



## **Factsheet # 4: Variations of Party List Proportional Systems: Closed List, Open List and Free List**

Party list systems are the most common methods of proportional representation used around the world. The three major variants of party list proportional representation systems vary to the degree that they allow voters to cast votes for candidates and for political parties.

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### **Closed List**

The simplest, most common party list system is the closed list. In closed systems, a party ranks its candidates on a list prior to the election. The order of candidates can be determined either by party members in primaries and conventions, by local committees, or by party leaders. In an effort to attract widespread support, lists typically are diversified along lines that are important to the party and the voters it seeks to attract; factors can include geography, ideology, name recognition, gender and so on. Called the "puller," the first name on the list is often the most popular and well-recognized candidate.

At the ballot box, rather than voting for any particular candidate, voters simply designate their favorite party. When all the ballots are counted, seats are assigned to each party in accordance with its percentage of the popular vote: in a ten-seat district, a party would win three seats if it won some 30% of the vote. The candidates filling that party's allotment of seats are taken from the top of the list downwards. If a party earned three seats, its top three candidates would take the seats.

Proponents of closed lists point out that they are easy for voters to understand, and may be particularly useful in situations where levels of voter education are low. They also stress their accountability: voters know exactly what they are getting when they support a particular party. Closed lists also can allow parties to take clear steps to elect more women and other traditionally under-represented constituencies. The main concern with closed lists is that they can concentrate too much power in the hands of party leaders and activists. Because parties determine the rankings on the lists, the worry is that representatives will be more responsive to party politics than voter concerns. Independent candidacies also are difficult.

### **Open Lists**

The second major category of party list systems is called the open list. Open list systems counteract the perception of "boss-ism" present in closed list. In open list systems, voters not only indicate a party preference on their ballot, but also preferences among individual candidates within that party. As in closed list systems, seats are assigned to parties in accordance with their shares of popular support. The ranking of a party list of candidates, however, and therefore the individual representatives selected, are decided by the voters' choices or by a combination of the voters' choices and the party's choices.



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Most commonly, the party presents an ordered list, but voters are given the power to change the order of that list by voting directly for candidates. A less common method is an "unordered list," as used in Finland. With an unordered list, voters vote directly for candidates. The total vote for a party's slate of candidates (which can have more candidates than seats to be filled, as the candidate vote acts as a primary) determines its share of seats, and the candidates who received the most individual votes fill those seats.

Proponents of open list systems believe that by allowing voters to choose among individual candidates within a party, the candidates will be more responsive to the concerns of the voters than the demands of the party leaders. They argue that open lists give voters more input over what happens to their vote. Critics warn against the effects of intra-party competition, including a greater potential for "pork barrel" projects, negative campaigning and "politics of personality."

#### **Free List**

The third and most rarely used variant is the free list system. Free list systems allow voters to vote for candidates from different party lists (panachange). Seats are essentially allocated to individual candidates based on their popular support, but the actual mechanism is quite complicated.