Electing a Rector in Brazil: Complicated Politics

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Abstract
This article describes the succession process of the president (rector) of one of the most important public universities in Brazil. Although each public higher education institution in Latin America has a different election system, general patterns apply. The intricate election system that precedes formal appointment has positive and negative facets, which are important arguments in the discussion on improving governance—so necessary not only in public Latin American universities, but also worldwide.

The list is the outcome of an election in which the entire academic community participates.

The University of Campinas (Universidade Estadual de Campinas, best known as Unicamp), is a state-funded, comprehensive university, ranked among the best in Latin America. Its governance system is similar to most public universities in Brazil, in which a president (rector) selects an administrative team. There is a university council (UC), presided over by the rector, with the participation of all the administrative principals, the directors of the different schools and institutes, and elected representatives from the academic community (students, staff, and faculty). Currently, this council has 76 members—with 70 percent among them faculty.

In most higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide, the president is a professional selected through a search process and charged with implementing strategies and actions approved by a council or a board, over which she or he does not preside. In Brazil, the rector is a professor who presides over the university council, which in turn decides the policies of the university, giving rise to an inherent ambiguity and excess of power.

The Election Process

The rector of the university is appointed by the governor of São Paulo state for a four-year term without the possibility of reelection. Only full professors at the university are eligible. The finalist is selected from a list of three candidates prepared by the UC. The list is the outcome of an election in which the entire academic community participates. Each university might have a different system, ranging from full parity of all sectors to the election of representatives who constitute an electoral college. At Unicamp, each member of the community is entitled to vote for the rector, but the votes from each sector are weighted differently, with greater weight given to the votes of the faculty (votes from faculty count for three-fifths, votes from staff for one-fifth, and votes from students for one-fifth as well). If none of the candidates achieves more than 50 percent of the weighted votes, there is a second round. The UC creates the list submitted to the governor based on the results of the election.

There is always a certain amount of tension resulting from formal appointments made by governors for state institutions, or by the country´s president in the case of federal universities. Since the country's return to democracy, the practice has been that the executive authority appoints the first name on the list, respecting the choice of the university community. However, since 2019, the current president, Jair Bolsonaro, has appointed rectors of federal universities dismissing the institutional choice in 20 out of 54 elections. In two cases, the president's choice was not even on the list. Even though there is no legal obligation for appointments to originate from the list submitted, accepting the academic community's preference is considered an important expression of respect of the autonomy of universities, of democracy, and of the legitimacy of the process. Administrative leadership by a person who was not chosen by the majority of the university community has only served to exacerbate tensions within the academic environment. In several cases, the result has been long strikes and conflicts that may require years to heal.

Considering the complexity of the election process, preparation starts long before election day. A committee is formed by the UC to determine the calendar, rules, and logistics of the ballot and the process for counting votes. (In 2021, the entire process at Unicamp was completely online, with around 35,000 voters.) Also, candidates start their campaign well in advance to exchange ideas with the community by participating in group discussions, interviews, debates, not unlike a campaign in a small town. Earning support from different constituencies, identifying future threats, and developing possible institutional strategies are essential steps in the preparation of a comprehensive agenda for the

forthcoming term. A well-organized communication strategy is also critical, with presence on social media to reach the entire community. Each candidate is helped by supporters who work on a volunteer basis, helping to elaborate the candidate's program, organize the schedule of visits, and contribute financially as needed. This support group eventually becomes a part of the administration team if their candidate wins the election.

Candidates usually represent groups within the university with different priorities and objectives that are, or at least should be, clearly stated throughout the campaign. A rather diverse mix of issues emerge during conversations and debates, including academic policy and practice, infrastructure problems, bureaucracy, salaries, etc. Other specific interest groups, including political parties, unions, student representatives, among others, eventually choose one of the candidates whom they support. Sadly, personal attacks and fake news have become increasingly prevalent, amplified in social media and message groups by malicious anonymous individuals. Since the campaign takes place exclusively among local candidates, they usually indulge in shallow discussions of internal issues, while missing the fundamental connection to the society that the university ultimately serves.

Advantages and Limitations of the System
The overall process has pros and cons. The candidates must necessarily be full professors at the university, which strongly limits opportunities for potentially good candidates with the necessary administrative skills and academic backgrounds who might come from another university or even a different sector. Nonetheless, to eventually make a change in order to attract candidates with different profiles, it would be necessary to modify conditions, most importantly, to the salary and duration of the term. As a matter of fact, there is no additional salary for the rector, rather an additional dividend that in the case of Unicamp is currently around USD 1,200 per month. Also, the four-year term is too short for robust changes or projects. The restriction on a rector from serving a consecutive second term brings instability to university programs, as agendas can change dramatically every four years. This hinders the execution of policy changes that might take years to be fully implemented or that could be perceived as unpopular and, as a result, limit the chances of a like-minded successor to be elected.

In fact, there is always the likelihood of major policy shifts each quadrennium. Populist speeches might make promises to attract votes from specific groups within the university. If implemented, some of these pledges may jeopardize the financial stability of the university or discontinue important initiatives.

The campaign period offers candidates a deeper understanding of the problems faced by different sectors. The participation of staff and students guarantees that all sectors actively engage in the process and have an opportunity to express their concerns. The candidates must develop their plan of action in advance and these discussions help to build a stronger piece.

Generally speaking, the governance of public universities in Brazil (and Latin America) has a great deal of room to improve, but it has valuable elements that should be preserved. A better system might consider practices followed elsewhere to identify university leadership, including search committees to select qualified professionals from inside or outside the university. It might also guarantee broader participation from different sectors of society. This would weaken the pattern of promises, expectations, and "return of favors" following the campaign, which might compromise plans of action. On the other hand, the participation of the whole university community in the election, as well as the deep discussions that occur during the campaign are healthy practices that should be preserved in an improved governance system, which ultimately would support the role of the university as a public good. ◢

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Disclaimer: The author participated twice in the election process.