

## HOW DIFFERENT IS THE BRAZILIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM? A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta uma comparação atualizada do sistema político brasileiro com o de 33 outras democracias. Mostramos que o Brasil é atípico no que diz respeito ao número de partidos efetivos, ao orçamento total do governo alocado ao poder legislativo e aos recursos públicos alocados aos partidos (para financiar campanhas e operações regulares dos partidos). O Brasil também é o único país de nossa amostra em que o judiciário organiza e supervisiona o processo eleitoral. Também encontramos uma correlação positiva entre o financiamento público total e o número total de partidos efetivos.

**Palavra-chave:** Partidos Políticos, Financiamento Público, Sistemas Políticos.

**Abstract:** This paper provides an up-to-date comparison of Brazil's political system with that of 33 other democracies. We show that Brazil is an outlier with respect to the number of effective parties, the total government budget allocated to the legislative power, and the public funds allocated to parties (to fund campaigns and regular party operations). Brazil is also unique in its electoral management body: it is the only country in our sample in which the judiciary both organizes and oversees the electoral process. We also find a positive correlation between total public funding and the total number of effective parties.

**Keywords:** Political Parties, Public Funding, Political Systems.

**Resumen:** Este documento presenta una comparación actualizada del sistema político de Brasil con el de otras 33 democracias. Mostramos que Brasil es un caso atípico con respecto al número de partidos efectivos, el presupuesto total

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asignado al poder legislativo y los fondos públicos asignados a los partidos (para financiar campañas y operaciones partidarias regulares). Brasil también es el único país de nuestra muestra en el que el poder judicial organiza y supervisa el proceso electoral. También encontramos una correlación positiva entre la financiación pública total y el número total de partidos efectivos.

**Palabras clave:** Partidos políticos, Financiamiento público, Sistemas políticos.

The Brazilian political system possesses some extreme features, such as the number of political parties, the amount of resources allocated by the government to these parties, and the cost of political campaigns. As stated by Mainwaring (1991), “Brazil’s electoral legislation have either no parallel or few parallels in the world”. Focusing primarily on the 1979-96 period, Mainwaring (1999) presents a comprehensive analysis of the Brazilian political system at that time, emphasizing the weakness of parties.

Newer data indicates that some of these features might have become more extreme. Zucco and Power (2021) document how the Brazilian parliamentary fragmentation, which was already considered extreme in the mid-1980’s, has “skyrocketed” since then. The authors argue that this rise is driven by strategic considerations of politicians, in particular, it is “far more enticing for most politicians to be a high-ranking member of a small party than a low-ranking member of a large one, and these incentives have intensified during the period under consideration.” An important part of this benefit is the control of the increasing public funds for campaigns and to finance party operations.

Years ago, Mainwaring (1999) and Samuels (2001) called attention to the expensive electoral campaigns in Brazil, especially if we take into account this cost relative to the Brazilian per capita income. Avelino and Fisch (2020) show that this cost (at least for Lower Chamber campaigns) has risen significantly in the period 2002-2014. The authors speculate about two complementary explanations: the rise of the Labor Party (PT) as a viable competitor in executive elections, and the concurrent increase in party fragmentation.

In this paper, we contribute to this literature by presenting recent data comparing Brazil to a group of 33 other democracies.<sup>4</sup> Our main focus is

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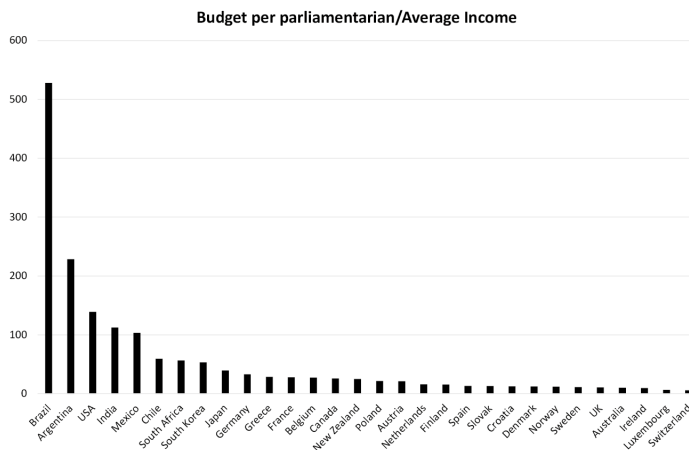
<sup>4</sup> Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa,

to provide new light into the relationship between party fragmentation, the total government budget allocated to the legislative power, and the public funds allocated to parties (to fund campaigns and regular party operation).

Compared to our sample, some of the most extreme features of Brazil are the following. First, Brazil has by far the highest number of effective parties<sup>5</sup> at 15.63. Belgium is a distant second with 10.08, followed by Chile with 9.54. The average number of effective parties in our sample (excluding Brazil) is only 4.51.

Second, Brazil is also an outlier regarding the amount of money that the government allocates to the legislative power. For each country in our sample, we compute the total budget allocated to the (federal) legislative power and divide it by the number of parliamentarians, to obtain the budget per parliamentarian (BPP). We then divide the BPP by the average income of each country. This ratio represents the relative resources allocated to the legislative. The result is presented in Figure 1. Brazil has the highest ratio at 528. This means that the overall legislative budget per parliamentarian (US\$ 5,013,706) is 528 times higher than the average income in Brazil (US\$ 9,500). Argentina is a distant second, with a ratio that is less than half of Brazil's ratio. The average ratio in our sample (excluding Brazil) is only 40.

Figure 1 – Budget per parliamentarian-to-Average Income Ratio.

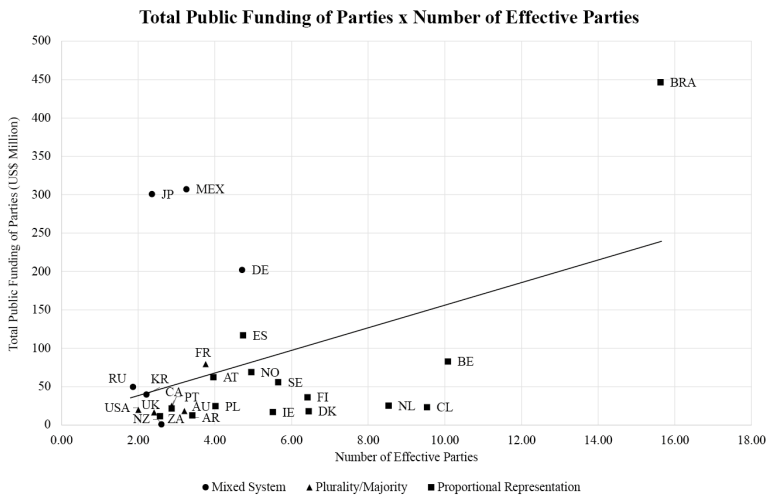


Sources: IPU Parline, IFS, St. Louis Fed and World Bank.

Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United kingdom, and United States.  
 5 As defined by Laakso and Taagepera (1979).

Third, Brazil is an outlier in terms of the total public funding of parties (the average annual monetary transfers from the government to the parties, both to fund campaigns and to fund their operation). Together political parties in Brazil receive, on average, US\$ 446 million per year. Mexico comes second with US\$ 307 million. Excluding Brazil, the average in our sample is only US\$ 65.40 million. On Figure 2 we present a simple regression of this total public funding on the effective number of parties. We can see that there is a positive correlation between total public funding and the total number of effective parties. Of course, this does not indicate causation, which can go either way. One needs to investigate whether the high number of effective parties is pressing for more public funds for political activities, or the availability of large funds incentivizes the multiplication of parties.

Figure 2 – Total Public Funding of Parties versus Number of Effective Parties



Sources: Parliament website, EMB website, IFS and St. Louis Fed.

In addition to these three main points, Brazil is also unique in its electoral management body: it is the only country in our sample in which the judiciary both organizes and oversees the electoral process. Moreover, only Brazil and four other countries in our sample enforce the obligation to vote.

We also present a series of other comparisons: political system,

legislative structure, and electoral system for the national legislative. In most of these dimensions, Brazil does not come out as outlier. For example, Brazil and 15 other countries in our sample use an open List Proportional Representation. However, as noted by Mainwaring (1999), the details of how the Brazilian system operates makes it unique and leads to a weak party system.

In summary, our paper shows how Brazil is an outlier in a number of important dimensions of its political system. In particular, its allocation of public funds to politicians and political parties is well above other countries in our sample. This seems to confirm an observation by Ames (2001): “The tragedy of the Brazilian system is not that it benefits elites; the problem is that it primarily benefits itself—that is, the politicians and civil servants who operate within it”.

Although there have been attempts to explain the special characteristics of Brazil’s political system, more research is necessary to better explain our findings. In particular, why there are so many parties in Brazil and why the public spending both on parties and the legislative power is so high. We hope that this paper will encourage research to explore these issues.

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