

Measures and votes: Party performance under free list proportional representation with evidence from Ecuador[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Free list proportional representation is an electoral system that gives voters as many votes as there are seats, and allows the voter to distribute them anywhere on the ballot. Computing party support under this system can be complicated, since different electors possess and use different numbers of votes. As a result, national election results and derivatives thereof (e.g. electoral volatility) may be calculated incorrectly. Using a stylized illustration, we describe obstacles to vote aggregation under the free list and develop four approaches for counting votes. The first two, “naive aggregation” and the “fictional voter” technique, have known applications. We propose the third, which we call “weighted votes”, to deal with missing data about the number of voters. The last, “weighted preferences”, has been used intermittently, and we offer a generalization for a broad range of applications. Applying these methods to Ecuadorian elections, our results reveal biases in certain approaches and inform the question of which method to use and under which circumstances. Lastly, we make publicly available a definitive set of district- and national-level election results for Ecuador over six elections from 1998 to 2017, thereby making it possible for the case to re-enter comparative cross-national research.

Ecuador—like Switzerland, Luxembourg, Honduras and El Salvador—uses free list proportional representation (PR) for elections to the national legislative assembly. Under the free list, voters can either 1) cast a “list vote” which is distributed as one vote to each member of the party list, or 2) cast up to as many “preference votes” as there are seats in the district, and distribute them across individual candidates from any party list. In 2017, voters from the Ecuadorian province of Los Ríos elected six provincial deputies using this method. In total, 412,152 valid voters cast about five votes each for a total of 1,917,659 valid votes, with 831,619 (43.4%) going to the governing Alianza PAIS (AP). Meanwhile, some 14,523 Galápagos voters cast about two votes each for a total of 27,392 valid votes to elect two provincial deputies, with just 7594 (27.7%) going to AP.

How do we average AP's vote share across these two districts? Adding the raw numbers as one does when each voter possesses one vote would distort the answer: it would show that the party earned 839,213 valid votes out of a total 1,945,051 in the two districts, for a share of 43.1%—just a few tenths of a percentage point below the party's share in Los Ríos. However, each voter in Los Ríos, which happened to be a party stronghold, was able to cast three times as many

votes as each voter in Galápagos, where AP is weaker. Consequently, the contribution of each voter in Los Ríos is up to three times as large as that of their counterparts in Galápagos: simply adding the raw votes produces a measure of party support that is heavily biased in favor of the strongest-performing parties in the largest-magnitude districts. Instead, measurement requires some method of adjustment to account for the unequal number of votes allotted to voters from districts of different sizes, and possibly to account for the unequal vote usage within districts. What methods exist, and which of these are most adequate?

Unfortunately, the academic literature on free list PR is practically non-existent, with few explanations of how it works and few proposals of how to aggregate votes in order to compute basic quantities of interest, such as measures of national party strength and electoral volatility. For example, we found only one scholarly treatment in English summarizing the Swiss Federal Statistical Office's national aggregation technique, the so-called “fictional voter” method (Caramani, 2000), and none summarizing the methods used in Luxembourg, Ecuador, Honduras, or El Salvador—or in any of the multiple European countries that use the free list at the subnational level.

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In this paper, we describe the basic mechanics of free list PR as well as its origins and current scope of use. We also bring the problems of aggregation to the attention of scholars, who often utilize raw vote totals or vote shares of unknown provenance in their own work. Our core contribution is to review, systematize, and evaluate four methods of aggregation—including one we develop ourselves—using a stylized illustration. We highlight assumptions and biases that operate in each. We then apply the methods to the case of Ecuador, which has adopted different vote aggregation rules and electoral systems since 1998, and even eliminated in 2012 the collection of a key piece of data needed to calculate one type of party support. This section includes a definitive set of district- and national-level election results for Ecuador over six elections from 1998 to 2017 based upon the best available data. We close with our theoretically and empirically informed recommendations about the preferred method of aggregation for analysts and scholars.

1. The mechanics and scope of free list PR

Free list PR provides voters with an enhanced set of choices compared to other forms of PR. Compared to closed list PR, it possesses three additional dimensions of choice. Under the closed list, voters cast a single vote for one party list, but they cannot alter the rank order of the candidates on a list. As under open list PR, the ability to alter the rank is the first dimension of choice: voters under the free list have the option of expressing their preferences within the list. Free list voters also have a second and third dimension of choice: they can cast multiple votes, and distribute them to candidates on different lists. Fig. 1 shows a model ballot for a magnitude three district with four parties. It depicts a list vote on the left, and preference voting on the right. Fig. 2, meanwhile, shows a 2017 sample ballot for Los Ríos, a magnitude six district with 15 parties (or party alliances). Voters there were able to cast six votes among the 90 possible candidates using the configurations we describe. These three dimensions of choice are at least partially independent of each other, and a diverse set of combinations are theoretically possible. For example, in Slovakia's "flexible list" PR system, candidates are permitted the first and second dimensions of choice, but not the third: they can cast up to four votes for individual candidates within a given party list (Crisp et al., 2013). Alternatively, one can imagine a multiple vote closed-list PR system, though we do not know of such a case.

This description takes place in terms of the idea of "multiple votes," where each voter's influence is treated in terms of the district magnitude, which we designate as M . A list voter, in choosing a party list, effectively distributes one vote to each candidate on the list, for a total of M votes, while a preference voter can cast as many as M votes. This

approach has the disadvantage of yielding an outcome in which voters from different districts have different numbers of votes (depending upon M). An alternative, but logically equivalent way to think about preference voting under the free list conceptualizes it in terms of a single vote that can be divided into fractions. A list voter can cast a single vote for a party list, which is distributed as $\frac{1}{M}$ votes per candidate on the list. A preference voter can divide their vote into M pieces each equal to $\frac{1}{M}$, which they can distribute as they wish across all candidates on the ballot. The latter conceptualization has the advantage of retaining the notion of "one-person-one-vote," and is therefore helpful for computing national aggregate party strength and derivatives thereof.

A definitional feature of free list PR requires that votes be pooled at the party level before seats are distributed to candidates within the lists. Like open list PR, preference votes alone determine the order in which seats are filled for each list (i.e. there is no threshold as in flexible list systems). When votes are not pooled—that is, when the top M candidates with the most votes win—the electoral system embodies a form of plurality, rather than proportional voting, and is commonly called "multiple non-transferable votes" (MNTV) or "bloc(k) voting."

Several other features of free list PR are not definitional. First, voters commonly retain the option of casting a party list vote, rather than needing to cast multiple preference votes. Thus, we distinguish between voters who choose the list option from voters who choose the preference option. Second, district magnitude can vary across districts. Third, voters are sometimes permitted to "cumulate" their votes by giving more than one vote to a single candidate. For example, a voter with two votes may be permitted to cast both for a single candidate. Fourth, voters can "plump" their votes by casting fewer than M (e.g. a voter with two votes might use only one). Finally, electoral authorities sometimes adopt counting procedures that include a weighting factor to equalize the total influence of individual voters regardless of the number of votes they use. For example, if a voter casts one vote when two are allowed, the electoral authority might weight it by two times to allow their contribution to be equal to the voter who uses both. When this happens, it has the same consequence as cumulation. When it does not happen, voters who cast fewer than M votes are exercising relatively less influence over the election results. In this sense, voters have the ability to partially abstain. Electoral authorities have used weighting factors at the individual level (as in El Salvador in 2015) and at the level of the average district voter (as in Ecuador in 2006).

As a point of semantic clarity, we prefer to call this electoral system by "free list PR," rather than "panachage," which is sometimes used. The latter translates as "mixing," and arises from the Francophone cases where PR voters have been given the three dimensions of choice we describe here. In these cases, the voter's ability to mix was always (as

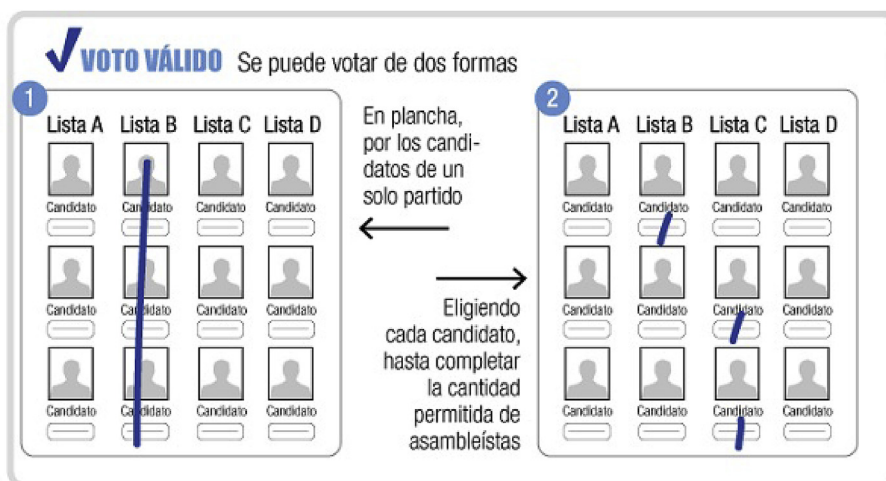


Fig. 1. Ballot instructions from a simple district in Ecuador.

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