Political Representation in Central America

Annabella España-Nájera
Tulane University
aespanan@tulane.edu

Mar Martínez Rosón
Universidad de Salamanca
roson@usal.es

Paper prepared for presentation at the Latin American Studies Association Congress,
Toronto, 6-9 October, 2010
I. Introduction

The countries of Central America face a number of important challenges. Even as the region weathered the recent global economic crisis much better than originally expected, the isthmus – which includes some of Latin America’s poorest and most unequal countries – must tackle a number of serious political and economic challenges. The countries need to develop policies that promote the higher rates of growth that are necessary to sustain their population, as well as reforms that successfully promote greater equality. In addition, Central America – trapped between the Northern and Southern continents of the Americas – has a pressing need for a coherent response to the rising problem of violence and its consequences. As elected officials, presidents, legislators, and mayors, seek to address these issues, one of the key questions is the extent to which citizens’ preferences are also the preferences of their elected officials. In other words, what is the level of congruence between citizens and their representatives?

Despite the importance of this question, little work has been done to address it, in large part because of data constraints. The information needed to analyze the question of congruence has only become recently available with the growth of public opinion data in this region. Today, thanks to the effort of two important survey projects – the Parliamentary Elites of Latin America (PELA) survey from the University of Salamanca and the Americas Barometer survey from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University – we can begin to explore how much congruence there is between citizens and representatives in the region.¹

Using these two data sets, this paper analyzes the level of ideological congruence between legislative representatives in Central America and Panama and the citizens that elected them into office. Studying representation and ideological congruence in Central America and Panama is particularly timely. First, because of the critical challenges that the region faces but also because as the events in the summer of 2009 demonstrated, the consolidation, and even the survival, of democracy is not something that we can take for granted. Exploring the extent to which the legislatures of these countries represent the interests of their citizens can help us better understand the linkages that exist between citizens and their representatives and how this relationship in turn impacts democracy.

We focus on these six countries because too often they are left out of important analysis about democracy, representation, and institutions. This is unfortunate since the sociopolitical and socioeconomic similarities and differences between the countries in the region are often useful for comparison purposes. Our group of cases includes both newer democracies and one of Latin America’s oldest democratic regimes. Similarly, there is variation in the quality of democracy in this region, from Costa Rica, which consistently

¹ We want to thank Manuel Alcántara and the Instituto Interuniversitario de Iberoamérica at the University of Salamanca and Mitchell Seligson and the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and its major supporters (the United Stated Agency for International Development, the United Nations Development Program, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for making the data available.
receives a high ranking in most indexes of democracy to Honduras, which was unfortunately the first country in the region to succumb to a coup d’etat since the transitions of the 1980s.

The paper finds that for most of the six countries there is considerable amount of ideological congruence between citizens and legislators. We also find, however, that in a few of the countries—in particular Nicaragua and Costa Rica—there are very low levels of ideological congruence between legislators and citizens for the time periods we study. The paper also reveals a number of surprise findings. Guatemala has one of the higher levels of ideological congruence in the region, even though this country is often highlighted in the literature for its unstable politics and weak political parties (Azpuru, 2008; Sánchez, 2008). The low level of congruence in Costa Rica was also surprising. We expected to find that the region’s oldest democracy would also have a higher level of congruence, or at least be within the region’s average.

The findings of the paper have important implications for the study of representation. Following some of the new literature on congruence we argue that for an appropriate measure of this aspect of representation, using information from two surveys that lets us position citizens and legislators according to their own stated preferences. Furthermore, the paper examines some of the correlated and finds that most perform poorly in this region or in unexpected ways. The findings raise important questions about what factors and causal mechanisms affect congruence in this region and what means for the broader theories of representation.

II. Explaining Congruence

It is widely understood that the concept of representation is central to the functioning of a liberal democracy (Huber and Powell, 1994; Przeworski, Stokes and Manin, 1999; Powell, 2004; Pitkin, 1967). However, beyond the general agreement that representatives should act in the best interests of their constituents, there are significant differences in the literature about how representation should be theorized and conceptualized. This paper focuses on studying representation by calculating ideological congruence, the degree to which the ideological preferences of representatives and parties overlaps with the ideological preferences of citizens. While this captures only one of the characteristics of representation, congruence articulates one of the most common assumptions of democracy: that “citizens’ issue preferences should correspond to the positions or behavior of their representatives” (Powell, 2004:206).

One of the central questions that the literature on ideological congruence has sought to answer is what factors are more likely to lead to higher levels of congruence between representatives and citizens. Although not exclusively, much of this literature has focused on older democracies and the effect electoral systems have on congruence (Huber and

\[2\] Another important question in the literature is how congruence should be measured. We consider this question in the next section.
Powell, 1994; Blais and Bodet, 2006; Golder and Stramski, 2010; McDonald, Mendes and Budge, 2004; Gallagher, 1991; Ezrow, 2007). Overall, the conclusion from this literature is that proportional representation tends to encourage higher levels of congruence, although as a few authors have noted, how congruence is operationalized and what data is used (including what time period) has important effects on the findings and needs to be considered in any conclusions (Golder and Stramski, 2010; Powell, 2009).

A number of studies have also examined the effect that ideology has on congruence, arguing that a party’s position on the ideological spectrum will determine the extent to which it represents and responds to the preference of its constituents (Otero Felipe and Rodríguez Zepeda, 2009; Haupt, 2010; Adams, Haupt and Stoll, 2009; Luna and Zechmeister, 2005). Other explanatory variables analyzed the effect that party system characteristics, such as institutionalization might have. These studies have found a positive relationship between institutionalization and congruence (Otero Felipe and Rodríguez Zepeda, 2009; Luna and Zechmeister, 2005). A few studies have also explored the relationship between socioeconomic development and congruence, following Kitschelt’s (2000) argument that higher levels of development are more likely to promote programmatic and ideological linkages between representatives and citizens while low levels of development make clientelistic and particularistic linkages easier to create and maintain. Congruence studies have found the expected positive relationship between development and congruence (Otero Felipe and Rodríguez Zepeda, 2009; Luna and Zechmeister, 2005; Kitschelt, 2000; Siavelis, 2009), demonstrating that in those countries that enjoy a higher level of development, citizens and their representatives are more likely to have a higher degree of ideological congruence.

For the Latin American region, Luna and Zechmeister’s (2005) work sets the foundation for studies of congruence. These authors are the first to examine the degree of congruence in Latin America. Using data from the Latinobarómetro and PELA surveys, the authors measure congruence between citizens and legislators in nine Latin American countries and examine what factors explain the levels of representation that they find. Although we differ from Luna and Zechmeister (2005) on a basic and important factor – our measure of congruence – our paper seeks to build on the research agenda established by these authors, testing a number of relationships that their article identify as potentially important for explaining congruence with a different set of cases.

Our analysis also includes a number of potentially insightful explanatory variables that we argue need to be included in our studies of representation. These variables focus on supply-side explanations since we expect that in post-1978 democracies elite decisions have an important effect on the type of party systems that develop as well as levels of representation (van Biezen, 2005; Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Tavits, 2005). Ultimately, in an election citizens can only choose from the available options presented to them by the parties. With this in mind, we include in our analysis three new party system

---

3 Luna and Zechmeister’s (2005) article examines congruence in the following nine countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, and Uruguay.
characteristics: extra-system volatility, polarization, and fragmentation. We also include three explanatory variables that focus on the characteristics of the politicians in the legislatures, arguing that the more experienced politicians are the ones more likely to have a high level of congruence with their constituents. These politicians have the time and the experience necessary to understand citizens’ demands and needs. It is also possible that being good representatives means that they have the opportunity to develop a longer career, allowing them to adopt a closer position to their constituents. Because we are the first to test this hypothesis, we also consider the possibility that being a professional politician, one with longer experience, is the result of other factors – such as clientelistic linkages – rather than ideological representation.

The literature on congruence has highlighted a number of important correlated of congruence. We examine how well a number of these explain ideological congruence in Central America and also include a number of variables not previously tested in the literature, both system level variables and variables that examine the affect the characteristics of legislatures have on congruence.

III. Measuring Congruence

How much overlap there is between citizens and their representatives is not an easy question to answer. In large part, this is because the concept of congruence is hard to operationalize. There are a wide range of differences in the literature about how congruence should be measured and what type of data should be used.

Achen (1978) seminal work on representation called for scholars to be clear about how representation was to be conceptualized because this decision had important implications for the type of representation that was under discussion. Golder and Stramski (2010) take up Achen’s (1978) challenge and argue that what question researches are addressing about representation should dictate the measure of congruence that is employed. Like Achen (1978) these authors argue that the differences in the measures of congruence that have been used in the literature explain why the findings from this literature have tended to be contradictory.4 To analyze the impact that different measures can have in our findings the authors review a number of different measures of congruence and explore what these tell us about different forms of representation, making a distinction between the relationship between a single representative and a single citizen, many citizens and a single representative, and many citizens to many representatives.

This paper follows Golder and Stramski (2010) work and adopts a many-to-many measure of congruence, which they argue is the relationships most studies of representation are interested in. This measure captures the degree to which the “collective body of representatives reflects the ideological preferences of the citizens” (10). To capture this

4 Powell’s (2009) argues that the different conclusions from the literature about what explains congruence – in particular about the extent to which electoral institutions affect congruence – are due to differences in the period of time being examined rather than the measures that are being employed.
complex relationship, where we have many citizens and many representatives, Golder and Stramski (2010) propose a new measure of congruence, one that explicitly conceptualizes it as a many-to-many relationship.

To capture many-to-many congruence we focus on the ideological spectrum. Although there are criticisms that rightly note the limits of the left-right spectrum, arguing for instance that it does not necessarily mean the same thing in different contexts (Zechmeister and Corral, 2010), the usage of the 10-point, left-right scale is common in the literature on congruence. Its usage is justified by studies that have shown that despite its drawbacks, this scale continues to provide a useful understanding of politics for citizens, serving as a communication code for political choices (Huber and Powell, 1994; van der Meer, Tom W.G, van Deth and Scheepers, 2009; Sani and Sartori, 1983; Hinich and Munger, 1994; Freire, 2008). For Latin America in particular, the left-right scale continues to be a valid measure of political choices, representing a summary of multiple dimensions, including economics, social, and religious issues (Zechmeister and Corral, 2010; Zoco, 2006; Rivas, 2007; Alcántara Sáez and Rivas, 2007). We thus depart from the premise that in Central America the left-right ideological scale is a salient dimensions that continues to capture a wide range of issue preferences, making it a useful short-cut for capturing the preferences of citizens and their representatives.

Having established the type of representation we are interested in capturing, many-to-many using ideology we still need to decide on a second question, whether congruence will be measured in absolute or relative terms. While absolute congruence assesses the ideological distance between citizens and their representatives, relative measures also allows us to compare congruence across different units of analysis, in this case countries, “relative to the dispersion of citizen preferences” (Golder and Stramski, 2010 italics in original). This is the more appropriate measure because it allows us to compare across different units even when the left-right dimension might be perceived differently. We thus adopt a measure of congruence that compares the cumulative distribution functions (CDFs) of citizens and their representatives, where CDFs capture in a single dimension the preferences of citizens and representatives. A country has a higher level of ideological congruence between citizens and representatives when the CDFs of these two are similar and the distance between them is small (Golder and Stramski, 2010:13-5).

Just as there is a debate in the literature about how congruence should be conceptualized and operationalized, what data should be employed to measure congruence is debated. In particular, differences emerge in terms of what is the best data to establish what the preferences of representatives and/or governments are. Some studies have advocated the use of expert surveys (Huber and Powell, 1994; McElroy and Benoit, 2007), roll call votes (Weisberg, 1978), while others the use of public opinion data (Golder and Stramski, 2010; van der Meer, Tom W.G, van Deth and Scheepers, 2009; Freire, 2008). In addition, with the availability of data from the Manifesto project, studies have also increasingly used it to calculate government positions (McDonald, Mendes and Budge, 2004; Ezrow, 2007; Laver and Benoit, 2006).
To establish the ideological position of representatives in Central America and Panama we use data from the PELA (1994-2009) surveys and to measure citizens’ relative CDFs, we use data from the Americas Barometer surveys. Comparisons of elite and public opinion with two different sources are scarce. We follow other studies that have used two different data sets to examine congruence (McDonald, Mendes and Budge, 2004; Adams, Haupt and Stoll, 2009; Luna and Zechmeister, 2005; Achen, 1978; McElroy and Benoit, 2007; Kingstone and Young, 2009) instead of one survey (Blais and Bodet, 2006; Golder and Stramski, 2010). Both surveys include a question about the respondent’s ideological position on the same 1 to 10 left-right scale. The advantage of this data is that rather than ask citizens to place, according to their best information/guess, political parties on the ideological spectrum we can position representatives and parties according to how politicians answers this same question. A second advantage is that we can develop two measures of congruence. One that captures where relative CDFs of legislators, according to how they position themselves on the left-right scale, the second calculates the relative CDFs of the legislature organized around political parties, since PELA surveys also ask respondents to also position on the left-right spectrum their own political party.\(^5\) Given the exploratory nature of this research, having the two measures is an advantage because each measure can potentially provide us with valuable information about congruence and representation if there is a significant difference between the two elite measures.

One disadvantage of using two surveys to position citizens and their representatives is that we need to match the two surveys to compare the CDFs of the two populations. We match surveys by comparing those surveys from PELA and the Americas Barometer that were undertaken in close proximity to each other. Unfortunately, often times more than a year separates the two surveys. Our focus on ideology rather than policy options makes this a less problematic issue, since the ideological placement of both citizens and legislatures is less likely to change abruptly.

Using this criterion to select the surveys we could work with, we were able to include two points in time for each of our six countries, matching a total of 24 surveys, 12 from PELA and 12 from the Americas Barometer. These include surveys undertaken by the LAPOP team in 2004, 2006, and 2008; for PELA, the matching surveys come from the third and fourth waves of the survey, undertaken between 2002 and 2008. Table 1 shows which studies were used.

Table 1. PELA and LAPOP Studies: Pairs of Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>PELA</th>
<th>LAPOP</th>
<th>PELA</th>
<th>LAPOP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

\(^5\) For a full description of the two questions, including the wording, see Appendix I.
While working with two surveys presents a particular set of challenges around matching surveys, both in terms of when they were conducted and the questions that can be used, using one survey to measure both representative and citizens’ ideological positions has its own difficulties. Golder and Stramski (2010), for instance, can use data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) but face the problem of deciding which citizens to use to position political parties, all of the population or only those with higher levels of education? We avoid this problem by having representatives speak for themselves. Our measure of congruence also avoids serious problems of missing data, which Luna and Zechmeister (2005) face, because they calculate congruence based on citizens’ party identification, a question with high levels of non-responses that might not be random. We avoid missing data problems by using ideological self-placement questions at both the elite and mass level.

There are two limits to our measure of ideological congruence and what we are able to capture by focusing on this measure to analyze representation in Central America and Panama. Ideally, it would have been preferable to develop a more complex index of the ideological position of citizens and representatives, one based on the left-right scale but which also included policy preferences over political, economical and social issues. The data available to us, however, limited the viability of this approach. First, because to construct such a survey we needed a much closer overlap between the LAPOP and PELA surveys than what we found. While the more recent surveys have attempted to overlap questions, the older surveys have few questions that closely match each other.

In addition, questions about policy preferences are not widely included in either the LAPOP or PELA surveys, limiting our ability to capture preferences over policy options. Luna and Zechmeister’s (2005) work, despite its significant strengths, also highlights some of the problems that arise from the construction of complex indexes that attempt to capture policy preferences. The authors have a difficult time matching questions across two different surveys and are often forced to use questions that are worded differently and are measured using different scales despite the importance that both wording and scales have on survey responses as the methodology on surveys has shown.

The second limitation to our approach is that we are only able to capture snapshots in time rather than the extent to which changes in preferences, due for instance to a global economic crisis, might take place in both our populations or which group reacts to change first. We hope, however, that as more data becomes available from LAPOP and PELA a more

---

6 It would have been interesting to compare our results from a similar measurement of congruence using data from the CSES. Unfortunately, not enough of the countries in our study are included in this larger data set to make this comparison possible.
7 Similar problem can be found in Otero and Rodriguez’ (2009) work.
8 The last wave of PELA and LAPOP surveys includes a set of questions about policy preferences that ask respondents what role the state should play in the market. When more country surveys that include this question become available, it will be possible to also measure policy congruence in the region at least in terms of economic policy.
extensive study that can include more than two observations per country will be possible and will allow us to try to capture change using time-series analysis.

Despite the limitations to our measure, our study of many-to-many relative congruence can still tell us a great deal about representation in Central America and Panama. The paper provides a first important glimpse into how well the politicians and parties in these countries where democracies are still vulnerable are at representing the interests of their citizens. In addition, the study allows us to test how well existing explanations of congruence perform in this region, as well as include a number of variables that have not been considered before but we highlight as being potentially theoretically relevant to our existing explanations of ideological congruence.

IV. The Correlates of Representation

The first variable we examine which might be correlated with levels of representation is party system institutionalization, measured using Pedersen’s (1979) index of electoral volatility. We expect that more institutionalized party systems are more likely to provide a higher capacity for representation. Inchoate party systems, by increasing the level of complexity from one election to the next, are likely to lower levels of ideological congruence. In addition, it is possible that where there is a high degree of change in the party system, citizens will be less likely to have a clear sense of what preferences parties and politicians represent, making it difficult for citizens’ issue preferences to correspond to the preferences of their representatives. To capture this type of change we include extra-system volatility (Mainwaring, España Nájera and Gervasoni, 2008), which measures the percentage of votes that go to new parties in an election. However, our expectation of the direction of this relationship is not as clear as electoral volatility because it is also possible that new parties emerge because of failures in the system and that when these new parties correctly represent the preferences of citizens this is when they will capture a larger share of the vote.

The third measure we include is the percentage of the vote that leftist parties obtained, the strength of the left. Previous work on congruence has found that in those systems where the left has a substantial presence in government/legislatures, there are also higher levels of ideological congruence. Behind this expectation is the idea that leftist organizations are more likely to promote linkages with citizens as well as help clarify the political alternatives in the system. We expect this relationship to hold in Central America and Panama, in particular because of the histories of civil conflicts that were divided along ideological lines.

We also include in our analysis two other party system characteristics that to our knowledge have not previously been included as possible explanations for congruence: party system polarization and fragmentation. Polarization we measure using Dalton’s

---

9 For a full description of how the variables are measured and the data sources used see Appendix I.
(2008) index, which captures ideological displacement weighted by party strength. We expect party systems with higher levels of polarization to lead to higher levels of congruence because these systems include a wider set of options for citizens, creating a greater possibility that citizens’ preferences will be represented in the legislature.

Fragmentation we measure using Laasko and Taagepera’s (1979) concept of the effective number of parties, measured with votes. Although fragmentation is sometimes considered a problematic characteristic, for instance it is positively correlated with electoral volatility, we expect it to be positive for representation. The more parties there are in the system the more choices citizens have on election day, increasing the probability that they will be able to choose parties that match their preferences.

Our last macro variable is an economic one, GDP per capita growth, which captures the different economic levels of the six countries. Higher levels of GDP per capita should lead to higher levels of ideological congruence. In those countries where citizens are better off we are more likely to find programmatic linkages between parties and citizens (Kitschelt 2000), which will result in higher congruence, whereas countries with lower levels of development will be more likely to have clientelistic linkages and as a result, less congruence.

Our next three variables measure the professional characteristics of the legislature. We include the average political experience of representatives, their legislative experience and the degree to which they focus on their legislative job or divide their time with other remunerated activities. We expect those politicians that have been working in their districts or with citizens for long periods of time have learned the ideological outline of their constituents. They also will serve as a model for newer legislators who will recognize citizens’ preferences faster. In addition, legislators who focus on their job as representatives exclusively will know their constituents better as well as learn faster about constituents’ ideological positions.

V. Data & Analysis

Figure 1 shows the relative frequency and cumulative frequency distributions for the six countries and the two time periods we compare. The first graph (on the left hand side) shows the ideological relative distribution of legislators’ and citizens’ self-placements (sp-mass and sp elite)\textsuperscript{10}. It is worth noting that El Salvador and Nicaragua have very different distribution patterns than the other four countries in our study at both the elite and mass levels. The distribution of the other countries resembles, to varying degrees a normal curve but El Salvador and Nicaragua’s ideological distribution of citizens and legislators is more evenly dispersed throughout the ten-point scale.

\textsuperscript{10} Here, because of space, we do not present the graphs that compare the relative frequency distribution for mass self-placement and party placements (sp-mass and pp elite).
The second column of graphs in Figure 1 shows the degree to which there is an overlap between the CDFs of citizens and legislators’ self-placement on the left-right ideological scale. The third column of graphs compares the CDFs of party and citizens’ placement on the 10-point scale. In both cases the differences between the two lines represent the differences between mass and legislators’ ideological positions (Golder and Stramski, 2010). The greater the difference, the less overlap there is, which means that there is less congruence.
Figure 1. Frequency on Left-Right Scale for Self-Placement in Central America and Panama and Cumulative Frequency Distribution for Mass and Legislators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Costa Rica</th>
<th>Costa Rica</th>
<th>Costa Rica</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency Distribution</td>
<td>CDFs Comparison, Self-Placement</td>
<td>CDFs Comparison, Party-Citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="#" alt="Costa Rica Frequency Distribution" /></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Costa Rica CDFs Comparison, Self-Placement" /></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Costa Rica CDFs Comparison, Party-Citizens" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>El Salvador</th>
<th>El Salvador</th>
<th>El Salvador</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency Distribution</td>
<td>CDFs Comparison, Self-Placement</td>
<td>CDFs Comparison, Party-Citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="#" alt="El Salvador Frequency Distribution" /></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="El Salvador CDFs Comparison, Self-Placement" /></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="El Salvador CDFs Comparison, Party-Citizens" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the six countries we find considerable overlap between the ideological self-placement of legislators and citizens, although in none of the countries do we find anything close to a perfect fit between the elite and citizens. It is also worth noting that while the similarities between the two elite measures (self-placement and party-placement) is substantial for a number of countries, a marked difference between how these measures overlap with citizens’ self-placement is clearly visible. For instance, while in both Honduras and Panama there appears to be a closer fit between party-placement and citizen-placement, in Nicaragua the opposite is true with legislators better representing the ideological preferences of their constituents than the parties in the system.

We measure the difference between CDFs for each category – party-mass congruence and politician-mass congruence – following the work of Golder and Stramski (2010). Table 2 shows the summary of the absolute differences for each set of CDFs. The larger the number, the larger the discrepancies between mass and elite’s ideological position and the less congruence that we find, while smaller differences correspond to higher levels of ideological congruence in that country. To put these numbers in perspective we can compare these six countries to Golder and Stramski (2010) sample of European and Western parliamentary systems, keeping in mind that they use data from the CSES data. The average level of ideological congruence between the 37 countries they include in their study is 0.87. In comparison, the levels of congruence we find in Central America and Panama is 1.05 (for selfplacements) and 1.03 (for partyplacements). The highest level of congruence the authors find is 0.33 for the Netherlands in 1998 and the lowest level of congruence is 1.5 in Hungary in 2002. This suggests that while congruence in Central America and Panama is slightly below the Western average, it still within the majority of the observations in the European study.

Table 2. Levels of Ideological Congruence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Legislature</th>
<th>mass-elite</th>
<th>mass-ppelite</th>
<th>Country/Legislature</th>
<th>mass-elite</th>
<th>mass-ppelite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala 2008-2012</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>Panama 1999-2004</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador 2006-2009</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>Guatemala 2004-2008</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras 2006-2010</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>Honduras 2001-2005</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica 2006-2010</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>Costa Rica 2002-2006</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua 2007-2011</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>Nicaragua 2001-2006</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama 2004-2009</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>El Salvador 2003-2006</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: mass-elite is the comparison between elite and mass self-placement, mass-ppelite is the comparison between mass and party placement.

In Central America, we surprisingly find that Guatemala is the country with the highest level of congruence from our sample, while at the other extreme is Panama, with the lowest congruence scores. Guatemala’s level of congruence is surprising because this is one of the countries in the region that tends to receive the lowest scores in indexes that measure the quality of democracy or governance performance and satisfaction. In addition Guatemala has consistently had the highest levels of party system instability, making this finding somewhat counterintuitive.
The data also shows that overall legislators’ ideological self-placement has a higher level of congruence with citizens’ placement than does the overlap between political parties and citizens. This means legislators tend to be closer to citizens’ positions than political parties. One possible explanation for this difference is that most politicians, just like citizens, have to choose a party in which to run. In some systems that limit the possibilities for new party formation and diversity, it is more likely that there will be a wider range of ideological differences among legislators than among political parties. It might also be possible that in some countries the electoral rules are reinforcing party cohesion, while in other countries electoral rules allow legislators to develop their own ideological placement even when this differs from their party’s.

In the rest of this section we explore the possible correlates of congruence between citizens and their representatives. Because we are dealing with such a small number of observations, twelve in total, we are unable to run regression analysis. This limits our ability to analyze the causes of congruence but we can still provide exploratory observations by using pair-wise comparisons that help us identify some of the possible correlates of congruence.\(^{11}\)

Figure 2 presents the first pair wise comparison between party system institutionalization and congruence. Surprisingly, given the previous findings, we find a poor fit between these two variables, both the slope of the best fit line is slight and most of the observations fall outside of the 95% confidence level. In addition, the direction of this weak relationship does not match the theoretical expectation; higher levels of electoral volatility are associated with higher levels of congruence. This means that high levels of party system instability have a positive relationship with poor congruence. We believe that in large part El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua are determining this relationship. The three countries have extreme values for the two variables.

---

\(^{11}\) It is important to restate before reading the following figures that a high value for the differences between the two CDFs measures means that there is a low level of congruence in that country. This larger difference is due to a wider gap between the two distribution functions in Figure 1.
The second potential correlate of congruence that we examine is extra-system volatility. Similarly to our previous finding, the relationship between this measure of party system instability and ideological congruence is also opposite to our theoretical expectation and the findings of previous studies for both measures of congruence (party-mass and elite-mass). Figure 3 shows these pair wise comparisons. For both measures in those countries were new political parties receive a large percentage of the vote, we also find a higher degree of ideological congruence. For instance, in Guatemala new political parties receive a substantial vote share and the country’s ideological congruence is high (the difference between CDFs is small). At the other extreme, in Nicaragua new political parties receive a very small share of votes yet the differences between the ideological distributions of our two groups is large, meaning that there is low congruence.

Figure 3: Ideological Congruence and Extra-System Volatility

The relationship between the strength of leftist parties and ideological congruence between citizens and legislators and parties is also surprising (see Figure 4). In Central America and Panama the relationship between these two variables is positive, which means that as the vote share of the left increases so does the difference between the distributions (CDFs). In other words, in those systems where the left is electorally strong there are also low levels of congruence between citizens and their representatives, whereas where the left performs poorly in elections, there are higher levels of ideological congruence. One possible explanation for this discrepancy in this region is the shape that polarization takes.
As Figure 5 shows, in those countries with high levels of polarization there are also low levels of ideological congruence. While we expected higher levels of polarization to lead to a higher degree of congruence between citizens and their representatives, we find that those systems that are more polarized are also the ones that tend to have lower levels of congruence. One possible explanation for this finding is that our measure of polarization does not take into account the tendency of polarization, whether it is centripetal or centrifugal. It could be the case that El Salvador and Nicaragua, for example, with their high levels of polarization also have low levels of congruence because polarization in both countries has very strong centrifugal tendencies. In both party systems we find two strong electoral contenders at both extremes end of the left-right scale and very few electorally viable parties in the middle. Such systems are less representative since, despite high levels of polarization which should signal that there are clear electoral options for citizens, the centrifugal tendency in these systems means that citizens have in fact very few electorally viable parties from which they can choose.

The last party system variable that we examine is fragmentation (see Figure 6). The pairwise comparison shows this relationship is in the expected direction. The more parties there are in the system, the more likely it is that there will be a high level of ideological congruence between citizens and their representatives. This finding is explained when we consider that the more parties there are in a system, the more likely it is that the spaces
between parties is smaller, giving citizens more options. In addition, with more parties in the system citizens have more options from which to pick rather than forcing them to choose from a fewer number of parties that might be far from their ideological preference.

The last system measure that we compare is the relationship between ideological congruence and economic development. Figure 7 shows this relationship. Surprisingly, we find that in those countries that experience higher levels of economic growth there is also a higher tendency towards less ideological congruence. We can also see that Panama is very much an outlier in this relationship. It is the only country in the region with high levels of economic growth and a somewhat average level of ideological congruence, rather than the high level of congruence we expected. One factor that might explain this unexpected finding is that more developed countries are more likely to have institutionalized party systems, which are more likely to be static in their response to change in the preference of citizens.

The next three figures show the pair wise comparisons between different measures of legislative professionalization and ideological congruence. The first, legislative experience is in the expected direction (see Figure 8). As we posited, the more professional legislatures
are also the ones that are more likely to have higher levels of ideological congruence. As we theorized, this relationship could be because those legislators that do represent the interests of their constituents are the ones that are more likely to be reelected, increasing their level of legislative experience. Equally possible is the idea that reelected legislators have more opportunities to “get it right” and be representative.

Figure 8: Legislative Experience and Ideological Congruence

Somewhat surprisingly, given the previous relationship, in those legislatures where politicians have a high degree of political experience we are also more likely to find low levels of congruence (see Figure 9). It could be the case that most of the party systems in this region have clientelistic links with society rather than programmatic ones. One potential consequence of this is that having political experience does not automatically translate to being a good ideological representative.

Figure 9: Political Experience and Ideological Congruence

The last measure of professionalization captures the extent to which legislators focus exclusively on their representative job or alternatively, dedicate their time to other jobs while in office (see Figure 10). The data match out expectation, which stated that legislatures where politicians focus exclusively on their representative job, more
professionalized legislatures, will also be those with higher levels of ideological congruence.

Some of the comparisons that we highlighted as having the potential to add to our theoretical understanding of representation were those variables focused on the characteristics of the representatives. These tended to perform better than the other system level variables in the comparisons. Legislative experience and dedication to the representative job are positively correlated with ideological congruence between citizens and their representatives. In terms of the systemic variables we found only that the fragmentation in the party systems has the potential to explain congruence. This variable should certainly be included in future studies.

Overall, the pair wise comparisons demonstrate that Central America and Panama present an intriguing empirical puzzle. What explains ideological congruence in this region? Most of the arguments from the literature are unable to explain the patterns of ideological congruence that we find in these six countries. In fact, our comparisons show that the vast majority of the expected relationships were in the opposite direction. This raises the question of whether this region is somehow an exception to the traditional correlates of representation.

Conclusion

This paper examines the extent to which legislators represent the interests of citizens in Central America. It conceptualizes representation using a measure of congruence that explicitly takes into account the many-to-many relationship we are interested in as well as the distribution of ideological preferences between citizens and their representatives (Golder and Stramski 2010). To our knowledge this is the first study that measures representation in Central America.

The paper provides a snap shot of ideological congruence between citizens and their legislative representatives for two points in time. The findings suggest that for most of the
countries in the region citizens are well represented. This is an important finding. It suggests that as representatives seek ways to address the important challenges that citizens’ issue preferences “correspond to the positions or behavior of their representatives” (Powell, 2004:206).

The results also point to some interesting differences across the region, with some countries having much lower levels of congruence than the region’s average. In addition, the findings reveal a number of unexpected results. Surprisingly, we find higher levels of congruence in Guatemala, a country not known for its democratic quality, as well as in El Salvador. In Nicaragua and Costa Rica, on the other hand, we find less ideology overlap. Costa Rica’s ranking at the bottom of the group was unexpected given the country’s longer democratic tradition and more stable institutions.

The paper also examines some of the possible correlates of representation. Because of the small number of observations we have available, we are unable to run any regression analysis, but our pair-comparisons do reveal a number of interesting and surprising results. These lead us to conclude that the majority of explanations for congruence in the literature are not replicated in this region. Variables related to party systems institutionalization and the affect the left will have on congruence do not have the relationship we expected. This raises a number of important questions for our understanding of representation. Is Central America an exception? And if this is the case, then what is it about these six countries that distort the affect of variables that are usually correlates of congruence? Studying this region pushes us to elaborate on our theories of representation and specify the mechanisms behind the expected relationships in order to explain their impact and explore the possibility that some of their affects might have important intervening variables.

One possible explanation for the discrepancy between our findings and the findings of previous work on congruence is that our set of cases mostly includes newer democracies. This could explain why, for instance, party systems institutionalization promotes greater congruence in Europe and other Western democracies but not in Central America. This potential explanation, however, still leaves us with an important regional affect. Why is it that Central America varies so substantially from Latin America in this respect, after all, Luna and Zechmeister’s (2005) work confirms the findings of older democracies. It is possible that the explanation lies in Central America’s particular history.

Overall, the findings raise a number of important questions that need further attention. We highlight three: First, what are the correlates of representation in the region? Second, why does representation in Central America and Panama appear to work in dramatically different terms than other regions, including other Latin American countries? Are these countries exceptional or can they tell us something about ideological congruence in other regions? Third, what are the consequences of ideological congruence? Are we more likely to find a higher degree of support or satisfaction with democracy and democratic institutions in those countries that have higher levels of congruence?
As more data becomes available from the PELA and LAPOP projects we will be able to more adequately address these questions. Future surveys will make an analysis over time possible, allowing us to examine the extent to which the levels of congruence we find change over time and if they do, in response to what. In addition, the newer surveys will also make it possible for us to analyze ideological and policy congruence citizens and legislators.
References


