

Brazil's October Elections Will Be the Biggest Test of Its Democracy Yet

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Brazil heads to the polls on Oct. 2 for crucial general elections in Latin America's largest economy and most populous country that will determine the next President, Vice President, and National Congress. The key question on everyone's minds is whether the right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro will get another term, or whether the left-wing former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva will return to office as part of a resurgent pink tide in the region that has recently seen leftists take power in Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, and elsewhere.

The choice between the two men could not be more stark.

Over the last four years, incumbent president Jair Bolsonaro has questioned the role of the Supreme Court and repeatedly suggested without evidence that the electoral system is rigged. He has compared COVID-19 to "a little flu," and approved destructive environmental policies that have devastated the Amazon rainforest.

Lula ruled from 2003 to 2010 after winning two four-year terms in office and helped lift millions out of poverty, making him one of the country's most popular leaders. "Lula is running on nostalgia to win his old job back," says Gustavo Ribeiro, journalist and founder of English-language politics site The Brazilian Report.

However, Lula is also controversial but in different ways. In September 2016, he was slapped with corruption charges that originated from a money laundering investigation known as Operation Car Wash, which set out to root out corruption among high-ranking Latin American political and business leaders. In July 2017, he was found guilty and a court ruled he was not allowed to run for reelection in 2018. But in March of last year, Brazil's Supreme Court overturned the conviction, citing some technicalities and saying Lula's right to a fair trial had been compromised by a biased judge-allowing him to run for President this time around.

Brazilian presidential candidate and former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, speaks during an election rally about sustainable development in Manaus, Brazil, on August 31, 2022. (Michael Dantas/AFP- Getty Images)

Lula has held up the Supreme Court's verdict as proof of his innocence: he argues that the corruption charges were cooked up by right-wing forces to keep him out. But recent surveys have found that public opinion is split.

Either way, polls suggest Lula will comfortably defeat Bolsonaro, although it's unclear whether he will have enough votes to avoid a run-off on Oct. 30. In Brazil, if no presidential candidate gets more than 50% of the total vote, it triggers a head-to-head competition between the two frontrunners, almost certainly this year Bolsonaro and Lula.

Brazil's democratic backslide

"Bolsonaro has eroded accountability institutions, he is rotting the state from within," Ribeiro says. Bolsonaro did, however, make a rare admission Monday on a podcast that he would step down if defeated. "If that is God's will I will continue, but if it is not, I will pass the presidential sash and retire."

That rhetoric has not quelled concerns that the transition of power if Bolsonaro loses may not go smoothly, although experts say it's unlikely he has the power to overturn the election. "I don't think he has the institutional support to pull that off," Ribeiro says. But even an attempt to suggest he was wronged could help him retain considerable influence in Brazil. "Everybody thinks Bolsonaro might try a January 6 in Brazil if he loses. We are not so sure... if this will be a coup d'état. I don't think so but it could just be a way of leaving power but still keeping his people with him," says Thomas Traumann, a Brazilian journalist and political analyst.

Fueling some of these fears is Bolsonaro's call last September for tens of thousands of his supporters to protest against the court after his dispute with the judiciary over changes to the voting system that involved the President's attempts to push for paper voting receipts. Brazilian and international media compared the incident to the Jan. 6 insurrection at Capitol Hill. While some may point to Bolsonaro as taking a page out of U.S. President Donald Trump's playbook, it may well be the other way around, according to Ribeiro. "Bolsonaro attacked the system way before Trump became President... He has threatened time and again not to recognize the results if he doesn't believe they are fair and square."

Civil rights advocates fear a second Bolsonaro term could lead to a democratic backsliding, or worse.

Bolsonaro's record in office

There are concerns the pace of the Amazon's deforestation could reach a tipping point where it turns into a dry savanna under a second Bolsonaro term. That would in turn accelerate global climate change; the Amazon has long functioned as a sink for draining carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and absorbs about 2 billion tons of CO₂ per year (or 5% of emissions). Data from Brazil's National Institute for Space Research showed that more than 3,980 square kilometers were deforested in the first six months of this year, the highest amount since 2016.

Under Bolsonaro, laws around deforestation have been loosened and environmental agencies have seen staffing and budget cuts. "There

has been very little monitoring or fining or attempt to regulate deforestation," says Amy Erica Smith, an associate professor of political science and expert on Brazilian politics at Iowa State University. What's more, Ribeiro says: "Bolsonaro incentivizes the use of Indigenous lands, environmental protection areas for mining, for cattle ranching."

Bolsonaro has also been criticized for his management of the COVID-19 pandemic, and spreading misinformation about the virus and vaccines. Brazil has over 685,000 recorded COVID deaths, which is one of the highest death tolls globally.

What do voters really care about?

Although Bolsonaro has triggered concerns about Brazil's democracy, it's unlikely this will be on the mind of the average Brazilian voter, experts say. More than one third of Brazilian families are dealing with food insecurity, according to a study published in May by the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV), a Brazilian academic institution.

A customer counts money at a fruit and vegetables stall in a market in Salvador, Bahia State, Brazil, on August 26, 2022 (Rafael Martins/AFP-Getty Images)

"People are really struggling," Ribeiro says. "That's why Bolsonaro has broken the bank to increase social spending."

Bolsonaro has cut fuel taxes to reduce prices after they shot up in part because of Russia's war in Ukraine. He increased aid payments to the country's poorest through a program called Auxílio Brasil, or Brazil Aid; in August, he started giving out \$120 monthly cash payments to 20 million families. Inflation has not been as big a problem in Brazil as in the U.S. and Europe either, because of lower energy prices. But wages are still shrinking and unemployment is still high, though decreasing.

Bolsonaro is also particularly popular among evangelical Christians, who make up almost one-third of the country's population, according to the Datafolha polling firm. (In 2018, about 70% of these voters backed Bolsonaro.) "There are enough evangelicals that they could really matter," Smith says.

"Bolsonaro is the first candidate that really embraced them," Traumann says. He gave them key ministerial positions as well as appointed a Supreme Court judge who was evangelical. Lula, on the other hand, faced pushback from many evangelicals following remarks he made earlier this year that abortion should be viewed as a public health issue, instead of a religious one. Bolsonaro has repeatedly stressed his commitment to ensure most abortions remain illegal in Brazil.

That's not to say all evangelicals vote in a bloc. Some female voters in particular may be put off by what experts say is Bolsonaro's misogyny. Smith doubts evangelicals will come out as strongly as they did for Bolsonaro in 2018 because "they will be evaluating him not only on culture war issues like abortion and LGBTQ rights but also his performance on the economy and pandemic," she says.

But if polls are correct, and Lula prevails either on Oct. 2 or Oct. 30, Brazilians—and much of the world—will be tuning in to see what comes next.

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