

Brazil

Pointers to the presidency

SAO PAULO

A good day for Sao Paulo's governor

FOR the past few weeks cars, motorbikes and even fishing boats across Brazil have been decorated with flags and stickers bearing the name of a candidate and the number of a party list. This visual bombardment has been backed up by jingles of maddening repetitiveness, blared out from lorries and cars, designed to hypnotise voters before they cast their ballot in the first round of municipal elections, which took place on October 5th.

As a display of the competitiveness of Brazil's democracy it was impressive. Even the cart-pullers in Sao Paulo, who weave in and out of traffic collecting cardboard and looking about as excluded from the country's current prosperity as it is possible to be, sometimes used their vehicles to advertise a candidate. There were the usual crop of local celebrities. In Goiania, a professional footballer who claims to have scored over 800 goals in his career was elected to the city council. In Salvador, a transsexual woman was elected and declared her intention to represent young people and artists.

While these elections were fought on local platforms, they also offered one or two pointers to the next presidential election, due in 2010. President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, now in his second term, is extraordinarily popular: he had a 78% approval rating in a recent poll. But the constitution bars three consecutive terms. The big question in Brazilian politics has become whether he will be able to transfer some of his electoral magic to a chosen successor.

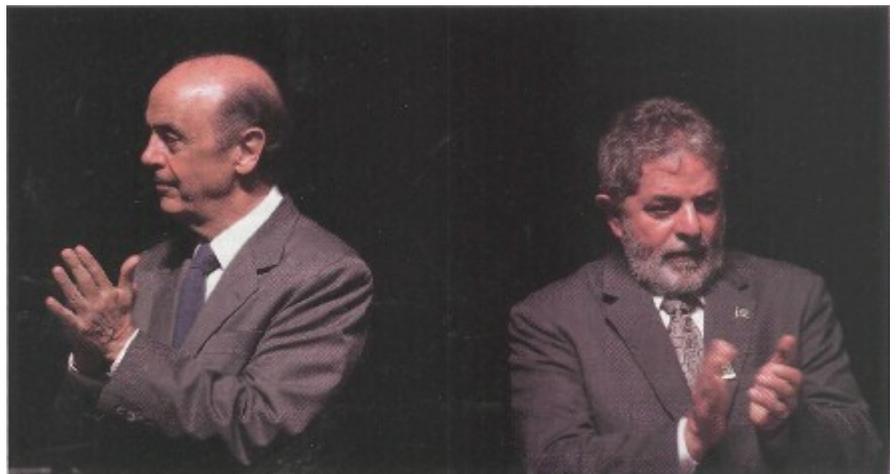
Lula's Workers' Party (FT) made modest gains in the mayoral elections and the cen-

tre-right opposition parties lost some ground. But the Lula factor did not sweep all before it. In fact, there was some evidence of the shortness of Brazilian political coattails. Of 15 mayors elected in state capitals in the first round of voting, only five were backed by the governor of the relevant state. A bigger advantage comes from incumbency. Of 20 incumbent mayors seeking a second term in state capitals, 13 won outright. All the rest made it through run-off ballots.

In 2010, however, there will be no incumbent. The main challengers to the FT candidate are likely to be Jose Serra, the governor of Sao Paulo state, and Aécio Neves, the governor of Minas Gerais. Both are from the centrist Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB). So the municipal polls were closely watched for evidence of their respective electoral pull.

Mr Serra won this contest. His quiet support helped his candidate, Gilberto Kassab, the incumbent mayor of Sao Paulo, to surprise pollsters by coming first, ahead both of a PSDB rival and of Marta Suplicy, a former PT mayor who was sometimes talked of as a possible Lula nominee for the presidency.

Mr Kassab now looks well placed to win a run-off ballot on October 26th. Mr Neves's candidate, by contrast, came second in Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais. Mr Serra, already the favourite to win his party's nomination, now looks even stronger. Mr Neves looks less likely to take him on directly. Mr Serra, who lost to Lula in the 2002 presidential vote, can now start working on his jingle. ■



Serra hopes for the next clap after Lula