

CLOSED LISTS

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A dear friend of mine sent me an e-mail expressing her indignation against election by lists and public financing of campaigns. The e-mail arrived just as I was writing this article in favor of closed lists and public financing. And so we realize that the Brazilian society, which calls for political reforms, is not exactly sure of what it wants. On the other hand, we all watch with concern the National Congress be transformed into the stage for a succession of scandals that weaken Brazilian democracy. There is no simple solution for this problem, but it is evident that we need a better quality of representatives who are more accountable to their voters. And it is also evident that a political reform could contribute to this.

For many years I have been defending the mixed system similar to the German model, which combines closed list and district vote, but it would require a constitutional reform, and there is no expectation that it can be approved. However, the bill introduced by Representative Ibsen Pinheiro proposing a closed-list voting system (such as the one for public financing) does not depend on amendments to the Constitution and, in my opinion, it contributes to a better Congress. There are four reasons why it contributes.

First, because it strengthens the political parties. In a good democracy, the voter is concerned about the great national goals of safety, freedom, welfare, justice, and environmental protection – goals that are consistent with the ideologies professed by the parties. The Brazilian system weakens the political parties, because it has a presidentialist form of government, and also because the elections are based on proportional vote with open lists, in such a way that candidates of the same party compete with each other, instead of forming a reasonably cohesive whole.

Second, the closed list leads to a greater degree of responsibility on the part of the elected people. The open list renders it almost impossible for the voter to follow the work of a candidate he does not know (very few remember the name of the candidate

they voted for) and of a representative he did not elect (only one third of the voters elect a representative). The closed list, on the other hand, allows the voter to demand accountability from the political party he voted for.

Third, because it reduces the role of money in the campaigns. Electing a representative in Brazil is very expensive. Such cost disappears with the list.

Fourth, because the closed lists make the political profession safer, and therefore it will be able to attract better candidates. There is no other profession more important to a country than that of a politician. We need to attract some of the most brilliant young people of great public spirit into politics, but it requires that a reasonable degree of safety be assured for the candidates. Several devices for this purpose can be found in advanced democracies. Yet the proportional representation with an open-list voting system makes the life of Brazilian politicians terribly insecure. The percentage of new representatives who are reelected is very small if compared to more developed democracies. In Brazil, you need to have an adventurous spirit to be a candidate.

But won't the closed-list voting system give even more power to groups controlling the parties? I guess not. If a political party presents lists with names of candidates that are not worthy of respect or not known, it will lose votes. There is no perfect political reform. Each reform has its gains and losses. For the very conscientious voters, the loss of possibility of voting for a specific person is real. But having a democracy based on weak parties and reckless politicians is a greater loss.