

## Brazilian Referenda and Plebiscites Are Quite Undemocratic

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Maria Victoria Benevides, professor of sociology and political science at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, is calling for revisions in the Brazilian laws regulating referenda and plebiscites.

In her view, the current legislation is "extremely restrictive" and it is therefore necessary to expand popular participation in national decisions.

"The bills that were approved to regulate referenda, plebiscites, and popular initiatives are very bad from the democratic standpoint, because they leave total control of the process in the hands of the Legislative and the Executive," she says.

"This means that, if the Executive and the Legislative are not interested in a certain issue or are afraid of losing, they will never call for one. That's the game of politics," she comments.

Benevides believes that a change in this situation would democratize popular access to the processes of decision-making involving matters of public interest.

She says that the act of voting in a democratic regime represents the only moment in which all citizens are equal, "especially in a democracy with so many socioeconomic and cultural inequalities."

"The vote of a homeless person and the vote of Antônio Ermírio de Moraes, the richest man in Brazil, count for exactly the same thing in the ballot box," she points out.

In her assessment, popular consultations are held less frequently in South America, due to the continent's "experience of extreme personalism in politics," among other factors.

"The voter pays attention to individuals, not to issues and programs. But, even so, we have examples of popular consultations in Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela, mainly referenda dealing with important issues, such as the question of amnesty for torturers from the military regime, which was placed on a referendum in Uruguay," the sociologist observes.

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