

Brazil's presidential election more than just another polarized contest



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OPINION

The first round of Brazil's presidential election is scheduled for October 4, with 13 candidates competing to occupy the Brazilian presidential palace, Planalto.

For now, the contest is dominated by two men. Only a few percentage points (depending on the poll) separate 80-year-old President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party (PT) — running for his fourth term — and 45-year-old Flávio Bolsonaro of the right-wing Liberal Party (PL). Flávio is the son of the man Lula defeated in 2022, former president Jair Bolsonaro (2019–23), sometimes referred to as the 'Trump of the tropics'. Lula squeaked out a narrow victory in the 2022 contest, of 50.9 to 49.1 percent in the second round, after public opinion surveys had seriously undercounted the support of his right-wing rival. Jair Bolsonaro is currently serving time for plotting a coup, after his supporters rioted in Brasília in 2023 in an effort to overturn the 2022 results.

This year's contest is more than a familial grudge match. For one, it looks a lot like recent presidential elections in the region. In June, elections in both Peru and Colombia went to a second round. Each resulted in a narrow victory for conservative candidates who, like the Bolsonaros, are aligned with the regional diplomatic agenda of US President Donald Trump. Another tight contest now looms in Brazil, the most populous country and largest democracy in Latin America, the 10th largest economy in the world, and for decades an international champion of the Global South, through blocs like BRICS. Both Lula and the younger Bolsonaro face high levels of voter rejection. More than 54 per cent of Brazilian voters disapprove of Flávio according to one poll. Lula does little better in the same survey, with 52 per cent against the president running for a fourth term.

The issues

Brazilian voters are divided over a number of issues relating to Brazil's political system and its place in the world. According to a Pew survey conducted in Brazil in early 2026, only 37 per cent of Brazilian

voters were satisfied with their democracy, down from 66 per cent in 2013. And Brazilians are ideologically split on favourable views of China versus the US. 57 per cent of Brazilians who identify as leftist have favourable views of China, compared to 40 per cent of those on the right. Those opinions flip on attitudes towards the US: 58 per cent of self-identified right-leaning voters have favourable views of the US, while only 30 per cent on the other side of the ideological spectrum do.

Division on these issues indicates that this election could have major implications for the direction of Brazil's foreign policy, its global influence, and the PT foreign policy agenda since 2003.

Brazil's situation is not unique. Distrust in democratic electoral systems has increased around the world — a sentiment that outsider political entrepreneurs have exploited. Their ability to do so stems from political polarization, discontent with the political class — and the simple fact that casting a ballot and accepting the aggregate macro tabulations of all voters requires a certain commitment of faith. As political tribes have become more separated and

disconnected from alternative views and media, it becomes easier to feed on distrust, suspicion and resentment.

According to a recent Chatham House/ Convergent Opinion survey, distrust in the electoral system is greater among those who voted for then-president Jair Bolsonaro in 2022 than those who voted for Lula that year.

Only 45 per cent of 2022 Bolsonaro voters expressed very much or some confidence that elections would be free from political interference this year, compared to 78 per cent of 2022 Lula voters. That is concerning, but not necessarily surprising. Jair Bolsonaro cast doubt on the integrity of Brazil's electoral system before the 2022 elections. (Flávio has promised to respect this year's election outcome. But he has also vowed to grant amnesties to those who took part in the 2023 riots). Fuelling this division is an escalating diplomatic row with the administration of US President Donald Trump. In July, the US imposed new 25 per cent tariffs on some Brazilian goods. The same month, the Brazilian government denied visas to two US envoys, accusing them of planning to meddle in elections — a charge the US State Department

called a 'baseless lie'.

The diplomatic dispute has escalated further, with the White House revoking the visa of Brazil's ambassador to the US, and Lula's office accusing the US of 'a deliberate escalation of hostile measures against Brazil, motivated by ideological reasons'. In his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 22, Lula warned against foreign interference in the election.

Potential foreign policy about-face

A Bolsonaro victory this year would create another friendly South American government for the Trump administration, adding to the White House's growing list of aligned leaders (either for transactional or ideological reasons) in Colombia, Venezuela, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Dominican Republic, and Ecuador.

Indeed, a Bolsonaro government would probably adhere to Trump's approach on various issues, including a more martial approach to narcotics trafficking and transnational criminal networks operating in or from Brazil. It will likely see Brazil joining Trump's Shield of the Americas initiative.

Flávio Bolsonaro's presidency would also bring a U-turn to PT-focused foreign policy agendas. It would trigger, if not a pulling out, then a significantly reduced role in the BRICS group, which Trump has criticized for 'anti-American policies'. And Brazil might well draw back from other global forums, such as the UN, the G20, and COP where Brasília has staked its claim as a representative of the Global South.

In reality, under the PT, Brazil's track record in supporting multilateralism has been spotty. Often it has been partisan in defending human rights and democracy even in its own neighbourhood.

Equally, it is not clear that a new Bolsonaro government would represent a triumph for Trump's so-called 'Donroe Doctrine', which seeks to establish American supremacy in the Western Hemisphere.

While a Bolsonaro-led Brazil would return Brasília to his father's anti-woke cultural battles, it would not necessarily fall into line with the Trump White House, particularly on trade. Bolsonaro distanced himself from Trump's heavy tariffs. And, as was true for his father and neighbour Argentine president Javier Milei — who both had campaigned on reducing Chinese influence — a new Bolsonaro administration would balk at reducing trade with China, Brazil's largest trading partner since 2009. China, though, may seek to reduce its Brazilian imports, if Bolsonaro strays too far in challenging Beijing.

Regardless, Brazilians face a stark choice in October. Brazil's commitment to international law and multilateralism hangs in the balance, as does the Global South's voice in the global order.



Towels depicting presidential candidates Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (R) and Flávio Bolsonaro are laid out for sale in a residential area of Brasília, Brazil, on September 11, 2026.

● SERGIO LIMA/AFP



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Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2nd-L) arrives at the Kremlin to meet with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, on May 9, 2025, as the commandant of the Kremlin salutes him.

● RAMIL SITDIKOV/RIA NOVOSTI



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