


Here's Who Will Win Brazil's Presidential Election

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Politics & Policy

Amid savage polarization, the leading candidate is “none of the above.”

By

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Good luck spotting the winner.

Photographer: Nelson Almeida/AFP/Getty Images

Don't let the polls fool you. The runaway favorite in Brazil's Sunday presidential election isn't retired paratrooper and dictatorship nostalgist Jair Bolsonaro, or his closest rival, former Sao Paulo mayor and left-wing Workers Party stand-in Fernando Haddad. Both front-runners, who look poised to win the first round and then square off in a runoff later this month, pale before their cumulative 79 percent rejection index: Forty-two percent said they would never cast a ballot for Bolsonaro while 37 percent would never vote for Haddad.

That's a landslide for repudiation and it says plenty about the state of play in Brazil's combustible democracy, where tribes eclipse political parties and talk of redemption trumps any coherent conversation about the reforms the country so badly needs. "In a polarized scenario, one side's win is another's loss," said Marcelo Cortes Neri, an economist who tracks welfare and equality at the Getulio Vargas Foundation in Rio de Janeiro. "Brazil needs to reduce risk, not provoke more, and that means someone with equilibrium in government."

Your Guide to Brazil's Wildly Unpredictable Election

So how did the country with a reputation for cultural accommodation, form-fitting ideologies and clubby politics become so brittle and bellicose? Clearly, voters have had their fill of legacy parties and their godfathers. Drawing on data on global attitudes from

Gallup, the Getulio Vargas Foundation found that Brazil ranks next to last among 130 nations in confidence in the central government, with only 4 percent voicing faith in political leadership. The nation's most popular public institution? The armed forces, and it garnered a mere 52 percent approval.

Throw in the bilious exchanges on social media, aggravated by what fact checkers at O Globo found to be a recent 10-fold surge in fake news, and prospects for reasoned debate and political temperance fall flat. Not even hard-charging nationalist Ciro Gomes, running a distant third in the polls, has found much traction for his populist reforms. It's even worse for moderates like former Environment Minister Marina Silva, polling a distant fifth, or fourth-placed former Sao Paulo governor and Social Democracy contender Geraldo Alckmin.

Economic travails also corrode the political center. With its storied gap between rich and poor, Brazilian officials know how to weaponize public largesse. Tracking eight elections between 1982 and 2014, Neri found that the number of people living in poverty fell by an average of about 8 percent during election years, only to rise by the same amount in the months after. That's because sitting administrations invariably use social programs to turn up the flow of cash transfers and other social perks before elections, then apply austerity once the ballots are counted.

Blunting that strategy this time are record rejection levels for the outgoing government of President Michel Temer and the stalled recovery after the country's worst recession on record. Little wonder that, despite the recent bump in household income and a projected downtick in poverty, all presidential candidates have taken care to distance themselves from Temer, even those who support his reformist agenda.

Clearly, centrists haven't helped their cause with proposals that neither offer fixes for a dud economy nor reforms for a monumentally corrupt political establishment. An even greater failing is a tin ear for the passions that drive protestors to the streets and ignite battles on WhatsApp and Facebook. Brazil's political problem may not be so much the missing middle as what the middle is missing.

"The traditional centrist agenda has lost traction to the politics of identity and values," Fernando Schuler of the Sao Paulo university, Insper, told me. "Brazil is now part of the culture wars."

Alckmin may have streamlined government in Sao Paulo, Brazil's biggest state, and presided over the continent's sharpest decline in homicides, while former Ceara Governor Gomes helped lift the fortunes of one of Brazil's most impoverished regions. Yet neither stands a chance when the loudest voices on God, family, guns, and racial and social inclusion are what make pulses race.

So much the better for Brazil's Workers Party (PT), which under iconic former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva became the country's foremost political machine — and then perhaps its most formidable conduit for graft. With Haddad standing in for the jailed Lula, the PT has since renewed its brand by embracing LGTB and human rights, and the #MeToo

movement while adding a sheen of political mysticism about its putatively wronged leader. "Lula is a genius of victimization and a master of political martial arts," said Getulio Vargas Foundation political scientist Octavio Amorim Neto.

Enter Bolsonaro, who has energized closet conservatives by tapping into the wellspring of resentment against Lula, a backlash against identity politics and a soft spot for the days of military dictatorship. Surveys show his core supporters are predominantly well-off, well-educated, young and hail from the more industrialized south and central regions. "The center had every chance to prevail," said Amorim.

Some analysts argue that the current fury can't last. "Everyone is on the anti-establishment train," said Monica de Bolle, head of Latin American and Emerging Market studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. "People are going to get tired of it. This isn't who Brazilians are."

For the moment, however, this is what Brazil has become.

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