capital grows or shrinks. There is an approximation to the idea that a chronological continuum defined by the time spent in politics configures, being positively correlated with the politician's better socialization⁷ increasing their political capital, which contributes with wider professionalization.

This is an aspect also underscored by Goldberg (2007) in his famous wisdom paradox, by defending that wisdom is accomplished with age in detriment to other mental functions such as memory and concentration capability. In like manner, there is a negative correlation if fulltime political activities and family life are related; an aspect in which women are severely affected considering the masculinization of the dominant patterns in politics.

Albeit, time in politics is varied. It can be leaps, continuous or for life, therefore contribution to difference the person whose presence in politics consisted in exiting and reentering at various occasions from the one who was constant over a determinate political time (commonly short), and from

⁷ "After a person has been in a party for some time, in all countries, at least in democratic systems, social contacts, friendships, personal recognition, the fun of campaigns become more important. This finding suggests a basic similarity in the party socialization process across systems" (Eldersveld, 1989: 11-12).

who devoted their entire life to politics. Political capital depends on each of these circumstances, and it is affected. The equation is clear in both aspects, the higher exclusivity and the longer the time in politics, the higher level of usual activity in politics and to a certain extent higher professionalization with the consequential possibility of increasing political capital.

The opposed situation that defines the nonprofessional politician implies partial engagement in politics and for shorter and internment time weakening political capital. The crossing of both levels allow referring to a dual entry matrix with various gradations and locating the different situations of those devoted to politics.

This scenario is compatible, from a long-term perspective, with the figure of someone who remains in politics for a defined period in professional life, which can extend for some forty years in consolidated democracies, being a half, for example in Andean democracies (Cabezas, 2012). In this life trajectory a number of models that outline, for their part, different political systems fits.

The intensity and time in the devotedness, or else fulltime engagement and lengthy experience configure a political career, helping maintain high levels of political capital. The career receives the name professional when the economic dimension is incorporated, this is to say the wage (“make a living”) —which can be regular monthly or by means of assistance stipends or by means of a combination of both— and those other perks received by politicians such as tax exemption, fuel coupons, air tickets, secretary and pension funds, according to the cases.

Although this implies a complex-to-understand entanglement, a last point can be added as it includes the gradation in the total incomes of those who devote to politics, purely public, and in the case those that come from activities that cannot be done without the participation of the accumulated political capital such as lectures, articles or books and consultancies. Likewise, another aspect to bear in mind refers to the existence of some sort of indemnification after leaving a public post or even the prerogative of having an annuity that may exclude other incomes or not.

Final considerations

The present work needs their proposals to be tested by the empirical evidence of the politician’s career. At the present scenario, in which a large number of political systems accumulate uninterrupted decades of democratic practice in which lengthy political careers occur, the task is not complicated if there

is relevant data gathering. However, the bulk of literature still pays attention to stagnated careers, understanding as such those in the legislative, ministries and locally separately. What we propose here is a vision of the politician and their trajectory over their life as unit of analysis.

Moreover, the recent social disapproval of politicians (“off with you all!”) and their anathema as people who only represent interests alien to the general interest (“they don’t represent us”) and with an activity that the most does not know about (“they don’t do anything else”) make this aspect interesting for the academia. For decades in the political panorama, there has been the idea of the so called professional politicians.

The term comprises those who receive a remuneration for an activity they perform as they were popularly elected or were appointed though electoral procedures in a relationship of trust; the term also considers those who perform an activity in an institutions such as a political party from organic positions. Along their trajectory produce a more or less extended over time. By means of a rigorous follow-up patterns of behavior can be detected over this apolitical career that help understand the current political representation crisis.

For example, taking a cohort of politicians of three or four lustrums ago and analyze the three stages here considered is a painstaking exercise, not impossible to undertake nevertheless. By doing so, not only can vital movements be interrelated, but also the way in which every political system works. There is need for a less static vision than that which prevails in most of the studies, contributing with the dynamical perspective that every trajectory implies.

Political science has numerous and valuable works on the recruiting of politicians and even on their performance over time in various posts, both executive and representative, at state or sub-state levels, and even supra-state and interrelated. A sample of such studies is accounted for in this article’s bibliography. However, studies on the conclusion of the political cycle have not been approached in practice. The questions “where do politicians go? To what extent is politics a spring board to reach professional activities which could not have been attained otherwise?” are increasingly relevant and have not been answered, but for analyses in various media, outside interpretative frameworks with theoretical vocation; this way, one of the few works in this respect is the one by Anderson (2010), it does not approach, however, the steps before leaving in the political sphere.

The concern in the analysis of political careers does not account only for the very profession implied in the political activity (Alcántara, 2012), it

also connects with works of democracy's quality; there is a recent work that approaches this (Alcántara *et al.*, 2016). This is so to the extent that a large part of the current disaffection and mistrust of broad layers of society for the representative democracy has to do with the unbridled enrichment of many politicians which over the course of their lives secure their future in circuits which they would have never accessed had they not been in politics. Morlino (2014) has evinced this deficit regarding the quality of the political class is a rather constitutive element of the quality of democracy.

Finally, it is necessary to take into consideration two fundamental aspects linked to time and space, which have to be incorporated into future research with empirical evidence. There is a first concern related to the meaning of political capital in different epochs. It is not the same immediately post-transitional moments as those defined by political stability and economic growth or those recessive. On the other side, one has to bear in mind the configured contexts of the particular context in function of the particular context in function of diverse structural/institutional characteristics that help create various sorts of capital. Both ends have to be considered when empirically approaching the model here proposed.

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