

Real-politik

Why elections, even to lowly office, are so expensive

ONE of the most popular laws passed by some city vereadores, members of the legislative arm of Brazil's municipal governments, has been to make any bank queue lasting longer than 15 minutes illegal. No matter that their authority is meant to be limited to duller things, like the mayor's budget or zoning laws. The vereadores, who along with mayors are up for election in more than 5,000 cities on October 5th, reject such constitutional leg-irons. Competition for the office is fierce—strangely so, perhaps, given that this is the lowliest political post in the land—and can be very expensive.

Transparencia, an NGO, has examined the last set of races in three state capitals (Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte), which took place in 2004. Of 55 vereadores elected in Sao Paulo, 40 declared that they had spent more than 100,000 reais (then \$35,000) on their races. One candidate spent over five times that amount. In Rio de Janeiro, some campaigns were even more expensive in terms of votes gathered per real spent. Certain successful candidates in the city spent more than \$15 for each vote they won. (In comparison, George Bush spent \$5.60 per vote he garnered in the American presidential election that year, and John Kerry, the Democratic candidate, \$5.20 for each of his.) If undeclared spending were added, the sums would be even greater.

Why is it worth spending such sums just to become a member of a municipal council? In the big cities, the mayor controls a substantial budget. In smaller ones, money from the federal government, funnelled through the municipality, is often the mainstay of the local economy.

Until the Supreme Court banned the practice, states were able to create new municipalities almost at will. As a result, the number of places designated as cities grew by more than a thousand in a couple of years. Each new city brought its own administrative structure, which in turn provided new jobs and the right to tap federal funds. In such places, control of the local machine this time around may be vital in securing success in 2010, when the next presidential election will be held.

Although many candidates are no doubt motivated solely by public spirited-ness, the moneymaking opportunities afforded to a vereador are also appealing. The combined salary and office expenses of a Sao Paulo vereador amount to 94,000 reais a month, making the job very well paid. Much of the office expenses seem to go on "consultancy", which is particularly sought after in an election year. There is also the possibility of making some money on the side: a few years ago vereadores were found to be behind an organisation that extorted money from street vendors. Power over zoning makes vereadores of interest to property developers, who often provide campaign contributions too.

As is the case with deputies at both state and federal level, a sizeable proportion of vereadores have cases against them pending in either the electoral or the ordinary criminal courts. The municipalities also share two further afflictions with the two tiers of government above them. The first is party switching: 14 of Rio's vereadores changed party after the last local elections. The second is the lack of electoral districts. A candidate standing in Sao Paulo, for example, must appeal to some 10m voters, rather than to a prescribed chunk of the city. Once elected, a vereador therefore lacks responsibility for any particular group of voters, further undermining his accountability.

The system is made even more unbalanced by a rule that allows candidates who get more votes than they need to win to transfer some of them to someone else on their party list. As a result, some vereadores are elected with very little support. The most popular vereador in the Rio election was voted in with 99,900 votes. Another candidate sneaked into the same chamber with a mere 6,800.

From time to time, and particularly when there is a big political scandal, the federal government makes noises about electoral reform to remedy these glaring faults. But so far, nothing has been forthcoming. And the spending goes on.

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