

The Curse of the Incumbent

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Heading into yesterday's first round of presidential voting in Brazil, the incumbent, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, was thought to be a narrow favorite. When the results came in, though, Lula was behind his challenger, Flávio Bolsonaro, 45 percent to 47 percent. The two men will compete in an October 25 runoff to determine the winner.

Those surnames will likely be recognizable even to casual watchers of global elections: Lula, a leftist, has been the dominant force in Brazilian politics this century, and was president from 2003 to 2011. Bolsonaro's father, Jair, was a right-wing president from 2019 to 2023 but was defeated by Lula in a comeback bid; Bolsonaro the elder then attempted a Trumpian [autogolpe](#) to stay in power but failed and was later convicted and sentenced to prison for it.

Now it's Lula who's struggling with voters. He was hurt by crime concerns as well as a corruption scandal, but he's also a very familiar figure to Brazilians—perhaps too familiar. “Brazil wants change and I am very happy with the results,” [Bolsonaro fils said last night](#). What kind of change, though?

When Donald Trump completed his own presidential comeback in the 2024 U.S. election, one common explanation was that a fundamental change had occurred in American politics, realigning demographics, parties, and policy for the long run. (As I have written recently, [that claim looks shaky today](#).) A competing narrative, especially popular among comparative scholars, focused on a wave of [anti-incumbent results](#) in elections around the world. In this view, the results were more a rejection of Joe Biden's administration and his vice president, Kamala Harris, than they were an embrace of Trump—and part of a broad trend of dissatisfaction among voters in many countries.

The specific motivations of the global anti-incumbent wave have never been entirely obvious. They include a post-COVID hangover but also deeper running dissatisfaction with democratic systems of government. Whatever the reasons, the trend is an important shift. Parties lose power from time to time in any country with free and fair elections, but political scientists have long observed that incumbents have an electoral advantage. In the modern United States, for example, Trump's and Biden's single presidential terms were outliers. If voters' default stance is to throw the bums out after only one term or a few years, parties and leaders will struggle to create lasting policy changes. This creates instability and conflict, as politicians try [more extreme tactics](#) to achieve their goals.

Lula's poor showing in the first round, at least, is a sign that the anti-incumbent wave has not receded since 2024. Indeed, politicians across the political spectrum have faced serious voter anger this year. In Hungary, a broad coalition emerged to eject the right-wing strongman Viktor Orbán, who, my colleague Isaac Stanley-

Becker noted, had [been viewed as un-oustable](#). In Denmark, the governing coalition lost seats, though Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, a centrist, was [eventually able](#) to form a new, weaker government. In Germany, Chancellor Friedrich Merz is unpopular, and his future [looks precarious](#), as parties on both the left and the right have gained in state elections, leaving his centrist government teetering. And today, the center-left Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, called for a November 29 snap election for Parliament, with polls showing his party trailing behind the center-right Popular Party.

The power of the anti-incumbent wave is demonstrated by the fact that it now threatens to wash out some of the same parties and politicians it previously carried in. Lula's victory in Brazil's 2022 election was in part a testament to voters rejecting the government of the incumbent, Jair Bolsonaro. Now the same dissatisfaction could swamp Lula and elect Bolsonaro's son.

In the United Kingdom, anti-incumbent currents helped defeat a long-running Conservative government in 2024. The result was a landslide: Conservatives lost 251 seats while Labour picked up 211 and a huge majority. But [Prime Minister Keir Starmer](#) lasted just two years in office before sagging popularity led to his effective toppling by another Labour politician, Andy Burnham. In what may be a canny reading of the global mood, Burnham has [rejected suggestions](#) that he call an election before he is required to do so, in 2029.

Finally, there's Trump, who benefited from anti-incumbent sentiments in 2024 but may be burned by them in November. Voters may not have liked Biden, but now that they've seen Trump back in the White House, they like him even less. Among other issues, the inflation that hurt Biden (and other global incumbents) in 2024 has persisted and sometimes worsened under Trump. Midterm elections in the U.S. are usually defeats for the sitting president's party, but many analysts now forecast a larger-than-normal Democratic victory. Trump has begged voters to act as though he is on the ballot, but that may be imprudent.

Anti-incumbency is a global trend, but it can have big effects on domestic politics. In the United States, Trump treated his narrow 2024 win as a huge popular mandate. Although that was a political overreach, he has managed to radically reshape the federal government and foreign policy. In Brazil, a new Bolsonaro presidency would jerk the country back toward the right after a leftward lurch under Lula. As long as voters remain this dyspeptic, however, any new approach should be treated as fragile and fleeting.

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A researcher at a Russian anti-plague institute [died from a suspected case of pneumonic plague](#), and as many

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The U.S. military [removed all of its bombers from a British air base](#) used for strikes on Iran yesterday after a suspected terror plot targeted the base. Six people have been arrested and released on bail in the investigation.

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Evening Read



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What Is Zionism?

By Adam Kirsch

On October 7, 2023, Hamas fighters launched a surprise attack on Israel from the Gaza Strip, killing more than 1,200 people and taking 251 hostages. The attack was the worst disaster in the history of the Jewish state. Three years later, it's clear that it was an even greater disaster for Palestinians. Determined to punish Hamas and prevent future attacks, Israel responded with a devastating invasion of Gaza that killed more than 70,000 people; it estimates at least 22,000 were combatants. Today, 2 million Palestinians, 80 percent

of the population of Gaza, have been displaced from their homes.

But if Hamas was defeated militarily, it largely succeeded in its goal of swinging Western public opinion against Israel. The spectacle of Israeli powerlessness followed by the violent display of Israeli power profoundly changed the way the Jewish state is seen and discussed. Perhaps the best way to gauge that change is to look at the transformation of the word *Zionist*.

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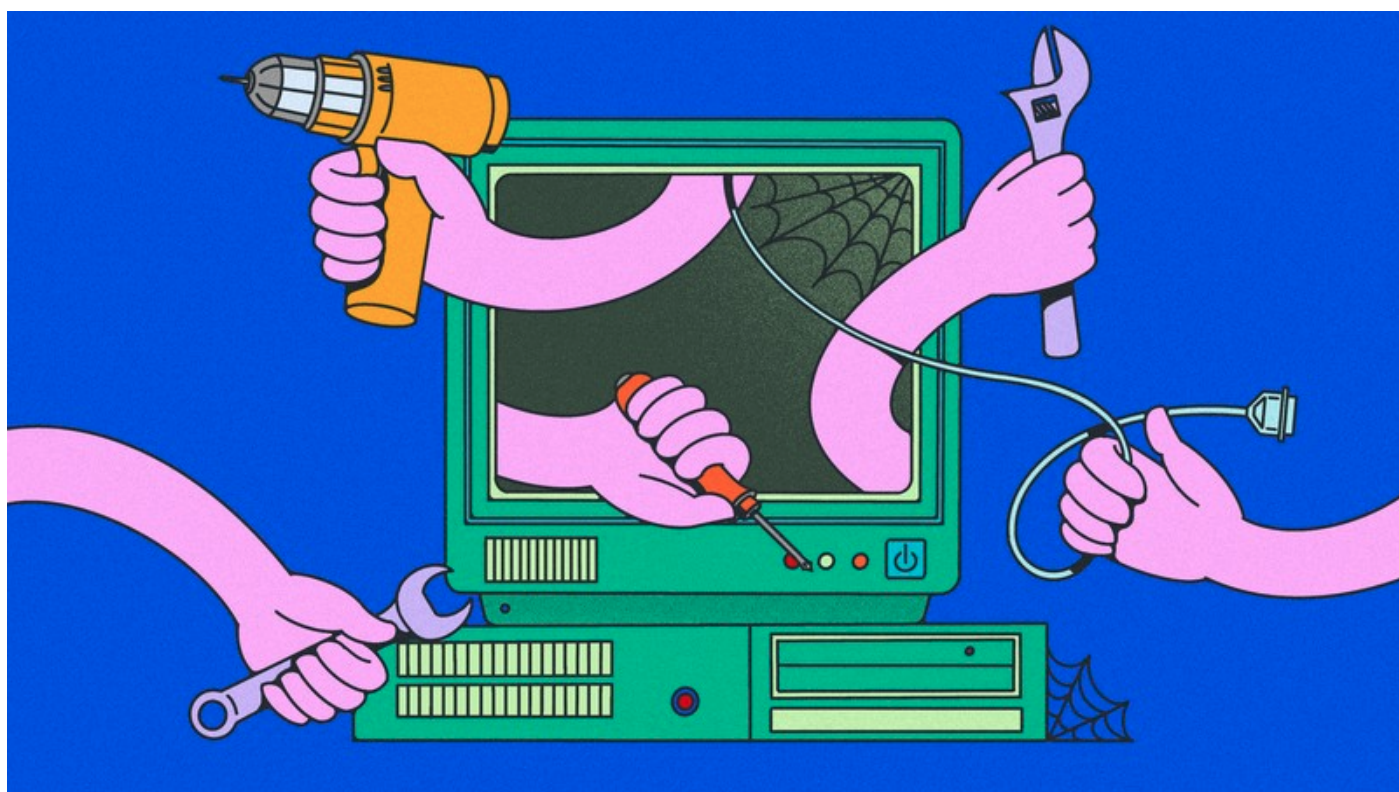


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Rafaela Jinich contributed to this newsletter.

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