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Why coalitions? Party system fragmentation, small party bias, and preferential vote in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Two distinct puzzles characterize the election of House members to the Brazilian Congress: first, in spite of Open-List Proportional Representation (OLPR) rules that allocate seats in proportion to vote shares, an overwhelming majority of parties prefer to form electoral coalitions and run joint lists of candidates. Second, under OLPR, the formation of coalitions consistently rewards smaller parties. Our research provides a single mechanism that integrates pro-small party biases and coalition making incentives under OLPR rules in Brazil. Results of our analysis also illustrate the mechanical properties of family relatives of Open List rules used in emerging democracies.

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Between 1994 and 2010, 74% of the candidates to the Brazilian Congress were elected in lists that included more than one party. Over 40% of coalitions included four parties or more, with some counting as many as 16 coalition partners. Most coalitions were locally forged, with parties joining in one State and competing against each other in another. Electoral coalitions included different Parties in each State, with an overwhelming majority of coalitions that failed to align either with the President or the Governors, but instead answered to more idiosyncratic concerns.

By any measure, the level of pre-electoral coalition making activity in Brazil is extraordinary. However, there has been only limited scholarly attention devoted to the study of its root causes compared to a vast body of research devoted to explaining the ideological heterogeneity of coalitions (Zucco, 2009, 2010; Melo and Alcántara Sáez, 2007) or the negative consequences of fragmentation on party labels (Samuels, 2003; Desposato, 2006a, 2006b;

Mainwaring, 2001; Stepan, 1989; Ames, 1994). Furthermore, no research has explained why the allocation of seats in Brazil consistently rewards small parties, an electoral trait that is to a large extent responsible for the observed fragmentation and, we argue, the uncommonly numerous effective number of electoral parties.

In this article we show that coalition incentives and pro-small party biases are explained by coordination failures by voters of large parties in Open List Proportional Representation (OLPR). As we will show, small and medium-sized district magnitudes reward majority lists, creating incentives to form coalitions by large and small parties. However, benefits to coalition partners under OLPR rules depend on the relative concentration or dispersion of preferential votes among different candidates. While the concentration of votes on the top candidates of small parties increases the odds of acquiring a seat; large parties need to *spread the wealth*, efficiently dispersing their vote among multiple candidates. Because optimal dispersion of votes among party candidates is difficult, large parties tend to subsidize their smaller coalition partners. Consequently, small parties not only survive but thrive under Brazilian Open List Proportional Representation (OLPR) rules.

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Conversely, large parties derive more moderate benefits from forming coalitions.

While large parties could claim a larger share of seats if small parties did not compete in elections, pooling votes from a large number of partners makes coalitions attractive to large parties as well. Indeed, if large parties decide against forming coalitions with their smaller partners, other coalitions would still recruit high-yield candidates and pool votes to gain premium seats.

Small party biases under candidate-centric rules have already been noted in the extant literature. Cox (1996) as well as Taagepera and Shugart (1989) provide evidence that Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) rules are *super-proportional* or *counter-majoritarian*, the result of coordination failures in the presentation of candidates.¹ Similarly, in a recent article, Bochsler (2010) provides evidence that small parties draw larger benefits from forming coalitions under OLPR rules while large parties benefit from apartment laws. The counter-majoritarian biases described by Cox (1996) have similar coordination origins to those of OLPR, with voters of large parties being more likely to be penalized for overinvesting in a few top party candidates.

To explain coalition incentives in Brazil, as well as to describe the sources of pro-small party biases in OLPR, we present a general model of seats and votes that incorporates information about the relative concentration of votes on top party candidates. We show that the relative concentration or dispersion of votes among candidates alters the expected number of seats to be allocated to small and large parties. The model provides a rationale for the three most important features of the Brazilian OLPR electoral rules: the (i) large effective number of parties, the (ii) observed partisan biases, and the (iii) uncommonly large number of coalitions.

The findings in this article also shed light on the electoral systems of over twenty countries that use variations of open-list PR electoral rules.² There are a number of scholars who have noted the incentive to form coalitions as well as the pro-small party biases in other electoral systems. Togeby (2008) provides evidence of how preferential voting in the Danish PR system allowed ethnic minorities to concentrate their vote and improve representation in the Folketing. As in the case of Brazil, Togeby notes that ethnic minorities have an incentive to run their candidates with larger parties such as the Social Democrats in order to overcome high electoral thresholds. Meanwhile, Danish

large parties have an incentive to incorporate high yield candidates from ethnic minorities. As in Brazil, ethnic minorities in Denmark concentrate their vote, thus allowing their candidates to be elected at higher rates than non-minorities.

Chang (2005) has shown that OLPR increases intra-party competition that generates incentives, cultivates minority vote, and increases corruption. There is also an extensive debate on how preferential voting OLPR systems such as in Brazil, Chile, Norway, and Poland affect women's representation (Matland, 1993; Jones and Navia, 1999). However, while all of these analyses have emphasized the importance of preferential voting on minority representation, women's representation, and corruption, there has been little work connecting these phenomena to the varying concentration of party votes on list candidates.

The organization of this article is as follows: first, we provide a discussion of the extant literature and its shortcomings. We also describe electoral rules and the partisan environment in Brazil, with an emphasis on the seat-vote properties of OLPR rules. Second, we describe a seat-vote model that estimates the allocation of seats under OLPR rules. Finally, we estimate the pro-small party bias in electoral rules as well as their effect on the formation of coalitions.

1. Open list PR and coalitions in Brazil

A number of different theories have been proposed to explain coalition formation in Brazil (Schmitt, 2005). Earlier research explained coalition formation as the result of ideological affinity (Lima Junior, 1983; Soares, 1964; Schmitt, 1999), with small conservative parties displaying a greater tendency to form or join coalitions. Evidence to support the ideological hypothesis, however, was mixed at best. Indeed, most current research finds very weak or no association between coalition formation and ideological congruence (Machado, 2007; Zucco, 2009).

Soares (1964) and Lima Junior (1983) were arguably the first scholars to associate the decision to form or join coalitions to electoral incentives. Since small parties tend to form or join coalitions more often than big ones, these scholars posited that small parties benefitted the most from OLPR rules. However, no formal or statistical model was proposed for explaining the higher propensity to join coalitions by small parties. Instead, researchers argued, coalitions allowed small parties to circumvent small district magnitudes and access seats they would not be able to obtain by running separate lists of candidates (Lavareda, 1991; Nicolau, 1996; Lima Junior, 1993). These theories, however, were unable to explain why large parties routinely form coalitions with smaller partners. Clearly larger parties neither form coalitions to overcome thresholds nor benefit from smaller parties taking seats they could allocate to their own party members.

A different group of researchers explained coalitions in Brazil as a majority-building device with policy-driven objectives. Indeed, Brazilian scholars have for a long time recognized that Presidents need (Abranches, 1988) and seek (Figueiredo and Limongi, 1999; Figueiredo et al., 2000) the support of legislative majority coalitions to approve

¹ Researchers have coined the term super-proportional (Cox, 1996), anti-majoritarian or unresponsive (King and Browning, 1987), and counter-majoritarian (Calvo, 2009) to describe the effect of rules that provide premium seats to small parties. Similarly, to explain premium seats allocated to winning parties, scholars have used the term sub-proportional, responsive, and majoritarian. In all three cases, the underlying statistical model is very similar. In this article we use the term, counter-majoritarian, to describe electoral rules that consistently reward small parties in proportion to their votes, and majoritarian to describe rules that consistently reward large parties.

² Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chile, Colombia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Fiji, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Northern Cyprus, Norway, Poland, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Sri Lanka.

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