



At a Glance

2024 Municipal Elections:
Power Shifts and the Rise of
Emerging Leaders

**São Paulo's Mayoral
Election:** A Crucial Test for
Brazil's Political Future

PSD's Meteoric Rise: A New
Political Powerhouse in Brazil

Elections 2024 Over 155 Million Brazilians Head to the Polls in a Key Test for the 2026 Presidential Race

Headline photo: Brazilian electronic ballot
Roberto Jayme/Ascom/TSE



2024 Municipal Elections: Fragmentation and shifting dynamics define the first round

The first round of Brazil's 2024 municipal elections revealed a deeply fragmented political landscape, marked by the consolidation of right-wing and center-right forces, while traditional parties such as the PT and PSDB faced significant challenges. These elections signaled shifting power dynamics across the country, with notable gains for emerging conservative leaders and growing questions about the future of some long-standing political actors.

Right-Wing and *Centrão* Consolidate Power

One of the clearest outcomes of the first round was the strengthening of the right and center-right, particularly through the consolidation of the "Centrão" coalition. These groups now hold 64% of all mayoralties across Brazil, an increase that underscores their growing influence even in key urban centers. Victories in cities such as Salvador and Vitória highlighted this dominance, with right-wing candidates securing comfortable wins.

The election results also demonstrated a shift within the right itself. While former President Jair Bolsonaro remains an influential figure, the 2024 elections showed that his leadership of the movement is no longer as dominant as in previous years. Candidates like São Paulo Governor Tarcísio de Freitas, who backed Ricardo

Nunes in the São Paulo mayoral race, are emerging as powerful new leaders. Freitas' support was instrumental in Nunes' first-round success, positioning him as a key player in the conservative movement and a potential contender for the 2026 presidential elections. His rise indicates a diversification of leadership within Brazil's right-wing, moving beyond the sole figure of Bolsonaro.

The Decline of the PSDB: A Crisis for a Historical Party

A significant development in these elections was the ongoing decline of the PSDB, a party that once dominated Brazilian politics. Once a leading force in São Paulo and the nation, the PSDB's performance in 2024 marked a sharp contrast to its historical dominance. In São Paulo, the party's candidate, José Luiz Datena, received just 1.84% of the vote, its worst result in the city's history. More notably, the PSDB failed to elect a single city councilor in the São Paulo municipal chamber for the first time, underscoring its diminishing relevance. This decline reflects a broader trend of erosion for the PSDB, which began with losing the São Paulo governorship in 2022. Once a central figure in Brazilian

politics, the party now faces the challenge of redefining itself in a political landscape increasingly dominated by newer conservative forces and regional leaders like Tarcísio de Freitas. The PSDB's future remains uncertain as it struggles to regain relevance in a rapidly changing environment.

What is the *Centrão*?

The *Centrão* is a powerful bloc of centrist and center-right parties in Brazil's Congress, known for its pragmatic, transactional approach to politics. While not an official coalition, the *Centrão* often supports government proposals in exchange for political appointments or increased budget allocations for its members' constituencies. This flexibility allows it to align with various administrations, left or right, making it a key player in legislative decision-making and coalition-building. However, it has also drawn criticism for perpetuating patronage-driven politics in Brazil.

Challenges for the Left and PT's Mixed Results

The left, led by the Workers' Party (PT), experienced a mixed performance in the 2024 elections. While the party managed to increase its number of mayoral wins by 37% compared to 2020, this growth was primarily in smaller municipalities. PT struggled to gain traction in larger cities, where political influence is more pronounced. The party's candidates advanced to the second round in only four state capitals—Cuiabá, Fortaleza, Natal, and Porto Alegre—highlighting its difficulties in maintaining relevance in key urban areas.

In São Paulo, PT did not field its own candidate but instead supported PSOL's Guilherme Boulos, who advanced to the second round. However, the anticipated large-scale transfer of votes from President Lula to Boulos was less impactful than expected, reflecting the challenges PT faces in appealing to urban voters. While still significant, the party's continued reliance on Lula's influence highlights the need for new leadership and strategies to re-engage voters in Brazil's largest cities.

The left's struggle to compete with the growing dominance of right-wing and centrist forces suggests that PT and its allies must reevaluate their approach, particularly as conservative politics gain strength across the country.

Bolsonaro's Influence: Strong but Shifting

While Jair Bolsonaro remains a significant figure in Brazilian politics, his direct influence showed signs of shifting in the 2024 elections. His party, the Liberal Party (PL), saw a 52% increase in mayoralties compared to 2020, winning 523 municipalities. However, this result fell short of expectations, as the party had set a goal of securing 1,500 cities.

More importantly, several candidates closely aligned with Bolsonaro underperformed, particularly in key cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Many right-leaning candidates distanced themselves from Bolsonaro's more polarizing rhetoric, signaling a broader shift within the conservative electorate. Figures like Tarcísio de Freitas are emerging as potential new right-wing leaders, challenging Bolsonaro's previously uncontested leadership.

This evolving dynamic suggests that Bolsonaro's influence remains strong but the right-wing movement is becoming more diversified, with new voices and leadership figures gaining prominence.



Valdemar Costa Neto, President of PL, and Jair Bolsonaro during Bolsonaro's party affiliation ceremony in 2021. Reproduction/YouTube

A New Political Landscape

The first round of the 2024 municipal elections has reshaped Brazil's political landscape, with clear signs of fragmentation and realignment. The right and center-right have cemented their dominance, particularly through the rise of leaders like Tarcísio de Freitas and the consolidation of the *Centrão*. Meanwhile, PT and PSDB face significant challenges maintaining their traditional influence, particularly in major urban centers.

These elections will likely have far-reaching implications as Brazil approaches the 2026 presidential race. The rise of new conservative leaders, the decline of historical parties like the PSDB, and Bolsonaro's evolving role will continue to shape the country's political trajectory in the future. ♦



In São Paulo's Mayoral Election, a Test of Brazil's Political Future Looms

As the 2024 São Paulo mayoral race moves into its second round, the political landscape has become a pivotal testing ground for national political trends ahead of Brazil's 2026 general elections. As the economic center of Brazil, the outcome of São Paulo's election could have a major impact on the broader political dynamics in the country. Several key aspects of this race signal how local elections may influence national debates and alliances, particularly on the right, but also within progressive movements.

The Power of the São Paulo Mayoralty

The position of São Paulo's mayor carries immense political weight. Beyond the symbolic importance of governing Brazil's largest city, the office commands a budget of BRL 119 billion in 2024, one of the largest in the country. The 2022 debt relief deal between the city and the federal government, involving the transfer of Campo de Marte airport, unlocked BRL 24 billion for infrastructure projects. This fiscal flexibility has further amplified the strategic importance of the office but has also increased the political pressures on its occupant.

Current mayor, Ricardo Nunes (MDB), inherited the office after the unexpected death of Bruno Covas (PSDB). Initially struggling to secure a foothold due to his lack of a strong voter base and limited political clout, Nunes has relied heavily on alliances, particularly with

the São Paulo City Council and the broader political establishment. However, support from São Paulo Governor Tarcísio de Freitas (Republicanos) has bolstered his campaign, making this election a crucial test for right-wing unity in the state and, potentially, across Brazil.

The Contestants and Their High Stakes

The first round of voting in 2024 was a close battle between Nunes, left-wing candidate Guilherme Boulos (PSOL), and *antiestablishment* candidate Pablo Marçal (PRTB), with less than 1% separating the three. Though Nunes edged out Boulos, the dynamics of the second round are likely to shape the future of Brazil's political landscape for years to come.

For Nunes, this election is about solidifying his political standing and securing a mandate of his own. His platform of administrative continuity, moderate conservatism, and infrastructure development—particularly in São Paulo's peripheries—has resonated with a segment of the electorate. A victory would not only validate his leadership but also reinforce Governor Tarcísio de Freitas as a central figure in São Paulo's political scene, potentially propelling him into contention for the 2026 presidential race.

Guilherme Boulos, meanwhile, represents the progressive left's best chance to make inroads into São Paulo politics. As a leader of the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) and the top-voted federal deputy in São Paulo in 2022, Boulos has emerged as one of President Lula's key allies. His candidacy symbolizes the growing momentum of leftist forces in urban areas. A victory for Boulos would raise his national profile, positioning him as a potential future candidate for higher office, perhaps even for the presidency or governorship in the 2030s. However, his challenge lies in overcoming São Paulo's traditionally conservative electorate.

The Marçal Factor and How a Political Outsider Changed the Game

Although Marçal didn't advance to the second round, his unexpected success demonstrates the rise of a new *antiestablishment*, right-wing bloc in Brazilian politics. Leveraging his background as a motivational speaker and his adept use of social media, Marçal managed to capture a significant portion of São Paulo's conservative and evangelical voters. His campaign, which combined Christian fundamentalist rhetoric with a strong entrepreneurial message, mirrors the disruptive strategies previously employed by figures like Jair Bolsonaro. This emerging faction represents a growing segment of the electorate that is disillusioned with traditional political structures and is likely to continue influencing the country's political landscape.

Marçal's ability to garner over 28% of the vote, despite limited television airtime and financial resources, underscores the increasing power of digital platforms in modern campaigns. His effective use of online engagement, where nearly 70% of his campaign funding came from internet donations, signals a shift in how political figures might approach future elections. This reliance on social media, viral content, and grassroots support highlights a new paradigm in political communication—one where traditional tools like TV spots and large-scale rallies may become secondary to digital outreach.

Looking ahead, Marçal has already hinted at his ambition for higher office, positioning himself as a potential candidate for the governorship of São Paulo or even the presidency in 2026. His combative rhetoric and promises to remain active in Brazilian politics for the next 12 years suggest that his influence is far from fading. Instead, Marçal's rise signals the continued fragmentation and evolution of Brazil's right-wing politics, with digital engagement and anti-establishment sentiments playing an increasingly central role.

Boulos' Battle

To win in the second round, Boulos needs to expand his appeal beyond the progressive left. While he enjoys strong support in São Paulo's more left-leaning areas, his main obstacle is convincing centrist and moderate

voters—many of whom backed Marçal or other centrist candidates in the first round. Polls suggest that Boulos faces significant rejection rates among older voters, men, and evangelical communities, all of which are critical demographics in São Paulo's relatively conservative voting base.

Boulos also faces criticism regarding his lack of executive experience, particularly from those who question his ability to manage a city as complex as São Paulo. His campaign has sought to counter this by emphasizing endorsements from seasoned political figures, such as former São Paulo Mayor Marta Suplicy. However, Boulos must balance his progressive platform with the need to attract centrists without alienating his core supporters.

Less than 25,000 votes separated Nunes and Boulos, according to the final vote tally.

Nunes' Dilemma

A potential vulnerability for Nunes lies in corruption allegations surrounding his administration, particularly regarding contracts for early childhood education and emergency social programs. Boulos has already signaled his intention to make these issues a focal point of his campaign, hoping to erode Nunes' credibility among moderate voters.

However, this strategy carries risks for Boulos. Voters could perceive these attacks as overly negative, or as a sign that Boulos is resorting to aggressive tactics rather than focusing on policy proposals. Such a perception could reinforce existing stereotypes of Boulos as a radical candidate, further complicating his efforts to broaden his appeal.

National Implications of São Paulo's Election

The 2024 São Paulo mayoral race extends far beyond local governance; it is a barometer for the national political climate. If Nunes secures victory, it will strengthen the conservative bloc in São Paulo, cementing Governor Tarcísio de Freitas' influence and bolstering his 2026 presidential prospects. A win for Boulos, on the other hand, would signal a shift toward the left in Brazil's urban centers, providing a much-needed boost to the progressive movement, which has struggled to expand beyond its traditional strongholds.

The stakes are high, and while the outcome remains uncertain, the 2024 São Paulo mayoral race is set to reverberate across Brazil's political landscape, offering a glimpse into the country's future direction. ♦



The Rise of PSD

The 2024 municipal elections marked a turning point in Brazilian politics, with the Social Democratic Party (PSD), led by Gilberto Kassab, emerging as a dominant force in São Paulo. This electoral triumph signals not only the party's growing influence in the state but also its strategic expansion nationwide. PSD's meteoric rise—from winning 67 mayoral seats in São Paulo in 2020 to 195 in 2024—illustrates a seismic shift in Brazil's political landscape.

PSD: Brazil's New Political Powerhouse

The PSD's success in São Paulo is a testament to its strategic vision. Founded by Gilberto Kassab in 2011, the party has positioned itself as a pragmatic, centrist force capable of building alliances across the ideological spectrum. This flexibility has been key to its success in São Paulo, a state long controlled by traditional heavyweights like the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) and the Workers' Party (PT). In the 2024 elections, PSD secured 195 out of São Paulo's 645 municipalities, solidifying its standing as the new political leader in the state.

The PSDB's dramatic collapse is one of the most noteworthy outcomes of this election cycle. Once the dominant political party in São Paulo, the PSDB saw its influence crumble, falling from 180 municipalities in 2020 to just 21 in 2024. This decline has been unfolding since the 2022 gubernatorial loss of Rodrigo Garcia, indicating a deeper crisis within the party. Seizing the opportunity, PSD not only attracted defectors from PSDB but also absorbed members from other smaller parties. By the end of 2023, over 300 mayors had switched their allegiance to PSD, setting the stage for the party's electoral triumph.

A key element of PSD's rise in São Paulo is its close relationship with Governor Tarcísio de Freitas, of the Republicanos party. Kassab's role as Freitas' Secretary of Government provided PSD with valuable political capital, extending its influence across the state's municipalities. This partnership gave the PSD access to critical state resources, helping it secure support in smaller towns that rely heavily on government aid. PSD's alliance with Tarcísio underscores its broader strategic approach. By remaining ideologically flexible, the party has formed partnerships with various political factions, allowing it to expand its influence across São Paulo's political spectrum. In the 2024 elections, PSD made significant gains in metropolitan regions like Ribeirão Preto and São José dos Campos, where it either won or is contesting second-round votes.

National Expansion and the Bolsonaro Factor

While PSD's dominance in São Paulo is significant, its national expansion is equally impressive. Across Brazil, the party won 877 mayoral seats, surpassing the long-dominant Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) to become the country's largest party in municipal leadership. PSD's success nationwide is not just a result of its alliances in São Paulo but stems from its ability to collaborate across the political spectrum, regardless of ideology. The party has aligned with left-leaning forces in Belo Horizonte against Bolsonaro's candidate, while also holding three ministries in Lula's government, demonstrating its capacity to work with both sides.

The Liberal Party (PL), Bolsonaro's political home, also performed well in the 2024 elections, winning 509 mayoral races across Brazil. In São Paulo alone, the PL gained control of 100 municipalities and is set to contest Guarulhos, one of the state's most populous cities, in a second-round vote. Although Bolsonaro remains ineligible for office until 2030, his political influence continues to shape key electoral regions, particularly in São Paulo's urban areas.

Kassab's Calculations and the 2026 Elections

The PSD's growth has outpaced both the PL and Republicanos, solidifying its position as Brazil's most powerful political force. With a substantial municipal base, the party is now poised to play a pivotal role in the 2026 presidential and gubernatorial elections. As part of this preparation, Gilberto Kassab has already begun subtly maneuvering within the political landscape, introducing potential names for the upcoming presidential race. One of these names is Paraná Governor Ratinho Jr., whose candidacy Kassab has strategically placed into public discourse. However, insiders suggest that this move is more tactical than it appears. Rather than signaling a firm endorsement of Ratinho Jr. as the PSD's definitive choice, Kassab seems to be testing the waters, gauging reactions and assessing the political landscape. By floating Ratinho's name, Kassab is likely exploring the party's options, without committing fully to backing him as the frontrunner. Known for his careful and calculated approach, Kassab often plays a long game, leaving his true intentions unclear.

This latest maneuver underscores the PSD's ambition to expand its influence, but it stops short of revealing Kassab's ultimate strategy for 2026. As he continues to keep his options open, the party's next steps remain subject to change, reflecting Kassab's preference for flexibility and potential alliances as the political environment evolves.

Challenges for the Left and Emerging Political Dynamics

While PSD's rise and the consolidation of right-wing forces in São Paulo are noteworthy, the left faces significant challenges, especially the Workers' Party (PT). PT's performance in São Paulo was dismal, securing only three mayoral victories in the first round of the 2024 elections. This continues the party's trend of declining influence in the state, where it once held considerable sway. PT failed to advance in key cities like Ribeirão Preto and Santos, underscoring its diminishing political presence. This reshuffling of political allegiances in São Paulo mirrors a broader trend in Brazilian politics,

where centrist and right-wing parties gain ground while traditional left-wing parties struggle. PSD's strategic positioning as a centrist party, with alliances ranging from Bolsonaro's political sphere to centrist government figures, gives it a unique advantage. The party's growing municipal footprint is a key player in shaping the political landscape leading into the 2026 elections.

Freitas & Kassab have formed a crucial partnership, blending their influence to shape São Paulo's political landscape and positioning themselves for key roles in Brazil's 2026 elections.



São Paulo Governor Tarcísio de Freitas and Gilberto Kassab
Mônica Andrade/Governo do Estado de SP

The Road Ahead: PSD's Role in Brazil's Future

In the long term, PSD's pragmatic and centrist approach could allow it to continue expanding its influence across Brazil. By forging alliances with both right-wing figures like Bolsonaro and left-leaning actors in the current government, PSD has positioned itself as a versatile political power broker. This strategy enables the party to adeptly navigate Brazil's increasingly fragmented political landscape, bridging both sides of the spectrum.

However, as Brazil's political dynamics evolve, PSD will face new challenges. Maintaining its centrist identity while navigating alliances with diverse political forces will require careful balancing. Additionally, its dominance may invite competition from both the left and right as the 2026 elections approach.

In conclusion, PSD's success in the 2024 elections marks a significant transformation in Brazil's political landscape. By leveraging strategic alliances and expanding its municipal base, the party is poised to play a central role in shaping Brazil's political future. As traditional parties like PSDB and PT continue to decline, PSD's rise could signal the beginning of a new era in Brazilian politics, one defined by centrist pragmatism and strategic adaptability. ♦



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