

Brazil elections 2018: who will win the race for second place behind Bolsonaro?



With Jair Bolsonaro certain to reach the second round of Brazil's elections in October 2018, the real issue now is which of the other 12 candidates will join him. [Mark S. Langevin](#) (George Mason University) analyses the key factors that will shape the prospects of Bolsonaro's main rivals: Marina Silva, Geraldo Alckmin, Ciro Gomes, and especially Lula's hand-picked candidate Fernando Haddad.

Brazil's upcoming presidential election will be fiercely contested, but citizens and candidates alike go to the ballot box on 7 October under a heavy fog of uncertainty.



Voters in Brazil face an especially fragmented and tightly disputed election involving 13 candidates ([TRE-RJ](#), [CC BY 2.0](#))

There are only two certainties. No one candidate will secure more than 50 per cent of vote to win in the first round. And populist firebrand Jair Bolsonaro will receive more votes than any other candidate and go through to the run-off on 28 October.

Just behind Bolsonaro are four competitive candidates vying for the second spot. The eight remaining contenders have yet to demonstrate any viability.

The race to resurrect Brazil

[Jair Bolsonaro](#) of the Social Liberal Party (PSL) leads the field, but he struggles to find favour beyond his base of zealous supporters. Bolsonaro is a controversial, conservative nationalist with a huge social-media following, but he faces a high rejection rate amongst a large plurality of voters. His kneejerk policy proposals and violent symbolism are celebrated by his followers but condemned by just about everyone else.

To make matters stranger, [Bolsonaro was stabbed](#) at a campaign event last week and needed surgery to survive the attack. His recovery will keep him from taking to the streets, but his social-media reach will continue to engage his base of supporters from his hospital bed. Love him or loathe him, Bolsonaro remains the man to beat in the second round.

First round arithmetic

Crucially, the effective abstention rate (blank and invalid votes along with the lost votes of absentee citizens) in the first round could reach 30 per cent, which is a little higher than the historical average of 28 per cent.

The first round is made even more complex by the high number of candidates and the consequent likelihood of a large number of votes being thrown away on candidates that are running well behind the competitive pack.

There are thirteen candidates, seven of which share a paltry 8-10 per cent of voting intentions. Throwaway votes come from loyal supporters who want to send a direct message of support to a contender in the first round, knowing all the while that they will need to make another choice for the second round.

Together, effective abstention and throwaway votes could account for 38 per cent of total votes. If we subtract voting intentions for Bolsonaro (24%), that leaves just four candidates fighting over 38 per cent of the electorate to reach the second round: [Geraldo Alckmin](#) (PSDB), [Ciro Gomes](#) (PDT), [Fernando Haddad](#) (PT), and [Marina Silva](#) (Rede).

In order to remain viable during the final week of September, these four will need to stay close to the benchmark of a 9.5 per cent share of the voting-age population, otherwise they may lose support as voters peel away and cast ballots with one eye on who will face off against Bolsonaro.



Media coverage will play a crucial role in deciding the election ([Ana Paula Oliveira Migliari](#)/TV Brasil EBC, [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#))

The role of media coverage: mandatory, social, or “earned”

Competition for this crucial 38 per cent of voters will be shaped by the volume and use of [mandatory radio and television time](#). Presidential candidates will place their campaign spots on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays in 12-minute blocks divided unequally across the 13 candidates.

Television time will be allocated at 1pm and again at 8:30pm. Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB) will receive 5 minutes and 22 seconds of each block. Fernando Haddad of the Workers Party comes in second with 2 minutes and 23 seconds of total time. [Ciro Gomes](#) gets 38 seconds and Marina Silva has only 21 seconds to make her case. The Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) candidate [Henrique Meirelles](#) of [President Michel Temer's](#) party will enjoy of the third largest share with 1 minute and 54 seconds, but Meirelles has yet to demonstrate his viability, polling with only three per cent approval. Despite leading in the polls, [Jair Bolsonaro](#) has only 8 seconds of television time. He will continue to rely on his massive social-media effort and “earned” media coverage relating to his controversial pronouncements and recent hospitalisation.

While two thirds of the voting-age population receives news mostly through television, Brazilians are increasingly relying on social media for information and analysis. This limits the sway of mandatory television time and intensifies the impact of the political noise and distortion generated by Facebook, Twitter, and other online platforms.

On the face of it, the distribution of mandatory radio and television time favours Alckmin and Haddad, but too much time may annoy undecided voters. Bolsonaro cannot count on television time, but Haddad of the Workers Party has both the television time and the social-media reach to increase his support among voters in the final weeks of the campaign.

Former president Lula, jailed on corruption charges and the preferred candidate of a third of the Brazilian electorate, can still trigger a massive migration of his faithful to Haddad. This switch from Lula to Haddad will require strong public relations, but more than 20 per cent of voters identify with the Workers Party. These factors give Haddad a significant edge in the last weeks of the campaign.

The real contenders: Bolsonaro, Silva, Gomes, Alckmin, and Haddad

As table 1 shows (below), Jair Bolsonaro is strong in the first round but may be severely weakened in the second. He has a 24 per cent share that has risen in the past fortnight, but his campaign faces a gender gap of 16 per cent towards male supporters and a wage gap of 14 per cent towards higher incomes. These gaps suggest a significant political distance between Bolsonaro and working class women in particular, resulting in his massive 43 per cent rejection rate.

His support base is very reliable, but his outreach efforts face significant challenges amongst women and the poor. Fortunately for Bolsonaro, effective abstention rates are highest amongst these segments and could neutralise his weaknesses unless another candidate can mobilise these voters.

Candidate	Voting intention (%)		Change	Rejection (%)
	22 Aug. 2018	10 Sep. 2018		
Jair Bolsonaro (PSL)	22	24	+2	43
Marina Silva (Rede)	16	11	-5	29
Ciro Gomes (PDT)	10	13	+3	20
Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB)	9	10	+1	24
Fernando Haddad (PT)	4	9	+5	22

Table 1: Voting intentions and rejection rates for the top five candidates (source: DataFolha)

Marina Silva led the competitive set of contenders in August, but she has begun to fade, just as she did in 2014. She has high name recognition and is currently polling above the benchmark at 11 per cent, but she has dropped five points in the past several weeks. Her gender gap of 6 per cent towards female voters is the inverse of Bolsonaro's weakness in this area.

For the first time in her various presidential campaigns (2010, 2014, and 2018), her supporters tend to come from the working poor. In the past she attracted educated, middle-class voters, but in 2018 there is an observable wage gap that indicates stronger support amongst the poorest Brazilians in her diverse constituency. This should be considered a new strength of Marina Silva and one that could prove decisive in both rounds of the presidential election.

Her rejection level is above average, but at 29 per cent it should not prove insurmountable. However, her dire lack of television time and feeble social-media presence could undercut her candidacy during the final weeks of first-round campaigning. Silva may trail off unless she finds a way to stand out during the final stretch.

Ciro Gomes is tracking towards a very competitive status and overtook Marina in this last round of polling with 13 per cent, three points higher than in August. There are no significant gender or wage gaps amongst his supporters and his rejection is a manageable 20 per cent. He is generally appealing but not popular. He needs to peel off support from voters that intended to vote for Lula, Marina Silva, and possibly Geraldo Alckmin.

Geraldo Alckmin and Fernando Haddad both need to come from behind, but they also enjoy large shares of mandatory television time. Alckmin came a respectable second in the first round of the 2006 presidential election before remarkably losing votes in the second round. 10 per cent of the voting-age population support the former Governor of São Paulo state this time around, but he needs soon to reach the 9.5 per cent benchmark soon or risk losing support altogether.

Like Gomes, he does not face significant gender or wage gaps, and his 24 per cent rejection rate is not an obstacle. Alckmin needs to peel voters away from Marina Silva and Gomes, as well as making a case to those flirting with the idea of voting for Bolsonaro. Alckmin's challenge is near-insurmountable, but his hefty television time provides him with a chance of cutting a path through the dense forest of fellow contenders.



Fernando Haddad has many advantages, but it remains unclear whether clear support will materialise ([PT](#), [CC BY 2.0](#))

The Workers Party (PT) presidential campaign, however, is the real game changer. The party insisted on naming former president Lula as the candidate despite his candidacy being nullified by his conviction on corruption charges. This week the PT formally announced the candidacy of Fernando Haddad, Lula's running mate and formerly Minister of Education and Mayor of São Paulo.

Lula and the PT cannot expect all loyal Lula supporters to automatically embrace Haddad, who does not enjoy Lula's charisma or history. Yet, his shift from four to nine per cent of voting intentions even before the PT made his campaign official bodes well for Lula's hand-picked candidate.

Haddad's candidacy does not exhibit visible gender or wage gaps, and his name recognition and rejection levels are below average. But this could all change in the coming weeks as São Paulo state prosecutors investigate allegations that Haddad engaged in corruption to finance his 2012 mayoral campaign.

Haddad benefits from ample television time to deepen name recognition and peel voters away from Marina Silva and Ciro Gomes. The party's organisational capacity and social-media efforts also promise to fuel his campaign in the final weeks of September. Haddad should be considered the favourite to make it through to the second round, but he needs to deflate corruption allegations soon to keep his rejection rate low.

Possible scenarios for the run-in

Those flirting with the idea of voting for Bolsonaro may harden their support for the candidate after the violent attack on him last week. Expect Bolsonaro to gain a few percentage points in the polls, but this gain may recede during the second round.

Bolsonaro's violent discourse and symbolism continue to limit his electoral reach. He circulated a photograph of himself in his hospital bed making a two-handed "armed" signal, his trademark as the pro-gun rights candidate. This kind of theatre enralls his base, but it also reminds most Brazilians that vigilante violence does not resolve the serious public security challenges facing the nation. At a moment when even his adversaries pray for his health, this candidate continues to shoot himself in the foot. He will not have to pay the bill for his mistakes in the first round, but they may come back to haunt him in the final reckoning.

Fernando Haddad of Lula's Workers Party has only just put on his running shoes, while his competitors left the blocks over a month ago. He faces two complex electoral flips in the coming weeks. First, he has to turn Lula supporters into Haddad voters. Then he has to tear away "soft" voters from Marina Silva and Ciro Gomes despite knowing that he will need the support of these contenders to defeat Bolsonaro in the second round. Haddad is the candidate to watch, but he does not have much time to make the great leap into the second round.

If any of the competitive contenders cave and fall measurably behind by September 23 then we can expect rumour campaigns about second-round support to shape the outlook of undecided and fickle voters.

Haddad and Alckmin would benefit most from the sinking support of Marina Silva or Ciro Gomes. It is also likely that if Alckmin caves, he would throw his party's informal support behind Marina Silva in the week leading up to the first round election on 7 October. This alliance was contemplated and discussed by both parties prior to the launch of the campaign season. Moreover, Marina's running mate, Eduardo Jorge of the Green Party (PV), has a strong working relationship with Alckmin's PSDB. This possible alliance would likely beat Bolsonaro in the second round.

Ciro Gomes demonstrates capacity to grow his support, but the introduction of Haddad as the PT's candidate may stop him in his tracks. The dispute between Haddad and Ciro for the left-of-centre voter block may be the most important point of contestation in the coming weeks.

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