

Will Women Decide the Brazilian Election?

The Potential Impact of Female Voters and Candidates

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women could play a decisive role in determining who wins the presidential race in Brazil this fall. As many as one-third of female voters are currently undecided and half reject the current front-runner, Congressman Jair Bolsonaro. Most leading male candidates, in an effort to gain women votes, have chosen as running mates strong, influential female politicians. At the same time, despite the potential power of the female electorate, women have struggled to gain a foothold in Brazilian politics. They hold just 12 percent of seats in the National Congress, putting the country in 152nd place in the world in terms of parliamentary representation, behind both Iraq and Afghanistan.

With less than a month before the October 7 election day, the Brazil Institute and the Women in Public Service Project hosted a discussion on the impact women could have on the outcome and the complicated landscape of female political participation in the country.

Panelists noted that the Brazilian party system remains a key challenge to female political participation. Despite the growing normalization of female candidates in Brazil and reforms aimed at providing a more equal share of party resources and campaign financing to women, male-dominated party leadership structures have acted to preserve the status quo—prioritizing male incumbents at the expense of female candidates.

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5th Floor, Woodrow Wilson Center

A *Anna Prusa*, Program Associate at the Brazil Institute, opened the conversation by contextualizing the role of women in Brazilian politics and the significance of the 2018 elections. Prusa highlighted that 52 percent of the Brazilian electorate is female and far more women than men remain undecided when asked about their support for presidential candidates, making women a decisive political force despite their diverse political views.

This election is momentous for female candidates as well, who have long battled striking levels of exclusion from Brazil's political system. In the upcoming 2018 elections, 12 percent of national congressional seats and 11 percent of all elected positions at federal, state, and city levels are up for grabs. Yet, even given the new requirement for 30 percent of party campaign funds to be spent on female candidates, Prusa insisted that additional measures and time will be necessary to bring women proportionally into legislative and executive processes.

Malu Gatto, Swiss Fellow at the Wilson Center and Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Zurich (and soon to be Assistant Professor at University College London's Institute of the Americas), highlighted the potential for the 2018 elections in Brazil to be the "women's election," as some have coined it. This year, 1,683 seats will be contested at the federal and state levels of government. This will be the first election to enforce a new law requiring that 30 percent of party campaign funding be allocated towards female candidates. The hope is that such measure will help propel more women into politics. New research conducted by Gatto and Anna Petherick of Oxford University supports this expectation, indicating that voter biases are less of a limiting factor for women attempting to enter politics in Brazil than the lack of party support and resources available.

Exceptionally high levels of distrust in government across Brazil could also potentially favor female candidates, who are in many ways viewed as outsiders given their longtime exclusion from politics, suggested Gatto.

Gatto also pointed out that current candidates have specifically targeted the female electorate through their discourse and campaign strategies. This election cycle has already seen the highest number of female vice presidential candidates in Brazil's history, in addition to two female candidates to the presidency. Even more telling has been the candidates' focus on women in their campaign ads: Marina da Silva's first televised campaign ad opened with the phrase, "I want to speak with you, woman." Likewise, former Governor Geraldo Alckmin's first ad was a montage of vulgar and offensive clips of Congressman Jair Bolsonaro disrespecting various women, which advised viewers "those who do not respect women should not have the respect of women." *Ciro Gomes* has spoken extensively on issues such as domestic violence and femicide, and *Jair Bolsonaro* has even suggested that arming women will "end" violence against women.

Although women are central in this election, Gatto admitted that there is reason to be cynical. In spite of new campaign finance laws supporting female



Left-right: Kristin Wylie, Malu Gatto, and Anna Prusa



Left-right: Pedro dos Santos (Skype), Kristin Wylie, Malu Gatto, and Anna Prusa

candidates, incumbents and traditional parties are resistant to higher female participation. Gatto noted that this is not just due to a culture of machismo, but that the parties are exercising power to protect the status quo (and thereby protect their own positions). For instance, many parties have placed female candidates as running mates—as potential vice-presidents and vice-governors—instead of at the head of the ticket, and parties have directed part of the 30 percent of funding reserved for women toward these dual, male-led tickets. Referencing the politically charged assassination of Rio de Janeiro city councilwoman Marielle Franco, Gatto emphasized the lengths to which the system will go to demonstrate who belongs in politics and who does not. She asserted that Marielle, a black, LGBTQ woman from a favela who was openly critical of police violence, did not belong. In concluding, Gatto warned that female representation is not expected to increase significantly—especially at the national level—and that whatever gains are made may not be politically significant.

Pedro A. G. dos Santos, Associate Professor of Political Science at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, gave a historical breakdown of female participation in executive politics in Brazil. To start, 2018 has seen the highest absolute number of women on presidential tickets in Brazilian history. Dos Santos noted that this is the fourth consecutive presidential election in which two female candidates have competed for Brazil's highest office. Candidates across the board have emphasized the centrality of women in politics this election. When announcing his running mate—Senator Ana Amélia—Alckmin declared, "The more women participate in politics, the more Brazilian society has to gain."

Given the presence of women across presidential tickets, dos Santos perceives a significant shift in the role of women as candidates. All major presidential candidates except for Bolsonaro and Marina Silva have selected female running mates, proving the competitiveness of women on the ballot. Even more telling is the heightened attention vice presidential candidates are drawing this election cycle, no doubt due to the fact that former President Dilma Rousseff's vice president, Michel Temer, assumed the presidency in 2016 after Rousseff's impeachment and removal from office. Vice presidential candidates, once an afterthought, have taken on new relevance in Brazilian politics; by extension, so too have female candidates. Dos Santos illustrated this with Kátia Abreu's decision to drop out of the gubernatorial race in Tocantins state (a race she likely would have won) to accept the position of vice presidential candidate for Ciro Gomes. This theory of rising female competitiveness in Brazilian politics is substantiated by other details, such as the fact that around two-thirds of voters voted for a woman—either Marina or Rousseff—in 2014 for president, argued dos Santos.

However, much more significant change is needed before women will be able to compete at the same level as men in Brazilian elections, dos Santos stressed. When women have run for president in the past—and even today—they have not been competitive due in large part to their parties. With the exceptions of Marina Silva and Rousseff, most female candidates have not been major players in national elections because their parties are too small and ideological to wield any real power or fail to capture a large part of the vote, as is the case with the current Unified Workers' Socialist Party (PSTU) candidate, Vera Lúcia. Dos Santos added that female representation

in executive cabinets has remained depressingly low. The highest ever percentage of female representation was in Rousseff's cabinet, which still did not meet the 30 percent female representation she promised in the 2010 elections. Notably, when Temer took over the presidency in 2016, his original cabinet consisted exclusively of white males.

Kristin Wylie, Assistant Professor at James Madison University, began by explaining that Brazil has had a gender quota law requiring 30 percent of candidates put forth by political parties to be women since 1995. Yet Wylie noted that the law existed on paper, but not in practice; from 1996-2008, only 16.1 percent of state party lists reached the 30 percent quota. It was not until the Brazilian Congress reformed the gender quota law in 2009 that parties began to actively try to meet the 30 percent target. However, although formal compliance with the quota has increased, the number of *laranjas* (oranges)—phantom female candidates who have no real intention of running or holding elected office—has increased as well. For example, in the 2014 elections, 48.6 percent of state party lists met the 30 percent female quota, approximately half of which, Wylie estimated, were *laranjas*. Wylie argued that parties that are larger and more institutionalized are better suited to support serious female candidates and are most likely to meet the gender quota.

An important factor in the success of any candidate running for elected office is resources, including campaign finances. Wylie argued that access to sufficient finances is one of the best predictors of electoral performance. Historically there has been a huge wage gap between genders in Brazil, which has hindered female candidates' campaign success. Wylie stated that some had hoped the playing field might level, at least from a campaign finance perspective, thanks to a 2015 ruling that corporate financing of political campaigns was unconstitutional. Candidates must now rely almost completely on public funding and a recent ruling from the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) established that at least 30 percent of funds allocated to the parties must

go to female candidates. However, Wylie predicted that female candidates will actually receive very little help from this ruling, since internal party rules allow discretionary spending of the funds. Furthermore, Wylie argued that as a result of these new laws and limited resources, parties have prioritized incumbents' campaigns, resulting in less political renewal and higher re-election rates of sitting elected officials.

Wylie went on to explain that while the percentage of female candidates has slowly increased since the gender quota law was established in 1995, the percentage of women actually elected to office does not follow the same upward trend, which Wylie argued is an observable effect of the increased use of *laranjas*. Furthermore, more female candidates will not necessarily translate into more women elected and progress in women elected is not unidirectional or inevitable in any sense; there is always a possibility for backlash.

According to recent polling cited by Wylie, 80 percent of the Brazilian electorate thinks that democracy would improve if more women were to be elected to office. Wylie contended that the principal hindrance to female candidacy is the critical role of political parties which, thus far, have been weakly institutionalized and remain dominated by male politicians. Government efforts to open the political system to female candidates have proven ineffective due to the fact that the majority of party leadership positions are held by men who want to preserve their power in the political sphere. Given this context, Wylie suggested that a beneficial tactic to increase female representation in Brazilian politics would be to place more women in leadership positions, so that they would have a say in the distribution of party resources.



One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20004-3027

 www.wilsoncenter.org/program/brazil-institute

 brazil@wilsoncenter.org

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 202.691.4147