



The Observatory of Populism

What is at Stake in Brazil's Upcoming Election?

By Olivier Dabène

*This article, belonging to the [Observatory of Populism](#), is part of **Institut Montaigne's new partnership with the Illiberalism Studies Program at George Washington University**, which will extensively cover populist voices, whether in Brazil, Europe, or in the crowded US midterm election landscape. For our first discussion session, we interviewed Olivier Dabène, Political Science Professor at Sciences Po Paris and Latin American Specialist. He goes over the Brazilian presidential election and the main stakes at the heart of the polarization.*

On October 2nd, 2022, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva collected 48,4% of the votes, against 43,2% for the incumbent Jair Bolsonaro. Such an outcome is much tighter than expected. Both contenders now have a month to convince Brazilians to vote for them, in what promises to be a very tense campaign. There are two important stakes in the Brazilian presidential election. The first can be described as the fight for qualitative democracy. The second is Brazil's role on the international stage and its leadership in Latin America in particular.

Brazilian democracy

Brazil's democratic ails did not begin in 2018 with the election of Jair Bolsonaro. Rather, his election is the culmination of a 30-40 year process of democratic fragility. Brazil has seen the impeachment of two presidents; the first in 1992 of Fernando Affonso Collor de Mello under accusations of corruption, and the second in 2016 of Dilma Vana Rousseff under accusations of violating federal fiscal responsibility laws. This later impeachment is seen by some as a coup.

Under the leadership of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, The Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil dominated for four elections in a row. The success of the leftist PT forced conservative parties to get creative and find a different strategy for winning. Thus, even before the

emergence of Bolsonaro, there was fragmentation in Brazilian politics and it is something that must be kept in mind when looking at this upcoming election. This long slide toward democratic instability can be seen through various statistics. 25% of the Brazilian electorate are now radicalized and vote for either the far-right or the far-left parties. Moreover, there has been a crisis in political parties. Whereas in 2006, the main parties in Brazil captured 90% of the votes, in 2018 that figure was 35%. This turbulent situation was capitalized upon by Bolsonaro who positioned himself as an outsider. In reality, Bolsonaro spent 27 years in politics and represented the Brazilian state of Rio de Janeiro in the Chamber of Deputies from 1991-2018. Nevertheless, he was able to play the role of a political outsider who could provide solutions to Brazil's ills.

Bolsonaro's impact on Brazilian politics has been to accelerate this decline in democratic quality. He has worked to disqualify and discredit institutions like the Supreme Court. He has perpetuated claims of electoral fraud. He has strengthened ties with the military by appointing some 6,000 military personnel to governmental positions. He has little respect for the rule of law, especially free speech, and has infamously spread fake news.

His (mis)handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was possibly the worst failure of all, as he deliberately let the population become infected to build herd immunity. This can arguably be considered a crime against humanity. His treatment of the indigenous population has also been lamentable and is considered by some to be equivocal with genocide. Hence, if Bolsonaro were to win, we should expect a continuation of his policies

However, it does not appear likely that Bolsonaro will win. Recent polls suggest that the former president, Lula, is in the lead and will likely emerge victorious in the second round. This would return Brazil to a coalition-led government which is normal for Brazilian politics. If he does win the runoff election, Lula will have to face a powerful opposition in Congress, as Bolsonaro's political party won the legislative elections.

International prospects

It is even more obvious that Brazil has been isolated on the international stage. During Lula's leadership, Brazil became a prominent global leader. Lula promoted southern cooperation through UNASUR and CELAC, which both became stagnant organizations under Bolsonaro. During the Trump presidency, Bolsonaro was quite friendly with the United States but the longer-term relationship between the United States and Brazil is unclear. Brazil's position on Russia's war against Ukraine is an issue that may not see much change. Bolsonaro visited Putin shortly before the invasion on February 24th and Lula has expressed opposition to the imposition of sanctions against Russia. On China, Bolsonaro initially held an anti-China stance but this has evolved. He has since allowed the entry of Huawei into Brazil and it's likely that Lula would have done the same. The reality is that both figures recognize China's prominent role in international politics and that it is too important to sideline. With the European Union, there was an effort to get a trade agreement between Brazil and the EU, but that was terminated by the EU in light of Brazil's treatment of the Amazon after Bolsonaro won the election in 2018.

The primary difference between Lula and Bolsonaro's prospects for international affairs is credibility. Lula's return will not produce a Brazil of the 2000s; there will not be a boom of economic growth and potential, but we will see a more credible Brazil. One thing to watch for is coalition building in the region. PT may talk to other left-led countries, like Chile, to build an alliance of progressive parties in the region.

This will be part of the rebooting of regionalism. Issues like migration, drug trafficking, and climate change are issues that require multilateralism — and it is exactly this sort of approach that we can expect to see should Lula win.

Characterizing Bolsonaro and Lula and the domestic election

As a leader, Bolsonaro personifies a number of different traits. He possesses populist qualities as well as authoritarian and conservative ones. He does not believe in representative democracy and is also not particularly committed to his political party. When elected, many expected the answer to his popularity to lie in the fact that he was able to hoodwink the poor and uneducated segments of the electorate to vote for him while playing the role of a political outsider. However, this isn't quite the case. Many of those who supported Bolsonaro didn't fit the stereotype of the "poor uneducated voter". Rather, Bolsonaro was able to win as someone who represented traditional values (especially family values). This has now changed a little. Many of those who supported Bolsonaro once do not anymore and this explains why Lula is ahead in the polls. At the same time, the lead isn't very large and we should not expect a landslide victory. A good portion of voters is convinced that Bolsonaro can do the job and that he deserves a second term.

Lula is a charismatic and pragmatic leader. He knows how to build coalitions, especially when it comes to solving Brazil's poverty issues. He comes from a generation of Trade Unionists who were deeply involved in the democratization of Brazil. His party is also a resilient force within Brazilian politics and, despite its defeat in the 2018 election, they have remained viable to the point that they are arguably now the only strong political party in Brazil. Thus, while Lula defends leftist values, he is fundamentally a pragmatic leader. There is a chance that he may focus on climate issues if he wins because that is what is topical now, at least on the international stage. That being said, he does not have a reputation as a particularly clean leader. His leadership oversaw some slowdown in rainforest deforestation, but it was not that impressive. Brazilians, in general, believe in absolute Brazilian sovereignty over the Amazon and this is unlikely to change much until Brazilians take action for change.

The campaign and its aftermath

If the campaign between Lula and Bolsonaro can be characterized by one feature, it is likely the sheer level of vitriol it produced. This presidential campaign has not been fought as a battle between ideas, or policy proposals. In fact, these issues have been largely secondary. Rather, the race has been fueled by hatred. Bolsonaro's religious and wealthy base harbors hatred against the Worker's Party that can be traced back to its

time in power, and members of the PT ([Partido dos Trabalhadores](#)) reciprocally cultivate hatred for Bolsonaro, along with the corruption and danger he embodies.

This hatred has the potential to boil over should Bolsonaro lose. While it is unlikely that the police or the military would perpetrate violence on behalf of Bolsonaro, it is quite possible that a consequence of this campaign may be a sustained uptick in grassroots violence. Gun ownership has shot up under Bolsonaro evidenced by spikes in gun sales. And while Brazil is not a country particularly marked by violent politics, it is possible that disgruntled Bolsonaro supporters, armed and angry, could take to the streets especially if the results of the election are narrow. In fact, three PT supporters have already been killed during this campaign.

Another possible scenario lies in the possibility of a Bolsonaro criminal trial and indictment. Corruption by not only Bolsonaro himself, but members of his family, has been well reported. And while the Brazilian judicial system has been politicized in the recent past, it still operates in a professional and independent manner. This could lead to charges being drafted against Bolsonaro, though Lula himself is likely to remain uninvolved. This in part, may be due to his recent imprisonment (on false charges that were later rescinded) but more broadly may likely just be out of a concern of increasing the politicization of the judiciary.

This paper was co-written with the help of **Aaron Irion** and **John Chrobak**, as part of Institut Montaigne's partnership with the Illiberalism Studies Program at George Washington University.

What to Expect:

	If Bolsonaro Wins		If Lula Wins	
	Domestically	Internationally	Domestically	Internationally
Democratic Quality & International Standing	Democratic Backsliding will intensify.	Brazil's isolation will intensify.	A return to "normal politics," which is not necessarily ideal because Brazil is one of the world's most fragmented political systems and is still difficult to govern, even in "normal" times.	A new "progressive alliance" of Latin American countries is likely to be forged. Improved relations with European countries are likely.
Economic Outlook & Trade Potential	Maintenance of Brazil's current economy, which is not terrible compared to Brazil's neighbors' (especially on the inflation issue) but is still not the economic golden years of the early Lula government and is increasingly unequal.	Partnership, or negotiations, with the European Union will continue to be withheld by the Europeans. Continued cooperation with Russia and China (this is unlikely to change no matter who wins)	The possibility of a return to broad welfare programs, shrinking poverty, and high growth. However, this will be made difficult by the lack of the "commodities boom" that undergirded the economic miracle of the first PT governments.	A return to the negotiating table with the European Union will be possible, as the first set of negotiations was agreed to when Lula's PT party was still in power and canceled only when Bolsonaro won the Presidency. Continued cooperation with Russia and China (this is likely not going to change no matter who wins)
Environmental Situation & Regional Integration	Continued desecration of the Amazon. Massive deforestation, and a general disregard for climate change issues.	A continued undermining of "regionalism," south-south cooperation, and other institutions like BRICS.	Difficult to ascertain. Lula's first stint as president was not characterized by a strong record on environmental issues. However, the moment is different now and the issue has more salience on the Latin American left than it did then.	A return to "regionalism," south-south cooperation, etc.