10-17-2014

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Recommended Citation
Unpredictable Brazilian Election Turns Predictable as Traditional Parties Duel
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Category/Department: Brazil
Published: 2014-10-17

Brazilians headed to the polls on Oct. 5 to decide the fate of incumbent President Dilma Rousseff, conservative challenger Aécio Neves, and insurgent Marina Silva. In the end, voters endorsed Rousseff, but not by enough to avoid a runoff against Neves that will take place on Oct. 26. It was an unpredictable election season that saw polling numbers for the candidates fluctuate wildly. In one of the campaign’s most surprising and tragic turns, Eduardo Campos, the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB) candidate, died in a plane crash. He was replaced on the ticket by his vice presidential nominee, Silva, a former Partido Verde (PV) candidate who had failed to register her own party (NotiSur, Sept. 5, 2014).

Rousseff, whose Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) has been in power for a record 12 consecutive years, struggled to shake association with an ongoing scandal involving Petrobras, the state-owned oil company, as well as a sluggish economy. Negative attack ads and an inconsistent platform, meanwhile, doomed Silva, who had unexpectedly surged to a statistical tie with Rousseff as late as Sept. 3. Neves, by contrast, was polling as low as 15% on Sept. 12 before strong debate performances helped him overachieve on election day. He was predicted to receive 24% of the vote and ultimately took 33.55%. Rousseff garnered 41.59%, while Silva finished third with 21.32%.

As of Oct. 4, both leading polling agencies give a slight edge to Rousseff in the runoff. Datafolha predicts she will pull 48% of the electorate to Neves’ 42%; IBOPE predicts 45% for Rousseff and 37% for Neves. While Eduardo Jorge, the PV presidential candidate, has already thrown his support behind Neves of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), Luciana Genro, from the Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (PSOL), has indicated that her party will not endorse a candidate. The PSB national leadership, pushed in part by Campos’ widow, has already endorsed Neves as well. Silva, whose 22 million votes could easily sway the election, is thus in theory endorsing him as well although her adherence to the PSB was only a recent marriage of political convenience. It remains unclear exactly what conditions Silva placed on the Neves campaign to garner her support.

Old rivals turn second round into referendum on PT

The last 20 years of Brazilian politics have alternated between the left-leaning PT and the conservative PSDB. President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB) was elected in 1994, served two terms, and implemented many economic reforms, including the Plano Real, in order to curb inflation and stabilize the Brazilian currency (NotiSur, Sept. 8, 2000). He was followed by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the PT, whose two terms saw the establishment of the Bolsa Família, a conditional cash-transfer program to help the extreme poor (NotiSur, July 14, 2006). His handpicked successor, Rousseff, won in 2010 on the strength of her management of the Programa de Aceleração de Crescimento (PAC) infrastructure program as well as Lula’s enduring popularity (NotiSur, Nov. 12, 2010). The 2014 contest will thus be the sixth-consecutive matchup between the two parties.

Neves is the grandson of a revered figure, Tancredo Neves, who won the first direct presidential elections in 1985 as the military dictatorship phased into democracy but died before taking office.
However, despite Neves' political career as the former governor of Minas Gerais, commentators view the second round as a question of yes or no on the PT more than a choice between the PT and PSDB because of both candidates' vagueness on specific policy proposals. "The PT has its successes and scandals, but Aécio [Neves]'s platform is just a collection of platitudes and promises," writes Elio Gaspari in the O Globo opinion section.

In an election season marked by negative advertising, Rousseff quickly turned on the offensive. On Oct. 8 during a campaign swing through the northeast, a traditional PT bastion, she claimed to offer voters a history lesson and asserted that, during the last PSDB mandate, there were "very low salaries," "high unemployment," and "stratospheric interest rates." She also criticized Armínio Fraga, president of the Central Bank during Cardoso's second administration and likely minister of the treasury in an eventual Neves administration.

Silva's third-party run and the shifting landscape in Brazilian politics

Despite the outcome leading to yet another PT versus PSDB showdown, both Silva's candidacy and surprising demographics suggest that the PT is losing ground and its hold on power is weakening. Party patriarch Lula is from Pernambuco, also the home state of the deceased Campos and his family's political dynasty. However, the PT did not pull a majority of votes for Dilma and it lost both a Senate race and all federal deputy races. São Paulo state, the largest electoral bloc in the country, went to Neves, who has no traditional roots there although the PSDB itself does, even though the PT controls São Paulo city hall. Most concerning, the industrial arc of the ABC Paulista, a series of municipalities on the outskirts of São Paulo where union activity first propelled Lula to national prominence, went for the PSDB. It also lost many mayoral races there in 2012. The PT's only upset was in Minas Gerais, Rousseff's home state. Although Neves was the governor, he is considered to be from Rio de Janeiro.

Silva’s second-consecutive third-place finish with 20% of the votes points to some longer-term trends. "After the social movements in 2013, there’s a lot of pressure for change and a breaking away of the polarization between two parties which have dominated Brazilian politics," says Ted Goertzel, professor emeritus at Rutgers University Camden and editor of The Drama of Brazilian Politics: From Dom João to Marina Silva. Although Silva lost, she had the burden of working off a political platform that was not her own and cobbling together a campaign in a manner of weeks.

Moreover, despite the media’s relentless attention to the Petrobras scandal and, previously, the mensalão scandal (NotiSur, June 24, 2005), these political acts of malfeasance do not seem to resonate with voters. "It's been striking that the courts and federal police have moved to arrest people like Geronimo [in the mensalão scandal] but the public does not seem to think it's a decisive issue in their vote," Goertzel says. "The people still support the PT."

At the same time, political apathy is growing. Although voting is mandatory in Brazil, the number of voters who abstained or cast blank ballots was 27% of eligible voters, the highest figure since 1998 when 36% did so. That translates to 38 million people, or more votes than Neves received, suggesting that, while more Brazilians support Rousseff than are frustrated with the political system, the next largest segment simply preferred not to vote for president.