



Selecting the “Best”? Competing dimensions of politician quality at India’s village level

The quality of politicians elected of office is key to democratic resilience. But what makes a “good” politician? Are politicians “better” than voters? Do the answers vary between developing countries (many in Asia) and advanced countries? MPs and state legislators in India, the world’s largest multi-party democracy, are notorious for amassing wealth in office. Many have faced criminal charges. But landmark research on village-level politicians there challenges some stereotypes and suggests valid but competing dimensions of quality may co-exist, at least in the developing world.** It also shows how far answers about quality depend on what we measure.

The researchers compared an impressive total of 239 councillors on 31 (part-time) village councils or Gram Panchayats, the bottom of India’s five-tier electoral system, with 100 citizens in a populous district of West Bengal near Kolkata. They sliced quality into four main dimensions: competence (education, occupation, cognitive ability, political knowledge); integrity (altruism, cooperation, trustworthiness, honesty); motivation (self-efficacy or believing one could make a difference, self-esteem, trust in institutions, political ambition); and representativeness or “inclusiveness” (family political connections, wealth, religion, gender). The researchers innovatively combined incentivized decision-making games with survey methods. They probed integrity via behavioural experiments with names like the “dictator game” or the “trust game”; and competence via cognitive tasks plus political knowledge questions, not only education.

On average, councillors had one more year’s schooling than voters and greater relevant job experience. Strikingly though, they underperformed voters on cognitive ability. Moreover, integrity results partly bucked stereotypes: while altruism, cooperation and trustworthiness did not differ, a die-tossing game indicated that citizens were more dishonest than politicians.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, politicians felt more capable of influencing government and improving village life; enjoyed higher self-esteem; and placed more faith in political institutions. And, in line with the country’s dynastic politics, far more politicians came from politically connected families. Muslim minority representation matched population share.

Notable differences emerged based on tenure. Re-elected members had more political knowledge and self-esteem. More also belonged to land-owning families. Further, women,

guaranteed at least 50% of seats, held 58% of first-term seats but just 27% among re-elected. Politics in India is notoriously gruelling on women.

Dimensions and also subdimensions sometimes competed. Seemingly, time-in-office built knowledge and confidence but lowered representativeness, while superior cognitive skill and political knowledge traded off with more cheating in one of the games. And the fact that years’ schooling mismatched raw cognitive ability warns us that single metrics like education can mislead.

Overall, while selection was “negative” on cognitive ability and findings were less rosy than results from advanced democracies such as Scandinavia, they were more optimistic than stereotypes about India. However, the authors suggest that higher political tiers, where rent-seeking prospects expand, may reverse competence and integrity patterns. Further testing is needed. But this multidimensional, multimethod analysis certainly supports nuanced conceptualization and measurement of politician quality.

** Study results are available in an article authored by Ananish Chaudhuri, Vegard Iversen, Francesca R. Jensenius and Pushkar Maitra: “Selecting the ‘Best’? Competing Dimensions of Politician Quality in the Developing World”. *British Journal of Political Science* 55, 2025, e81. OPEN ACCESS: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425000225>

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