



Attitudes Toward Politics, Participation and Citizenship Competencies: A Study of Students From Commercially-Oriented Private Universities in Chile

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Abstract

Research on the relationship between attitudes towards politics, student participation, and citizenship competencies remains scarce in Latin America, with most studies focused on primary and secondary education, and even fewer conducted in public or private universities. This study examines that relationship, as well as the mediating role of student participation between attitudes towards politics and citizenship competencies. The sample consisted in undergraduate students ($n = 489$; mean age = 21.20 years; $SD = 3.47$) from commercially oriented private universities in Chile, which are characterized by low levels of student participation. Three separate questionnaires were administered to measure each variable. Using descriptive analyses and structural equation modelling (SEM), the associations among the variables were analyzed. Results showed that attitudes towards politics do not directly predict citizenship competencies, but are indirectly associated through student participation, which itself was found to be acceptably related to both constructs in a direct and independent manner. The findings suggest that engagement in academic university activities can function as a formative space that connects student's attitudes towards politics with the emergence of the competencies required for active citizenship. This research highlights the importance of fostering participatory environments within these types of institutions to strengthen democratic capacities, while also suggesting the inclusion of personal variables and diverse university contexts in future studies.

Keywords

attitudes, competencies, citizenship, participation, students, politics



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Resumen

La investigación sobre la relación entre actitudes hacia la política, participación estudiantil y competencias ciudadanas sigue siendo escasa en América Latina, con la mayoría de los estudios centrados en la educación primaria y secundaria, y aún menos realizados en universidades públicas o privadas. Este estudio examina esa relación, así como el papel mediador de la participación estudiantil entre las actitudes hacia la política y las competencias ciudadanas. La muestra consistió en estudiantes de pregrado ($n = 489$; edad media = 21.20 años; $DE = 3.47$) de universidades privadas con orientación comercial en Chile, que se caracterizan por bajos niveles de participación estudiantil. Se administraron tres cuestionarios distintos para medir cada variable. Mediante análisis descriptivos y modelos de ecuaciones estructurales (SEM), se analizaron las asociaciones entre las variables. Los resultados mostraron que las actitudes hacia la política no predicen directamente las competencias ciudadanas, sino que se asocian indirectamente a través de la participación de los estudiantes, que a su vez resultó estar aceptablemente relacionada con ambos constructos de forma directa e independiente. Los resultados sugieren que la participación en actividades académicas universitarias puede funcionar como un espacio formativo que conecte las actitudes de los estudiantes hacia la política con la aparición de las competencias necesarias para una ciudadanía activa. Esta investigación destaca la importancia de fomentar entornos participativos en este tipo de instituciones para fortalecer las capacidades democráticas, al tiempo que sugiere la inclusión de variables personales y contextos universitarios diversos en futuros estudios.

Palabras Clave

actitudes, competencias, ciudadanía, participación, estudiantes, política

Non-Technical Summary

Background

In Chile and Latin America, the expansion of commercially oriented private universities has increased in recent decades. These universities have prioritized competencies-based academic training, abandoning the importance of civic education, participation, and politics as part of their educational offering. However, the discussion and relationship between competencies and citizenship has gained importance due to the country's political contingency and the last decades of alternative political participation by young people outside the university system, even in universities that traditionally describe themselves as academic and non-political.

Why did the researchers conduct this study?

Our objective was to analyze the relationships between attitudes towards politics, student participation and civic competencies in large private/commercial universities in Chile. By focusing on a critical position due to the theoretical differences between attitudes towards

politics and a model based on civic competencies, our aim is to contribute to the understanding and deepening of student participation as a mobilizing mechanism and bridge between these attitudes and competencies.

What did the researchers do and discover?

We conducted a quantitative cross-sectional study with students from private universities in Chile that are known for being large, commercially oriented institutions. These universities place a strong emphasis on traditional, academic, and non-political teaching. We used instruments to measure attitudes towards politics, student participation, and civic competencies, analyzing the resulting data using a structural equation model.

The results show that attitudes towards politics are significantly associated with student participation, and that the latter is directly related to civic competencies. No significant direct relationship was observed between political attitudes and civic competencies. However, an indirect relationship was identified, mediated by student participation. Likewise, political participation outside the university context showed a slight association with internal participation.

What do these findings mean?

The findings indicate that the development of civic competencies does not depend exclusively on attitudes towards politics but requires specific spaces for participation within the university that function as a formative bridge. In institutions where participation tends to be limited—as is the case with these universities—promoting opportunities for student involvement can strengthen civic education and the link between political dispositions and the active exercise of citizenship.

Given the prevailing conditions in many societies, marked by the sustained increase of social unrest such as social inequality, political corruption, and the disregard for the democratic system (Crocker, 2016), it becomes imperative to expedite the development of public policies that take into account not only distributive justice matters—usually personalized goods and services—in their strategies, but also, to the same extent, methods that encourage active citizenship and inclusion in communities. This is predicated on the premise that social justice encompasses more than just the availability of resources. It requires, for its genuine effectiveness, activities that enhance the interrelationship and social recognition of communities and the individuals they comprise (Honnet, 2010; Taylor, 2009).

The structural role of education in addressing democratic challenges such as social polarization, digital disinformation and youth political disengagement has been a topic of discussion in Europe and America. Initiatives such as the European Education Area and the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 propose that higher education institutions should also promote civic practices through competences based on the development of critical

thinking and active participation as central elements in sustaining pluralistic democracies (European Commission, 2020, 2022; García Álvarez, 2023; Schulz et al., 2025). Some research from the last 10 years confirms that European universities have incorporated curricula oriented towards civic competences that include political attitudes such as respect, tolerance, interculturality and deliberative participation, showing greater civic self-efficacy and socio-political commitment in their students (Barrett & Zani, 2015; Slavkova et al., 2025). Unlike Europe, Latin America has revived citizenship, culture and local identity as fundamental generic competencies, aligning itself with debates on the public function of democratic education and universities. This public function has emphasized social responsibility, social needs, commitment to human rights and youth participation in university politics, with the aim of addressing regional challenges for the citizens of the present and the future (Beneitone et al., 2007).

In this regard, Chilean universities and university students have historically been key players in denouncing abuses and demanding improvements in citizens' quality of life. Their commitment and participation, during a time of profound crisis in democratic representation and weak political institutional affiliation that characterizes Latin America nowadays, remain relevant (Antía & Vairo, 2023). This is evidenced by the several mobilizations that have taken place in the country over the past decade, reflecting a deep public unrest with the development and outcomes of neoliberalism, four decades after its implementation (Morales, 2020).

While this political and citizenship role – as well as its historical variations – is the result of numerous and complex contextual variables of a sociocultural nature –such as processes of individualization, neoliberalism, technological impact, identity crises, etc.– and of a sociopolitical kind (Garretón, 2011), it is also a consequence of how our societies develop discourses and social practices that foster them. Since the 1960s, this intentionality has been reflected in the development of the notion of education for citizenship, a fluid and polysemic concept which, in democratic societies, aims to help students become active, informed, and responsible citizens (De Coster & Sigalas, 2017).

This historical citizenship and political role of the university sector have been challenged in Chile by the expansive and systematic privatization of higher education provision. This process has led to the proliferation of institutions whose educational aims have been focused exclusively on the development of technical and professional competencies, guided by employability criteria derived from the labour market, thereby potentially limiting their commitment to citizenship education within the university context (Ball, 2012; Biesta, 2015; Rojas & Villalobos, 2018). This pragmatic orientation of professional training in Chile has contributed to the inhibition of the development of education for *active citizenship* (Cortina, 2017), grounded in political action and student participation.

On the other hand, international curriculum developments promoted in recent decades in the context of private higher education have provided a foothold for these concerns under the umbrella of the so-called competency-based training model, where

citizenship is understood from the perspective of representative democracy and liberal citizenship (Crouch, 2004; Rawls, 1999). This model assumes citizenship to be a series of concepts, attitudes and competences required to be part of a democratic society (Schulz et al., 2025; Zambrano, 2018) that do not necessarily require active social participation, as historically understood by the approach of deliberative democracy and active citizenship (Cortina, 2017; Habermas, 1997; Mouffe, 2000).

Civic competencies are defined as a defined set of knowledge, competences, and behavioral dispositions that enable individuals to act ethically and responsibly in social and political contexts, based on social norms and professional roles (Hoskins & Crick, 2010; Ruiz & Chau, 2005). They focus on dialogue, peaceful conflict resolution and decision-making for democratic coexistence, with virtues such as empathy, emotions, respect for identity, health, and improved quality of life (Russo, 2020; Torney-Purta et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2015).

In both cases, the attitudes towards politics and forms of citizenship participation appear to be shaped by these educational frameworks. In the first, an adaptive and normative disposition is cultivated, focused on fulfilling expected attitudes towards politics and behaviors that contribute to social harmony and coexistence (Hoskins & Crick, 2010). In the second, attitudes are fostered that engage individuals in critical, deliberative, and transformative political behavior, positioning citizenship as a space for contestation, collective construction, and the redefinition of the social order (Mouffe, 2013). Rather than a dichotomy, this reflects a tension that is highly relevant to professional education, as although the competency-based training model may serve to reinforce a liberal conception of citizenship, its hegemonic implementation could also limit the participatory or active dimension of citizenship, given that it does not require the active involvement of students in its application.

In practice, universities are tasked with reconciling two theoretical conceptions of citizenship. On one hand, they must consistently declare and promote technical and disciplinary training. On the other hand, they are required to incorporate spaces for student participation as part of the educational experience to meet the institutional demands of current educational policies (Carrasco, 2010; Muñoz & Durán, 2019). The relationship among attitudes towards politics, student participation, and citizenship competencies is subject to a strain that arises from the national cultural and political context on one hand, and the type of higher education institution on the other. Evidence regarding this relationship is limited and has mostly been explored in isolation; this will be further developed in the following theoretical section.

From a global perspective, this article is of particular interest for civic education within higher education institutions, as it addresses a cross-cutting phenomenon that, as we have seen, has recently been in demand in the international context: the development of civic competences, attitudes towards politics and student participation. In an international context marked by digital disinformation, the decline of traditional political

engagement, and the rapid transformation of democratic institutions, understanding how student participation acts as a bridge between political attitudes and the development of citizenship competences allows us to identify educational spaces that transcend the local and engage with these types of global citizenship challenges.

To contextualize and address this issue, we will first present theoretical and empirical evidence that attempts to define and relate these variables within the context of private university education. Subsequently, these three variables will be operationalized along with the respective instruments used for their measurement, in order to present the findings and develop a discussion. Thus, this research contributes in an exploratory manner to clarifying the relationships between Attitudes towards Politics, Student Participation, and Citizenship Competencies among students attending massified and marketized universities in Chile (hereinafter referred to as *Private Mass/Commercially Oriented* by [Fleet and Guzmán-Concha \(2017\)](#)). Therefore, the guiding question that led this research was: What are the relationships between attitudes towards politics, student participation, and citizenship competencies among students at universities in Chile?

Conceptual Framework and Empirical Evidence

About Citizenship Competences

Regarding the competence-citizenship binomial, the *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study* between 2009 and 2022 has systematically and thoroughly monitored trends in citizenship knowledge and engagement in participating countries. While its first versions included intercontinental samples, its latest application only covered a few representative countries in Europe and Latin America ([Schulz et al., 2025](#)). In this last one continent, Colombia and Panama have refined the study of civic competencies the most, mainly in primary and secondary education for both students and teachers, reporting findings of interest in terms of pedagogy, social coexistence, and the strengthening of democratic behaviors ([Mendoza, 2024](#); [Núñez-Rueda et al., 2023](#)). Some university research has pointed to a decline in students' critical thinking competences as a result of the marked academicism in the university education system, which acts as a normalizing and insurmountable factor that blocks the development of this competence at the mercy of factors such as emotion, empathy and action ([Bernate et al., 2024](#); [García & González, 2014](#); [Puerto-Garavito & Bernate, 2024](#)), consistent with other research conducted in Ecuador by [Cañarte \(2020\)](#) and in Cuba by [Calderius-Fernández and Martínez-Sánchez \(2013\)](#).

Citizenship competences are defined as the knowledge, know-how and ability to act of citizens as a set of cognitive, emotional, communicative, and integrative abilities, with a moral and political purpose by virtue of the expected rights and duties; They contribute to the maintenance of a democratic society with genuine spaces for coexistence ([Hoskins & Crick, 2010](#); [Ruiz & Chaux, 2005](#); [Schulz et al., 2025](#); [Zambrano, 2018](#)). These competen-

cies not only include knowledge of democratic institutional norms and processes, but also the capacity for deliberation, empathy, critical thinking, and participation, promoting active citizenship built on real contexts of participation and democratic learning (García & González, 2014). People become actors in their community to the extent that they develop a political awareness that allows them to understand and manage power relations, committing themselves to key social needs and promoting political actions guided by human rights, diversity, and social coexistence. In this context, active citizenship requires not only critical awareness, but also favourable attitudes towards politics, which can only be consolidated in contexts where civic competencies are effectively developed, thus enabling committed and transformative participation (López Restrepo, 2011).

In Chile, the main national scientific evidence described by *Gobierno Abierto* -open government- follows this line of inquiry and findings within the university context. Some public efforts have been observed, but with limited communicational impact, which nonetheless highlight significant challenges in the development of citizenship competencies and participation, largely due to the excessive emphasis placed on academicism. The acquisition of technical-disciplinary knowledge does not promote student participation or the critical thinking necessary to develop citizenship, as a result of an education model based on standards and socially instituted behaviors. As previously noted, this aligns with the predominant training model in non-traditional private universities in Chile: the competency-based education model (Segpres, 2024).

About Attitudes Towards Politics and Participation

Regarding Attitudes Towards Politics, research exploring their relationship with citizenship competencies is very limited or virtually non-existent in Latin America. As these attitudes represent individuals' feelings and positions towards political and institutional matters (Almond & Verba, 1989), it is expected that they would relate to citizenship competencies and student participation, as implied by definitions of citizenship. However, this relationship remains uncertain when considering factors such as the high levels of distrust and disillusionment with traditional politics among today's youth. Young people increasingly seek new forms of politicization and recognition of their non-conventional modes of participation within educational and social spaces (Eliécer, 2008; Ganter & Zarzuri, 2020; Muñoz & Durán, 2019; Reguillo, 2004). Participation, as a social function through which values and reflections for the common good are learned, developed, and exercised, is oriented -within the political sphere- towards the construction and shaping of democratic coexistence, in pursuit of the well-being and effective development of society (Krauskopf, 2000).

When we observe that individuals develop relatively stable dispositions towards politics -which are not innate, but learned through experience- and that these involve cognitive, emotional, affective, and volitional dimensions which shape favourable or unfavorable responses to political situations or objects, we are referring to attitudes

towards politics (Morales, 2020). As these attitudes tend to persist over time, they influence the orientation everyone adopts regarding their role as a citizen, enabling them to subjectively assess the gratifying or displeasing nature of political life (Arias et al., 2017).

Numerous studies have identified attitudes towards politics as general orientations that mediate judgement and action concerning public affairs, even beyond explicit ideological affiliations (González et al., 2005). Aspects such as self-efficacy, civic engagement, and adherence to democratic principles constitute key dimensions of these attitudes, which are grounded in complex psychological structures (Almond & Verba, 1989). For this reason, attitudes towards politics not only predict the degree of political participation but also influence individuals' subjective evaluations of their experiences, particularly when cognitive resources are insufficient to form rational judgements. In such cases, the affective or ideological dimension gains greater importance in decision-making and the resulting forms of political participation (Bedolla Ramírez & Reyes-Lagunes, 2012).

On the other hand, Participation has been conceived as an essential form of civic engagement, as a multidimensional phenomenon linked to participatory behavior, understood as any associative action with collective goals and social awareness. It involves moral behavior grounded in cooperation and interdependence, which are fundamental to democratic practice and social development (Krauskopf, 2000), thus constituting a distinctly human practice. Participation seeks to influence governmental and social decisions, either directly or indirectly, through acts of interpellation, support, or criticism towards power and institutional structures (Virgili et al., 2015). It is configured as a dynamic and transformative practice in which citizens become political actors, either through conventional means, such as voting or representation, or through non-conventional actions, including protests, civil disobedience, or performative behavior.

About and Towards Private Mass/Commercially Oriented Universities in Chile

It has been documented that the stability and health of democracies are largely linked to the development of competences and the formation of attitudes towards politics that promote the development of citizenship competencies and participation in support of individuals' sense of public responsibility (Kymlicka & Norman, 1997; Mieles & Alvarado, 2012). This relationship has been grounded mainly in theoretical rather than empirical studies. In this regard, a study conducted by Medina (2020) highlights the challenges related to political and civic education among secondary students in private educational institutions in Peru, confirming a relationship between ideological orientation and interest in politics, reflected in the outcomes of their educational process. While these findings encourage further research focused on private educational institutions, they are not conclusive due to the still isolated nature of such studies, given the overall scarcity of related research.

This scarcity of empirical studies becomes particularly relevant when considering the growing role that private education has assumed in Latin America, and especially

in Chile. Over the past forty years, private universities have become more than just an alternative to public education, now accounting for a large share of enrolment among the middle socioeconomic sectors of society. Public policies such as free tuition for higher education -primarily at the university level- have led to an increase in enrolment in this type of institution, with around 60% of students in the nation currently benefiting from such policies. Of these, approximately 38% are enrolled in private universities (Zarzuri & Vásquez, 2023).

One characteristic of these universities is their unwavering adherence to the neo-liberal and competency-based education model, which was even endorsed by the country's 1980 political constitution and through various legislative decrees between 1981 and 2010. In this model, the focus has been on academic training with certification interests aimed at the labour market, while abandoning any form of association and participation in political matters, removing such elements entirely from the curriculum except for strictly academic, cultural, or sporting programs (Bellei et al., 2014; Ganga & Mancilla, 2018; Labraña & Brunner, 2022; Zurita, 2022). What was, decades ago, a fertile environment with widespread student participation across the various state universities (Garretón, 2011) gave way to a redefined university model with a diminished public function. This model is now characterized as 'apolitical' and 'personally individual' (Infante, 2023), deeply academic, and merit-based through technocratic, routine mechanisms aligned with 'youth responsibilities'; a matter that, in the case of private universities, has not been sufficiently explored or studied in the country (Calvo & Muñoz, 2021; Disi, 2018; Virgili et al., 2015).

Considering the increase in enrolment, the deep expansion of private universities, and the socioeconomic group they serve, it is of interest to us to develop knowledge about the relationship between the variables we have described -citizenship competencies, student participation, and attitudes towards politics- within the so-called *Private Mass/Commercially Oriented* (Fleet & Guzmán-Concha, 2017). This is motivated both by their growing expansion in Chile and the lack of research on the topic. Current empirical evidence is almost exclusively based on studies from the perspective of actors within so-called *State or Public* universities, highlighting the historical importance of public and state universities as an essential component of university public policies in Chile during the twentieth century (Garretón, 2011; Virgili et al., 2015; Zurita, 2022). This importance essentially lay in their mission not only to provide academic training and human capital but also to foster the formation and development of a critical and engaged citizenship committed to participation as the foundation of the country's democracy and its decision-making processes (Errázuriz, 2018; Ibarra & Leyton, 2022).

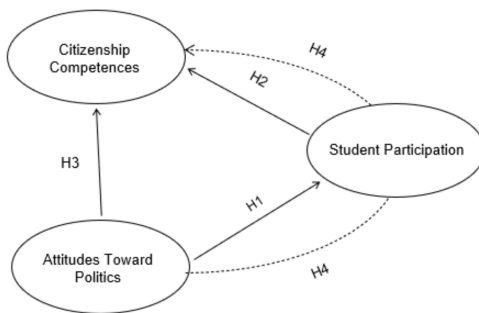
About This Research

This study aimed to analyze the relationships between Attitudes towards Politics, Student Participation, and Citizenship Competencies in *Private Mass/Commercially Oriented*

universities in Chile. We developed four hypotheses, which were tested using descriptive and multivariate analyses, by constructing a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) model that treated these main variables as latent constructs (Figure 1): H1: Attitudes towards politics positively predict the level of student participation; H2: Student participation positively predicts the development of citizenship competencies; H3: Attitudes towards politics directly predict the development of citizenship competencies; H4: Attitudes towards politics indirectly predict the development of citizenship competencies, mediated by student participation.

Figure 1

Preliminary Model Based on Research Hypotheses



Method

We conducted quantitative research with a cross-sectional design and associative strategy, exploring the functional relationship between variables (Ato et al., 2013). We selected a non-probabilistic sample ($\alpha = .05$; $d = .80$) made up of 489 individuals, meeting enough cases for the work with SEM (Hair et al., 2014). All participants at the time of answering the instruments were students of the so-called *Private Mass/Commercially-oriented* universities (Fleet & Guzmán-Concha, 2017), characterized by high levels of management and academicism, not explicitly encouraging student participation but rather a deep relationship between depoliticized knowledge. In turn, these institutions are characterized by high social expectations of student mobility.

The gender distribution was 35.2% male, 64.8% female, where 191 belonged to the first year, 65 to the second, 88 to the third, 97 to the fourth, and 40 to the fifth year (Table 1). The mean age of the participants was 21.10 years ($SD = 3.47$) at the time of answering the form.

Table 1*Characterization of Participants by Gender and Semester*

Semester	Men N = 172		Woman N = 317		Total N = 489	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
1	33	19.2	47	14.8	80	16.4
2	28	16.3	32	10.1	60	12.3
3	16	9.3	37	11.7	53	10.8
4	27	15.7	44	13.9	71	14.5
5	0	0.0	11	3.5	11	2.2
6	27	15.7	50	15.8	77	15.7
7	12	7.0	40	12.6	52	10.6
8	14	8.1	31	9.8	45	9.2
9	9	5.2	14	4.4	23	4.7
10	6	3.5	11	3.5	17	3.5

Variables and Measuring Instruments

Attitudes Toward Politics (ATP): We used the *Attitudes towards Politics Scale* developed by Álvarez-Ramírez (2014), which operationalizes the variable as a diverse representation of feelings, values, motivations, experiences, and political socialization that shape the citizen's stance on collective, political, and institutional matters. This includes political organization or action within public institutions such as universities (Almond & Verba, 1989; Álvarez-Ramírez, 2014). The original version of the scale comprises sixty Likert-type (1-5) items across 10 factors. For this study, three dimensions were deemed relevant for constructing the latent variable, with the remaining factors excluded due to their non-significant contribution ($p \geq .01$). The resulting instrument reports a reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .70$).

The dimensions included in the model were: a) Satisfaction with Democracy ($\alpha = .66$), defined as the consistency between one's democratic expectations and their fulfilment. Its reliability is considered slightly below the usual threshold ($< .70$), but acceptable given the exploratory nature of this study (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Rodríguez-Rodríguez & Reguant-Álvarez, 2020); b) Political Optimism ($\alpha = .73$), corresponding to a favourable hope regarding the possibilities of social changes that representatives effectively implement; and c) Political Engagement ($\alpha = .81$), being the attitude of involvement and responsible participation in the management of various public affairs. The evaluation of metric invariance based on sex did not reveal differences in factor loadings in χ^2 for men and women: $\Delta\chi^2 = 7.22$; $\Delta df = 2$; $p = .57$; $\Delta CFI = .00$; $\Delta RMSEA = -.03$. The comparison of the restricted model with the scalar model showed significant differences in the factor loadings: $\Delta\chi^2 = 9.24$; $\Delta df = 5$; $p = .006$; $\Delta CFI = -.03$; $\Delta RMSEA = .01$ (Table 2).

Table 2*Fit Indices for Scale Invariance by Gender –Male, Female–*

Variable	χ^2/gl	$\Delta\chi^2$	CFI	RMSEA	<i>p</i>	ΔCFI	ΔRMSEA
Attitudes Toward Politics							
Configural	3.61	.00	.98	.07			
Metric	1.84	-.03	.99	.04	.570	.00	-.03
Scalar	2.62	-.04	.95	.05	.006	-.03	.01
Student Participation							
Configural	2.20	11.03	.90	.50			
Metric	2.10	28.29	.90	.48	.419	.00	-.02
Scalar	2.18	51.48	.90	.48	.080	.00	.00
Citizenship Competences							
Configural	2.09	7.11	.99	.04			
Metric	2.21	16.39	.98	.05	.069	-.01	.00
Scalar	2.90		.97	.06	.003	-.02	.01

Note. Man, *N* = 172; Women, *N* = 317.

Student Participation (SP): We used the *Civic Participation Scale with the Academic Program* (Yáñez et al., 2018). This construct accounts for voluntary student participation in activities that promote civic behavior within educational institutions, assuming that good academic performance is not only limited to attending classes and passing assessments, but also involves engagement and participation in actions that imply a civic responsibility which, beyond the academic program, supports proper functioning, healthy coexistence in the community-oriented sense of civic behavior, the development of a positive socio-emotional climate, and the democratic spirit of all its members (LeBlanc, 2014).

The Likert scale of 5 points – from 1: ‘strongly disagree’ to 5: ‘strongly agree’ – and consists of fourteen items grouped into 2 factors: a) Active participation in student organizations ($\alpha = .89$), defined as the voluntary and active engagement in representative student organizations; and b) Support for the academic program ($\alpha = .81$), understood as the appreciation of relationships with faculty and staff, collaboration in pedagogical activities, and local representation of the academic program within the broader community. For this study, a Cronbach’s alpha reported was $\alpha = .79$, which is considered acceptable. Metric invariance was assessed based on sex, with no significant differences observed in the respective factor loadings for the Chi-square test: $\Delta\chi^2 = 11.3$; $\Delta df = 11$; $p = .41$; $\Delta\text{CFI} = .00$; $\Delta\text{RMSEA} = -.02$. The comparison between the intercept model and the scalar model also revealed no significant differences: $\Delta\chi^2 = 39.5$; $\Delta df = 24$; $p = .08$; $\Delta\text{CFI} = .00$; $\Delta\text{RMSEA} = .00$ (Table 2).

Citizenship Competencies (CDD): We applied the *Citizenship Competencies Scale* (Zambrano, 2018), consisting of twenty-nine Likert format items with 7 response options

ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Its purpose is to assess the competences that constitute citizenship competencies, three of which were considered in this study due to their significant contribution ($p \geq .01$) to the construction of the latent variable, as well as their overall reliability ($\alpha = .85$): a) Emotion ($\alpha = .70$), comprising the identification, understanding, and expression of why affects, feelings, and emotions are manifested in civic behavior; b) Empathy ($\alpha = .72$), defined as the identification, understanding, and behavior regarding what others experience or live through in civic coexistence; c) Democratic Environments ($\alpha = .95$), referring to the attitude and ability for assertive communication based on knowledge of human rights, as the foundation for exercising democratic participation, linked to the learning and education received by individuals throughout all stages of life (Climént, 2010; McMillan & Schumacher, 2005). Metric invariance was evaluated according to sex –male, female– (Table 2) with no differences observed between the configural and scalar models for factor loadings in the Chi-square test: $\Delta\chi^2 = 7.11$; $\Delta df = 3$; $p = .06$; $\Delta CFI = -.01$; $\Delta RMSEA = .00$. However, comparing the metric model with the scalar model yielded a significant value: $\Delta\chi^2 = 16.39$; $\Delta df = 4$; $p = .003$; $\Delta CFI = -.02$; $\Delta RMSEA = -.03$ (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002).

Sociodemographic data: we inquired about sociodemographic information by means of specific questions such as, gender, degree programme, year of study, and participation outside the university. The variable gender was operationalized as a dichotomous nominal variable due to the absence of other personal preference options: (1) male, (2) female. Regarding external participation, students were asked whether they belonged to any organization oriented towards personal interests – such as religion, NGOs, etc. – with the variable operationalized as a Dummy: (0) does not participate, (1) participates.

Procedure

Participants were invited through two methods: 1) email at the beginning of the first semester of 2022. Along with this email, a virtual link to the set of scales hosted on *Google forms*® was attached. 2) in person, where the set of scales was completed directly on paper. The average response time was approximately 20 minutes. In both cases, each student was asked to read and accept an informed consent form – accessible via QR code –, which outlined all ethical considerations and the characteristics of this research, duly validated by an Ethics Committee.

Data Analysis

As a first step, we conducted an exploratory analysis of the variables using descriptive statistics, to make the research variables visible. As a second step, we verified the fulfillment of the underlying assumptions of normality and linearity to construct an empirical model for the three variables. Once reviewed, we conducted a structural analysis using Maximum Likelihood estimation, allowing us to assess the model's fit and analyze the

proposed hypotheses. To evaluate the presented models, we considered the following indices and minimum acceptable values as described by Byrne (2001): *Chi-square* ($\chi^2 > .05$; $\chi^2/df < 3$), *Goodness-of-Fit Index* (GFI $> .95$), *Comparative Fit Index* – as a measure of parsimony – (CFI $> .95$), and the *Root Mean Square Error of Approximation* (RMSEA $< .08$) as absolute fit measures. All analyses were performed using IBM-SPSS®, v.24, and IBM-AMOS®, v.24 statistical software.

Results

In the first step, and after confirming the metric invariance of the measurements, we analyzed the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances for study variables. Subsequently, we conducted parametric analyses using the *t*-test, observing significant differences by gender in the emotion, empathy, democratic environments, and political optimism variables. No differences were found between the two groups in the remaining variables.

According to Table 3, univariate normality is observed based on the values of Asymmetry and Kurtosis for the general sample, except for variable democratic environments. Notwithstanding, Mardia's index shows values lower than 70, thus indicating the possibility of proceeding with the following steps (Rodríguez-Ayán & Ruiz-Díaz, 2008).

In the second step, we correlated the variables with each other, ruling out potential multicollinearity as no value exceeded .85 (Table 4). It is observed that the variables Emotion, Empathy, and Democratic Environments – as citizenship competences – had moderate and significant correlations with each other; the same situation occurred between Active Participation in Student Organizations and Support for the Academic Program – as student participation. The variable Satisfaction with Democracy showed a low correlation with both Political Optimism ($r = .234$) and Political Involvement ($r = .316$), but since both were statistically significant ($p \leq .05$), it was nonetheless included in the construct because: a) theoretically, it is related to attitudes towards politics such as trust, political involvement, and optimism, sharing a common attitudinal root toward the political regime and therefore should not be separated (Norris, 2012). In other words, feeling satisfied with the system leads to commitment and involvement, which are consistent with democracy (Almond & Verba, 1989); b) Satisfaction with democracy is a political attitude that integrates beliefs and evaluations about the system, guiding future political behaviors, and aligns with stable dimensions such as political efficacy and electoral participation (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Almond & Verba, 1989). For this reason, it has been a recurring dimension in other instruments used to assess attitudes toward politics (Álvarez-Ramírez, 2014), and therefore we have decided to include it in the analysis, interpreting it with caution based on the data presented herein.

Table 3*Descriptive Statistics of the Variables Incorporated in the Model*

Variable	Media (SD)		<i>t</i>	N = 489	
	Men N = 172	Women N = 317		Asymmetry	Kurtosis
Attitudes Toward Politics	3.52 (.67)	3.67 (.68)	-2.270*	-.491	.577
Satisfaction with democracy	3.33 (.78)	3.39 (.80)	.828	-.338	.379
Political optimism	3.37 (.78)	3.55 (.86)	2.266*	-.378	.384
Political implication	3.88 (.83)	4.03 (.86)	1.855	-.519	-.288
Student Participation	3.66 (.63)	3.68 (.67)	-.349	-.239	.288
Active participation of the SO	3.44 (.72)	3.47 (.07)	-.550	-.183	.083
Career support	3.90 (.69)	3.96 (.80)	-.839	-.580	.843
Citizenship Competences	5.56 (1.00)	5.72 (.73)	-1.988	-2.481	8.380
Emotion	5.62 (1.15)	5.87 (.94)	-2.480*	-1.412	2.959
Empathy	5.41 (1.13)	5.73 (1.00)	-3.095**	-1.155	2.276
Democratic environments	6.20 (1.32)	6.51 (1.00)	-2.631*	-3.190	11.467
Mardia's Coefficient					22.236

Note. The variables presented in the table correspond only to those contained in the definitive model, excluding those whose contribution was not significant for the latent variables. *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = *t* Student; SO = student organization.

p* ≤ .05. *p* ≤ .01.

Table 4*Relationship Between the Variables Introduced in the Model*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Attitudes Toward Politics								
Satisfaction with democracy	–							
Political optimism	.234*	–						
Political implication	.316*	.530*	–					
Student Participation								
Active participation of the SO	-.207*	-.238*	-.324*	–				
Career support	-.194*	-.219*	-.344*	.791**	–			
Citizenship Competences								
Emotion	-.103**	-.105**	-.136*	.101**	.236**	–		
Empathy	-.005	-.149*	-.177*	.189*	.308**	.654*	–	
Democratic Environments	-.096**	-.153*	-.178*	.164*	.281**	.691*	.662*	–

Note. SO = student organization.

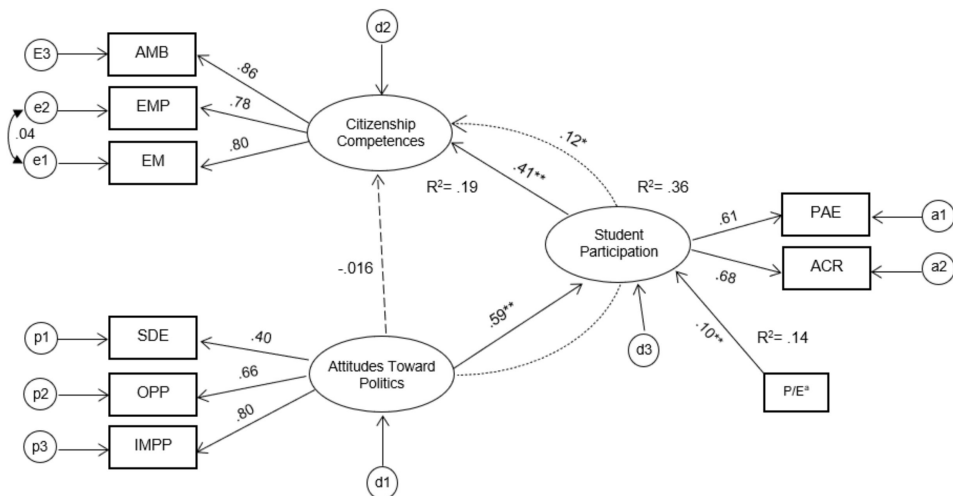
p* ≤ .05. *p* ≤ .01.

Structural Model

As a third step, we conducted a structural model for the total sample, assuming equality in the measurement of men and women for all variables, a decision supported by the scarce evidence to support their separate analysis for these three variables. By using the maximum likelihood method, this initial model and the theoretical possibilities supporting the hypotheses showed satisfactory fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.56$; GFI = .97; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .057) (Figure 2). In all proposed models, factors with non-significant contributions to latent variables were disregarded (< .40).

Figure 2

Empirical Model for the Total Sample Among Attitudes Towards Politics, Student Participation, Citizenship Competencies, and Their Respective Dimensions



Note. Nomenclature: AMB = democratic environments; EMP = empathy; EM = emotion; PAE = active participation in student organization; ACR = degree support; SDE = satisfaction with democracy; OPP = political optimism; IMPP = political implication; P/E = external political participation as control variable.
 * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

The data in Figure 2 and Table 5 shows that the variable Attitudes towards Politics is associated with Student Participation ($\beta = .59$; $p \leq .01$), explaining 36% of the variance, which is consistent with the expectations for H1. On the other hand, student participation is significantly associated with citizenship competencies ($\beta = .41$; $p \leq .01$), explaining 19% of the variance, which is partially consistent with what was indicated in H2. Regarding H3, the direct relationship between attitudes towards politics and citizenship competencies is very weak and not significant ($\beta = -.016$; $p > .05$), not allowing the hypothesis associating them directly to be confirmed. However, we considered the mediation of

student participation between attitudes towards politics and citizenship competencies, examining a mediation model that indicated a weak but significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.123$; 95% CI [0.06, 0.180]; $p \leq .001$), therefore H4 is weakly and partially supported.

Table 5

Direct and Indirect Effects Inside the Model, Including Hypothesis Testing Results

Variable	Student participation			Citizenship competencies		
	Direct	Indirect	Total	Direct	Indirect	Total
Attitudes toward Politics	.59**	–	.59	.16	.12***	–
	H1 confirmed			H4 partially confirmed. H3 not confirmed		
Student Participation	–	–	–	.41**	.00	
				H2 confirmed		
External participation ^b	.149*	.00	.149	–	–	–

^aIndirect effect mediated by Student Participation. ^bExternal participation is a control variable incorporated into Student Participation.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

On the other hand, finally we considered it important to incorporate participation/non-participation in political organizations external to the university context as a control variable for student participation. This assumes that many students do not necessarily get involved within universities, but rather in external political organizations aligned with their personal interests. Overall, the control variable showed a low but significant association ($\beta = .149$; $p = .042$), suggesting that such external participation could, in some cases, weaken student participation within universities, likely by channeling political engagement into external rather than institutional student representation spaces.

Discussion

Through this research, we analyzed the relationships between Attitudes toward Politics, Student Participation, and Citizenship Competencies in commercially-oriented private universities in Chile. We examined 4 hypotheses regarding the theoretical connections between attitudes towards politics (specifically satisfaction with democracy, political optimism, and political involvement), student participation (both institutional and career-support-related), and civic competencies (such as emotion, empathy, and democratic environments). One of these hypotheses proposed a possible indirect relationship between

Attitudes toward Politics and Citizenship Competencies mediated by Student Participation.

The findings of this study allow us to state that attitudes toward politics are significantly associated with student participation (H1), positioning student engagement as a key factor in the development of citizenship competencies among university students (H2). Although the direct relationship between attitudes toward politics and citizenship competencies was neither satisfactory nor statistically significant (H3), a weak but significant mediating effect of student participation was observed (H4), suggesting an indirect -but minimal- influence of attitudes toward politics on the development of citizenship competencies. These findings raise important questions: Is student participation within universities a suitable space for political socialization and the development of citizenship competencies? What type of student participation should be promoted to enhance these competencies?

Additionally, the findings suggest that participation in political organizations outside the university may slightly reduce involvement in on-campus student activities, thus limiting opportunities for engagement in formal political spaces within these institutions. While this decrease might be explained by a potential dissociation between external political actions and internal citizenship commitments, it is also important to consider whether other forms of student participation – outside formal education – are more relevant. These are often referred to as ‘new forms of youth participation’ (Eliécer, 2008; Ganter & Zarzuri, 2020; Zarzuri, 2016). Overall, these findings confirm the expected association between this pattern of participation and the characteristics of Private Mass/Commercially Oriented universities, which tend to restrict and control political participation within their educational and social spaces, as reported by several national studies (Bellei et al., 2014; Fleet & Guzmán-Concha, 2017; Ganga & Mancilla, 2018; Labraña & Brunner, 2022; Zurita, 2022).

Nonetheless, we argue that active participation within the university context can function as a formative mechanism crucial to the development of citizenship competencies, particularly when it mediates the influence of the attitudes towards politics. In a complex context marked by political disaffection and disinterest among youth – a trend that has grown over the decades – (Labraña & Brunner, 2022; Zarzuri, 2016), attitudes towards politics become a key element in citizenship education. They contribute to the understanding of various forms of youth organization, including new expressions of student participation, and their articulation through emerging technological platforms (Norris, 2012). While attitudes towards politics are not directly associated with citizenship competencies, their influence becomes visible when channeled through concrete action within the university, highlighting the importance of higher education institutions as spaces for political socialization and citizen development.

Beyond Chile's borders, these results are of global interest because they open up and expand the discussion about the relationship between civic competencies and partic-

icipation in universities, not only private but also public. On the one hand, the results indicated here are consistent with current trends in youth participation in formal spaces for participation. In both Europe and Latin America, this decline has been explained by the erosion of public trust in institutions and the discrediting of this age group, as its political representation is minority and of little interest, resulting in external youth participation committed to particular or unconventional interests (Ganter & Zarzuri, 2020; Goulard, 2016; Zerka, 2019). On the other hand, student participation in this type of private university acts as a bridge – albeit a weak one – between attitudes towards politics and the development of civic competencies, with political socialization being particularly important in this type of educational space due to the involvement and promotion of political self-concept (Slavkova et al., 2025).

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design and convenience sampling limit the ability to establish causal inferences and temporal ordering between variables, as well as the generalizability of the findings to broader populations (Fiedler et al., 2018). Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to track the evolution of these relationships and diversify the sample to include different types of students, universities, and their respective socioeconomic, political, and cultural characteristics following the classification from Fleet and Guzmán-Concha (2017). Based on these authors, we recommend including students from *Private Elite* or *Private Mass/Public Oriented* institutions. It also seems necessary to compare these with public universities – either *Public Elite* or *Public Mass* – to deepen the understanding of the role of institutional context. Accordingly, we urge future studies to employ new designs that can validate and expand upon the findings reported here based on these suggestions.

A second limitation is the reliance on self-reported data collected through online forms, which may have introduced social desirability bias, potentially weakening the observed associations between the latent variables. A third limitation concerns the explained variance of the selected variables. While the exploratory approach contributes meaningfully to the understanding of an underexplored phenomenon in Chile, additional variables – such as ideological orientation, religion convictions, region of residence, field of study, or new forms non-conventional of student participation – should be considered to improve explanatory power. Although this study focused on exploring relationships between variables, future research must delve deeper into these dynamics.

This research contributes directly to the field of social psychology by addressing student participation not only as a behavioral expression and of ‘the political’ (Mouffe, 2013), but also as an intermediate category related to education, which helps to explain how university students transition from attitudes towards politics to the development of citizenship competencies. This relevance becomes even more pronounced when considering recent studies that reveal youth dissatisfaction with traditional politics, alongside a decline in formal political participation and a shift toward alternative forms (Ganter & Zarzuri, 2020; Muñoz & Durán, 2019).

In conclusion, the findings of this research support our initial hypotheses, insofar as citizenship competencies are not directly explained by attitudes towards politics, although they may be related through student participation. This intermediate variable showed a weak but statistically significant association with both political attitudes and citizenship competencies, supporting the idea that student involvement in non-academic activities within the university can serve as a formative bridge between attitudinal dimensions and the development of competencies for citizenship.

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Data Availability: As this article is part of a larger research project, we are unable to publish the data at this time. However, the metadata information is available in the research and innovation area of the University of Santo Tomás (www.ust.cl). Once all publications have been completed and the relevant ethics committee has been informed, the data will be made publicly available by contacting the authors.

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