

Elections in a fog of uncertainty

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In the first round of the elections, Lula won 48% to Bolsonaro's 43%, a smaller margin of victory than expected in most polls. However, the 57 million votes that Lula garnered on Sunday constitutes a historical record for the first round of presidential elections in Brazil. This feat was overshadowed by the success of the Bolsonarista candidates in the legislative and gubernatorial elections. Bolsonaro's party became the largest party in the Chamber with 99 of the 513 seats while also winning a series of important victories in the Senate. But, according to the new poll, Lula's advantage is considerable in the final elections on October 30. The leader of the Workers' Party (PT) only needs 1.8 million more votes to win the presidency. Bolsonaro needs six million. Some commentators maintain that a wave of Bolsonaristas could erase Lula's advantage. But given the few votes of the losing candidates in the first round, Bolsonaro would need a significant transfer of votes from Lula to win in the second round. This is not impossible but it would be the equivalent of the fans of Flamengo, from Rio de Janeiro, becoming a follower of their rivals the Corinthians, from Sao Paulo. The polling companies have not been able to measure the Bolsonarista vote, in part because Bolsonaro himself fosters mistrust of them. Many voters of the president refuse to participate in the polls because they believe the polls are rigged. Others feel shame. "Bolsonaro's vote is not being properly polled; but the estimation of Lula's vote is reliable", said Lucio Rennó, a political scientist at the National University of Brasilia. Most likely, the votes for Bolsonaro that were not detected in the first-round polls came from the minor candidates, specifically the liberal Simone Tebet - who won 4% - and the center-left nationalist Ciro Gomes whose vote fell from 8 to 3%. In this sense, Lula's plan to promote a tactical vote to win in the first round backfired. "He served exactly the opposite; the undecided and the voters of Ciro or Simone driven by an "antipetista" sentiment (hatred of the PT) changed their votes at the last moment to prevent Lula's victory", said Isaac Luna, from the University of Janeiro do Norte in Ceará. Other commentators explain the unexpected increase in the vote for Bolsonaro due to the interventions of the so-called Bolsonaro "Cabinet of Hate", which spreads false news and conspiracy theories through social networks. This already happened in 2018 when a hoax about a PT plan to educate children about homosexuality scared part of the electorate. But now the "Cabinet of Hate" is more effective in mobilizing the already convinced base of Bolsonarists; it does not go viral in the general electorate as much as in 2018", said Rodrigo Nunes, a philosopher and politician from the Catholic University (PUC), in Rio. In the fog of uncertainty that surrounds these elections, one thing is clear. The political center no longer exists in a country sharply divided between the traditional left of PT, with its red flags, and the hard right of Bolsonaro, usually dressed in the yellow and green jersey of the Brazilian soccer team, preferably adorned with the name of Neymar, who reaffirmed this week his support for the president. Tebet and Gomes and the other candidates of the so-called centrist third way did not even get 10% of the votes. Brazil's historic Social Democratic Party (PSDB), dominant in the years of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's presidencies, has been wiped off the map even in its old fiefdom of Sao Paulo. But paradoxically, both Bolsonaro and Lula have dedicated the first days of the second round to signing alliances precisely with the politicians of the center. The PT campaign has already signed agreements with Tebet and Gomes. Cardoso, 91, has announced his support for Lula as well as another former "tucano" candidate from the PSDB, José Serra. Bolsonaro, for his part, has obtained the support of the governors of Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, Paraná, the federal district and Sao Paulo - east, from the PSDB-. If everything were linear arithmetic in these elections, the support of Gomes and Tebet -some eight million votes- would be more than enough for Lula to win. But elections in Brazil are not linear; they are usually decided by waves of feedback, as happened with Bolsonaro in 2018. The unexpected vote for the president last Sunday, especially in the densely populated state of Sao Paulo, may indicate the reactivation of the "antipetismo" that spread through the middle classes in 2013-16 in a furious rejection of the PT's redistribution policies. "The "anti-petism" (...) explains why governors, mayors, party leaders from the already defunct political center, have run to support Bolsonaro," summarized Vera Magalhaes, a columnist for the newspaper O Globo. The path to Bolsonaro's victory would be to reactivate "antipetism" in the south and southeast - Sao Paulo, Rio and Minas Gerais. In this sense, the most valuable signings of the Bolsonaro campaign may be the super judge Sergio Moro, responsible for imprisoning Lula in 2020 after a trial that was later annulled due to irregularities, and the evangelical prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol, who confessed that the accusation against Lula was "more out of conviction than facts." "This is an asymmetrical polarization and what worries me most in the second round is that they will do again what they did in 2018 and make Bolsonaro the best option between two extremes," Nunes said. Bolsonaro will also seek votes in the poorest electorate, where Lula has almost 60% of the intention to vote, by expanding the subsidy program of 600 reais per month per family known as "Aid Brazil" so that it reaches another 500,000 families., in total more than 20 million. The president has also instructed the public bank Caixa Econômica to grant loans to those who receive this benefit. Everything indicates that if Bolsonaro wins, his powerful finance minister, the billionaire financier, Paulo Guedes, will withdraw aid to the poor after the elections. "Poverty always goes down in Brazil in electoral years and goes up the following year," says Marcelo Neri, of the Getulio Vargas Foundation, in Rio.

