

## **The 2018 Brazilian Elections: A Hotbed of Populism?**

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It is no exaggeration to state that the upcoming presidential elections are the least predictable in Brazil since the very first ones after democratization, in 1989. Leading the polls, former President Lula da Silva is unlikely to be allowed in the ballot, due to a criminal conviction on corruption charges (though, given that Brazil's Judicial system is often as unpredictable as its politics, this writer warns his readers against putting money on such prediction). A dozen politicians have put their candidacies forward, and no clear front-runner is in sight. First, for the lack of any other highly popular leader besides Lula da Silva. Second, due to ongoing corruption probes into the high reaches of power, which have been killing political aspirations left and right.

Against this chaotic background, a few general points may be tentatively made. First of all, Brazil might be veering towards a party system collapse. The trend in recent legislative elections has been towards more fractionalization, with the current legislature being the most fractionalized ever. The Workers' Party (PT), the largest in the lower house as of April, holds fewer than 15% of seats. A host of factors have contributed to the erosion in public support and congressional representation for the three parties that dominated the scene in the last decades - PT, MDB, and PSDB -, allowing for previously small and medium-sized parties to reach their number of representatives. One such factor has been the continuous erosion of confidence in political institutions. Historically, Brazil has had low levels of institutional trust - much like many other countries in Latin America. Nevertheless, numbers have recently plunged, amid the uncovering of massive corruption scandals by politicians of all affiliations and the worst economic recession in recorded history.

In comparative political research, these elements compose the perfect soil for flourishing populist movements, left and right. Hugo Chavez, Silvio Berlusconi, and SYRIZA all came to power at times when mainstream parties were crumbling and public trust in political institutions was shattered. Populism, in the ideational definition shared by most of contemporary political science literature, is seen as a discourse which morally opposes a romanticized view of a good, homogeneous people, against an evil, powerful elite. This elite, often painted in conspiratorial tones, is said by populists to dominate the state in order to protect its own interests, at the expense of common folk. Therefore, populists call for liberation, a systemic change that does away with all established parties and returns political power to its rightful owners, the people. It is easy to see how such a discourse can be very appealing in an environment where citizens despise political institutions and mainstream parties.

That is to say, Brazil appears to be a most likely case for the emergence of a populist leader in 2018. Troubled mainstream parties with unpopular leaders, and widespread dissatisfaction with the way politics has been conducted, are a fertile ground for anti-establishment candidates who promise to "change all that's there". In fact, one such politician is close to leading the polls, with a steady support at around 20% - right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro, a member of Congress by the state of Rio de Janeiro and former military officer. His followers claim Bolsonaro represents the only real political alternative, different from all other politicians and in touch with common people's concerns. His

authoritarian rhetorics are praised as courage to challenge the politically correct establishment. Bolsonaro, however, is not the only candidate on the populist camp. Lula da Silva himself had been radicalizing his discourse in recent months, going back to his left-populist roots from the early 1990s. If indeed he is not allowed to run, there may be room for the emergence of a left-wing populist to take his place in the run up to the elections.

A victory by a populist in Brazil might be significant for the short and medium term future of Latin America. Ideologically, it appears that countries in the region tend to move together in waves. Recent years have seen a resurgence of the Latin American center-right, for example in Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Argentina, after years dominated by fifty shades of red, from socialists and social democrats in Uruguay and Chile to radical leftists in Venezuela, Bolivia, or Ecuador. A populist victory in Brazil might be another trend-setter in a region marked exactly by low levels of political trust, lack of party-system institutionalization, and a history of populist governments.

Nevertheless, a populist victory in Brazil is far from certain. While mainstream parties might have low public approval, many of them still control vital electoral resources - especially in light of new campaign finance regulations which ban private corporate donations to political parties. Clientelistic networks and the political use of discretionary federal and state-level investments may well play in favor of traditional parties for national elections, ironically being the ones to thank, in November, if a populist victory is avoided. Even if most predictions at this point are all but impossible, it still feels safe to say that few voters around the democratic world have much to envy about the possible paths and choices laid out for Brazilians at the end of this year.