LIBERAL ARTS

Electoral Reform in Ecuador: The Obstacles to Citizen Representation

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Ecuador passed an electoral reform in 2009 that adopted the rare “free list” proportional system for selecting representatives to the lower house of the national legislature. A free list allows the voter to cast “preference votes” for multiple candidates across different parties. A voter has as many votes as there are representatives in the district; districts vary from 2 to 17 representatives. (Alternatively, the voter can cast on “list vote” for a party.) I examine district-level electoral data from the lower house elections of 2009 to understand voting behavior under the new electoral system, with a particular interest in how the complexity of the electoral choices leads to biases against voters in large districts. I compare the rate at which voters use the preference vs. list option and find that list voting is most common in large districts.

I also study the conditions under which voters underutilize their preference votes and find that voters underutilize their options most in large districts. Both patterns support the conclusion that preference voting is an enormous cognitive challenge for voters in large districts, and consequently undermines their representation. For example, in Guayas Province, the most complex of all, voters are free to vote for 17 candidates from among 20 parties and 340 total candidates, illustrating the challenge in knowing every candidate and the chaotic structure of voting in Ecuador.

Research advisor Thomas Mustillo writes, “Shannon’s work identifies limits to participatory democracy. Ecuador’s electoral reform was part of a region-wide wave of populist victory that sought to weaken traditional political parties and maximize voter choice. By showing how participation declines as the complexity of the information environment increases, she underscores that robust parties are central for meaningful representation.”

Guayas Province ballot: Voter casts 17 votes from 20 political parties with 340 total candidates.