

Could a third path open up?

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TWO PARTIES HAVE CONTROLLED Brazil's last five presidential elections. For nearly two decades, the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) and the Workers' Party (PT) have dominated the national political landscape, with two victories for the PSDB (1994 and 1998) and three for the PT (2002, 2006, and 2010). With President Dilma Rousseff (PT) and Senator Aécio Neves (PSDB) leading the polls less than three months away from the election, the polarization seems likely to endure through yet another political cycle.

However, there have been recurrent attempts to break up the duality. In years when the incumbent is running, these attempts have been noticeably fruitless. In 1998, former governor Ciro Gomes got only 11% of the votes and in 2006 former senator Heloisa Helena grabbed a meager 7%. In years without an incumbent, the presidential race tends to be more competitive. In 2002, former governor Anthony Garotinho reached 18% (Gomes also ran that year, receiving

12%; he had peaked in pre-election polling at 27% only to implode a few months before the ballot). In 2010, former minister Marina Silva achieved 19% of the votes—until now the best performance by a third-party candidate.

What about the 2014 election? The comments just made may suggest that there won't be much room for a third candidate: Not only is there an incumbent running but also polls have been consistently showing the usual tension between the PT's Rousseff and the PSDB's Neves. In fact, after formally announcing his candidacy in April, in May former governor Eduardo Campos of Brazil's Socialist Party (PSB) did attract 11% of those intending to vote but has since been struggling in the single digits. Nevertheless, despite the poor performance so far, Campos is likely to go up in the polls when the campaign starts in earnest, mainly because his running mate is Marina Silva, who did relatively well in 2010.

Even if unlikely to smash through the PT-PSDB polarization in October, the Campos candidacy could represent an inflexion point for a more competitive political landscape in the future. Silva's impressive performance in 2010 was already a sign of voter fatigue with the two mainstream parties. As a former member of the PT and a candidate of the Green Party (PV), she

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was able to garner a broad range of support from environmentalists, evangelicals, leftwing movements frustrated with the PT, and the antiestablishment vote. In fact, the heterogeneity of her support helps explain why Campos hasn't automatically inherited those votes, and probably will pick up only a portion of them.

Until now, voter fatigue with the PT and the PSDB hasn't translated into a viable third alternative. This may have to do with the fact that the PT-PSDB divide is more about competition for power than contrast of ideologies. To an extent, the overlap in ideologies tends to somewhat constrict the political debate. Despite heated rhetoric between the two parties and accusations that gain in intensity during election campaigns, with a few exceptions the differences in approach to most policies are mere nuances. Broadly speaking, the PT and the PSDB aren't that far apart; both are vying for the center-left side of the political spectrum. In fact, the lack of major political parties espousing more conservative ideas tilts Brazil's entire political spectrum to the left, overcrowding the debate with generally like-minded voices.

Against this backdrop, it would be difficult to drive a wedge between the PT and the PSDB by resorting to messages and political arrangements similar to theirs. Most-third party candidates so far have been defectors from one of those two parties, which dampens any expectations that they will bring a fresh alternative to the table. Campos and Silva face a similar challenge this year. Rather than exploring new issues and approaches—which may eventually move them across the political spectrum but heighten the risk

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to their candidacy—they have been attempting to bridge the divide between the PT and the PSDB without cutting the cord completely. Such a strategy may be very useful in a second round run-off against either the PSDB or the PT, but hedging doesn't give them enough momentum to catapult Campos past the first ballot.

Nevertheless, Campos's hope lies in a new element that is likely to make this year's election a bit different, and more competitive, than previous races. That is the new middle class. The wave of protests for better public services that rocked major Brazilian cities last year churned up diffuse discontent with the established parties. So far, this malaise has produced impatience, and this year that may merely lead to political apathy: there is a risk that the large number of undecided voters will translate to record-low voter turnout in October. While constrained by fewer campaign resources than the PT and the PSDB, Campos and Silva could attempt to craft a clear message that taps into this middle class discontent. That would pave a third way in Brazilian presidential politics. 