

October's elections in Brazil will be the biggest test of its democracy yet

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Jair Bolsonaro is using Brazil's Independence Day celebrations to rally voters ahead of the October 2 election

A flag of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is sold during celebrations of Brazil's Independence Day in Copacabana on Wednesday September 7, 2022 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Bolsonaro used Brazil's Independence Day celebrations to rally voters ahead of the Oct. 2 presidential election. Photo Credit – Gary Coronado/Los Angeles Times – Getty Images)

Brazil heads into the crucial October 2 general election in Latin America's largest economy and most populous country, which will determine the next president, vice president and national congress. The key question on everyone's mind is whether right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro will get another term, or whether left-wing former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva will return to office amid a recent resurgence of pink tide in the region, seen as how Leftists have taken power in Colombia, Argentina, Mexico and elsewhere.

The choice between the two men couldn't be more stark.

For the past four years, incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro has questioned the role of the Supreme Court, repeatedly claiming without evidence that the electoral system was rigged. He has likened COVID-19 to "a little flu" and endorsed destructive environmental policies that have ravaged the Amazon rainforest.

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

However, Lula is also controversial, but in different ways. In September 2016, he faced corruption allegations stemming from a money laundering investigation called Operation Car Wash, which aimed to root out corruption among senior Latin American politicians and business leaders. In July 2017, he was found guilty and a court ruled that he was barred from running for re-election in 2018. But in March last year, Brazil's Supreme Court overturned the conviction, citing some formalities and saying Lula's right to a fair trial had been compromised by a biased judge – this time allowing him to run for president.

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

Lula holds up the Supreme Court ruling as proof of his innocence: he argues the corruption charges were fabricated by right-wing forces to keep him out. However, recent polls have revealed that public opinion is divided.

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Anyway, polls suggest Lula will easily defeat Bolsonaro, although it's unclear if he'll have enough votes to avoid an Oct. 30 runoff. In Brazil, if no presidential candidate gets more than 50% of the total vote, then it triggers a head-to-head contest between the two frontrunners, almost certainly Bolsonaro and Lula this year.

Brazil's democratic throwback

"Bolsonaro has eroded the institutions of accountability, he is rotting the state from within," says Ribeiro. However, Bolsonaro made a rare admission in a podcast on Monday that he would resign if defeated. "If that is God's will I will continue, but if not I will pass the President's sash and retire."

That rhetoric hasn't allayed concerns that the transfer of power might not go smoothly if Bolsonaro is defeated, although experts say he's unlikely to have the power to overturn the election. "I don't think he has the institutional support to pull this off," says Ribeiro. But even trying to accuse him of being wrong could help him maintain considerable influence in Brazil. "Everyone thinks Bolsonaro could try Brazil on January 6 if he loses. We're not so sure... if this will be a coup d'état. I don't think so, but it could just be a way to hand over power but still keep your people with you," says Thomas Traumann, a Brazilian journalist and political scientist.

Some of these fears are fueled by Bolsonaro's call last September for tens of thousands of his supporters to protest the court after he argued with the judiciary over changes to the electoral system, which involved the president's attempts to push for written election confirmations. Brazilian and international media compared the incident to the January 6 riot on Capitol Hill. While some might suggest that Bolsonaro picked a page from US President Donald Trump's playbook, according to Ribeiro, it could very well be the other way around. "Bolsonaro attacked the system long before Trump became president... He has repeatedly threatened not to honor the results unless he believes they are fair and honest."

Civil rights activists fear that a second term for Bolsonaro could lead to a democratic relapse or worse.

Bolsonaro's record in office

There are concerns that the pace of Amazon deforestation could reach a tipping point, turning it into arid savannah under a second Bolsonaro term. This in turn would accelerate global climate change; The Amazon has long acted as a sink for the outflow of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, absorbing 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, deforestation laws were relaxed and environmental agencies saw staff and budget cuts. "There has been very little monitoring, fines, or attempts to regulate deforestation," says Amy Erica Smith, associate professor of political science and expert on Brazilian politics at Iowa State University. In addition, Ribeiro says, "Bolsonaro encourages the use of indigenous land, conservation areas for mining and ranching."

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

What do voters really care about?

Though Bolsonaro has raised concerns about Brazil's democracy, it's unlikely to cross the minds of the average Brazilian voter, experts say. According to a study published in May by the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV), a Brazilian academic institution, more than a third of Brazilian families struggle with food insecurity.

A customer counts money at a fruit and vegetable stall at a market in Salvador, Bahia state, Brazil, August 26, 2022Rafael Martins/AFP – Getty Images

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

Bolsonaro has cut fuel taxes to lower prices after they skyrocketed in part because of the Russian war in Ukraine. He increased aid to the poorest in the world through a program called Auxilio Brasil, or Brazil Aid; in August he began making \$120 monthly cash payments to 20 million families. Inflation was also not as big of a problem in Brazil as it was in the US and Europe due to lower energy prices. But wages are still falling and unemployment is still high, albeit declining.

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

"Bolsonaro is the first candidate who really accepted it," says Traumann. He gave them important ministerial posts and appointed an evangelical judge to the Supreme Court. Lula, on the other hand, was rebuffed by many evangelicals after he made comments earlier this year that abortion should be viewed as a public health issue rather than a religious one. Bolsonaro has repeatedly stressed his commitment to ensuring that most abortions remain illegal in Brazil.

That doesn't mean that all evangelicals vote as a block. Some voters in particular could be put off by Bolsonaro's misogyny. Smith doubts that evangelicals will come out as strongly as Bolsonaro did in 2018 because "not only will they judge him on culture war issues like abortion and LGBTQ rights, but also on the economy and the pandemic," she says.

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