

# Brazil voters jaded by ruling party's corruption

**Some Brazilians are encouraging voters to annul their mandatory vote in the October election.**

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**RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL** – When Brazil's Workers' Party (PT) won a historic presidential election four years ago, millions of people took to the streets to herald what the winning candidate memorably declared "the triumph of hope over fear."

But now, with the PT having shown itself to be every bit as corrupt as their predecessors, Brazilians feel they are left with little choice in the Oct. 1 vote.



**VOTE:** Corruption in Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's government angered voters.

"If you ask me which of the candidates have the qualities I am looking for then I'd say none of them," says small business owner José Carlos Vieira, summing up the helplessness felt by many of Brazil's 126 million voters. "We don't have much of a choice. Today we have to vote for the least awful of the candidates."

Yet at least some voters are trying to make a statement, threatening to vote for fringe candidates. Others, however, say the answer is to vote for no one and to annul their votes in protest.

In several polls released over the last few weeks as many as 11 percent of respondents said they would annul their mandatory vote for president, making it the third most popular option behind Lula and his main rival Geraldo Alckmin of the PSDB.

Frustration with the government has become widespread. When President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva took power in 2003, after eight years of rule by the Brazilian Social Democratic Party, Brazilians were voting for economic, political, and - most of all - social changes long promised by Lula. Today, the economy is healthier than ever and his government has pumped billions into social programs that have helped the country's poor.

But Lula did not break with the past as he promised, and with his government mired in one corruption scandal after another, many voters don't know where to turn.

In races for state governor, polls showed that 13 percent in São Paulo and 17 percent in Rio de Janeiro said they would vote for none of the declared candidates. Although Brazil's list system means there are few polls for the concurrent parliamentary elections, voters and experts agree the percentage of annulled votes will almost certainly be higher for those races.

With more than 100 of the 513 deputies implicated in the latest corruption scandal, and disgust so widespread that even the president of the Congressional Ethics Committee classed this Congress "the worst in the country's history," few have faith in those running for congressional seats.

"The credibility in the political system is damaged," says João Augusto de Castro Neves, an analyst at the Brazilian Institute for Political Studies. "But confidence in the Chamber of Deputies is even more damaged than that of the presidency. This scandal is ongoing and some candidates have even withdrawn from the race. It is very worrying because people see so many candidates involved that they don't know who to vote for."

There is no mass movement to annul the vote but small campaigns have sprung up on the Web and some celebrities have endorsed the tactic.

The popular Orkut relationship site has several pages urging annulment. MTV ran a spot that was criticized as encouraging youngsters to spoil their

ballots, and rock stars have fomented the unrest with passionate pleas from the stage.

Dinho Ouro Preto, lead singer of popular band Capital Inicial, told audiences to annul their votes to protest the current generation of politicians.

"You are not annulling and saying that any of them will do. You are saying that none of them will do," Mr. Ouro Preto told Brazilian news service Globo online. "I see so much frustration and I think that annulling the vote is an expression of that. It would be good for Brazilian democracy (for them) to see the dimension of dissatisfaction."

Such opinions worry electoral watchdogs who feel the protest could gather pace. The Internet campaigns have led people to wrongly believe that if an absolute majority null or void their electronic ballots then a new election will be declared and new candidates must be chosen.

That is untrue and electoral officials have launched a campaign to educate voters otherwise.

"Voting is compulsory but it is also a duty," Marco Aurélio Mello, the president of Brazil's federal electoral court, said in a telephone interview from the capital Brasilia. "We can't be like ostriches and bury our heads in the sand. The solution is to get people motivated to choose the candidates they want to represent them."

Spots on television, radio and the Internet will hopefully go some way to convince disenchanted voters they are the ones responsible for deciding the country's future, Mr. Mello said. Already some counter campaigns are highlighting the importance of a positive participation.

Other experts said that disenchantment could serve as a wake-up call to politicians. "The positive is that attention is drawn to the problem," said political consultant Walder de Goes. "Politicians and institutions are forced to take notice."

Mello acknowledged the disdain for politicians and the electoral process was widespread but political analysts argued such feelings were normal for a democracy that this year celebrates its 21st birthday.

"I think it shows that the system is maturing," Castro de Neves said. "In developed democracies these things exist too. There is a lot of consensus in politics now and the downside to that is apathy. The parties are so similar now ... people feel they don't have options."