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[André Freire, José Santana-Pereira](#)

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THE PORTUGUESE NATIONAL ELECTION OF 2015:

FROM AUSTERITY TO THE FALL OF THE PORTUGUESE «BERLIN WALL»

André Freire

CIES-IUL / Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

José Santana-Pereira

CIES-IUL / Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

INTRODUCTION

The Portuguese legislative election of October 4th 2015 is particularly relevant to students of European politics for two fundamental reasons. To start, it is the first national election since 2011 and, thus, like the Spanish and Irish elections of December 2015 and February 2016, the first after the end of the adjustment programme and several years of bailout-related austerity policies stemming from the Great Recession (2007-2008) and the sovereign debt crisis that followed. It provides a fundamental test of how voters judged this harsh exercise of austerity, who they blamed, and what vehicles of change they supported. In the Greek case, national elections after years of bailout-related austerity already took place four times (in 2012 and 2015, twice each year) and led to extreme changes in the Greek party system (Tsatsanis 2016). A similar trend, although less pronounced, is observed in the 2015 Spanish election results (Medina 2016). Second, although the Portuguese election does not show much innovation in terms of changes in the party system, it is characterized by novelty in terms of partisan cooperation: for the first time in 40 years, the centre-left Socialist Party (PS) and the radical left parties (BE, Left Bloc; PCP, Portuguese Communist Party; PEV, Green Party) reached an agreement aimed at the formation of a PS minority government without the presence or support of the right-wing incumbents. Therefore, although no new strong parliamentary parties emerged in October 2015, this election led to a shift in the traditional patterns of government formation and alternation. Moreover, for the first time since 1974, the list that received the most votes (the right-wing coalition PàF: PSD, Social Democratic Party and CDS-PP, Popular Party) is not in government.

This article aims to give a general overview of the 2015 national election in Portugal. Following a description of the context in which this election took place, we undertake an analysis of the electoral campaign. Then, we analyse the electoral results and account for major shifts in electoral volatility, disproportionality, and party system fragmentation. In the fourth section, we describe the process of government formation. The article ends with a few concluding notes on the nature of this election and its aftermath.

THE CONTEXT OF THE 2015 NATIONAL ELECTIONS

In the spring of 2011, following the rejection of a fourth austerity package and the prime minister's resignation, the upward pressure on Portuguese interest rates forced the outgoing PS government to request external assistance (Moury and Freire 2013). The PS lost the 2011 early legislative elections, mainly due to the popular rejection of the prime minister, negative assessments of the incumbent's management of portfolios that most concern the electorate and the harmful effects of its policies (Magalhães 2014). Moreover, despite the strong neoliberal inflection of the centre-right PSD in terms of policies that are unfavourable to the state and favourable to the market – contrary to the preferences of the majority of the voters, even within the right's constituency (Freire, Tsatsanis and Lima 2016) – and the PS's attempt to mobilise the electorate in defence of the Welfare State, the electorate voted largely as a consequence of the incumbent's performance (Magalhães 2014; Freire, Tsatsanis and Lima 2016).

During the troika's financial bailout years, the Portuguese democracy suffered a crisis of legitimacy due to four different reasons (Freire 2016). First, the government went well beyond the political mandate it received from the voters in 2011, as well as from the troika's original programme (which also framed the electorate's choices), in addition to governing at the limits of the constitution. This generated a certain delegitimation of democracy and erosion in institutional trust. Second, there has been an enormous imbalance in the sacrifices required of citizens and capital (large corporations, banks, etc.) – much more from the former than the latter – which also led to regime delegitimation and erosion in institutional trust. Third, delegitimation was also a consequence of the negative socioeconomic results (public deficit, public debt, unemployment rate growth and GDP decline).

Fourth, an additional factor behind the Portuguese dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and less enthusiastic support of the democratic regime was the opposition's inability to come up with alternatives, largely because the PS represented a weak opposition to the right-wing government (especially until late 2012) and the left-wing parties seemed unable to cooperate in order to create a governmental alternative (Freire 2016). This underscored a long-term mismatch between the preferences of left-wing voters (overwhelmingly in favour of an understanding between left-wing parties leading to a government alternative) and elites (unable to cooperate) (March and Freire 2012; Freire 2016). Of course, in Portugal, an erosion in democratic support due to negative political and economic management is not new or specific of the post-sovereign debt crisis period (Sousa, Magalhães and Amaral 2014). However, there were specific elements (related to austerity policies and their enforcement during the troika era and the patterns of opposition until the 2015 national elections) in the erosion of democratic support between 2011 and 2015 (Freire 2016).

THE CAMPAIGN

Unlike other recent legislative elections in Southern Europe, the 2015 election was not a competition between old and new players. On the one hand, none of the five political forces with parliamentary representation anticipated a complete disaster or an exponential growth in terms of votes. The incumbents PSD and CDS-PP formed a pre-election coalition, *Portugal à Frente* (Portugal Ahead)¹, which they announced on April 25th 2015. In the following months, the polls estimated a vote share of around 35 % for the coalition, only slightly below the values achieved by the PS (37-38 %).² The election therefore seemed to be a close race between the two mainstays of the Portuguese party system, while both the communist/green coalition (CDU: PCP and PEV) and the BE were expected to secure results that were not much different from those achieved in 2011: around 9 to 10 and 4 to 5 per cent, respectively.

On the other hand, there were a few parties running in legislative elections for the first time, of which *Livre/Tempo de Avançar* (Free/Time to Move Forward), which results from a scission within the BE, and PDR (Democratic Republican Party), a personalistic centrist anti-establishment party, are the most relevant. Both were expected to elect MPs, based on their opinion poll results (around 2-3 % of votes) and 2014 European election results (Freire and Santana-Pereira 2015), but neither seemed to constitute a threat to the traditional parties in the Portuguese landscape.

In short, nothing very new under the Portuguese sun. The only exciting feature of this race was the expected tie between the two major lists at the polls, with both having very low odds of securing a majority of seats in parliament. This led the political strategy of the main parties/lists and the different post-election scenarios to be among the main issues in the public arena during the months preceding the election, along with the spectre of the Greek referendum and election, the Syrian refugee crisis, the Sócrates affair, and the debate over the candidates to the presidential seat that would be left vacant in 2016 (Lisi and Fernandes 2015).

The recently appointed PS leader António Costa was facing a tough situation. Although asking for an absolute majority during the campaign, he had to address several other post-electoral scenarios, namely the possibility of coalescing (or supporting) the right-wing parties and risk *pasokization* (i.e. a virtual disappearance in electoral terms due to the implementation and/or support of austerity measures) or a seemingly unlikely scenario in which, for the first time in the history of the Portuguese democracy, an understanding with the leftwing forces CDU and BE would be reached. This second scenario puts the PS under the risk of *syrization*, i.e. being depicted as the Portuguese version

1. Except for Madeira and Azores, where they led separate campaigns.

2. All the opinion poll data mentioned in this article is retrieved from the POPSTAR website (www.popstar.pt), which offers estimated vote shares for the main political parties (plus new and seemingly relevant political forces) between 2011 and the current date, based on polls published by the media, with confidence intervals.

of the incumbent radical left coalition in Greece (which was not congruent with its ideological background, and, most of all, with its track record of Euro enthusiasm), an idea that Costa rejected several times throughout the campaign. Costa also had to face other difficulties, such as the fact that the former PS leader and prime-minister José Sócrates, his personal friend, was being held under custody on the basis of corruption charges, or a highly mediated *faux pas* related to the campaign outdoor placards. At the same time, the radical left parties were ambivalent (Lisi and Fernandes 2015), sending mixed signals about their willingness to reach an understanding with the centre-left party. The communists were frequently very harsh towards the socialists during their campaign activities. Nevertheless, the campaign ended with the radical left parties expressing their availability to reach an understanding with the PS.

In terms of policy proposals, the main cleavage was found to be between PàF and the radical left. The right-wing coalition stressed the importance of continuing the good work carried out in the previous four years, whose results would be jeopardized if the PS were returned to power. The institution of a ceiling on public debt through a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution and a social security reform negotiated with other parties were two of their most important proposals (Lisi and Fernandes 2015). The PàF stressed the success of the adjustment programme and accused the Socialist manifesto of being too abstract. The keyword was stability, and performance and optimism were the leitmotifs of their campaign strategy.

On the other hand, both BE and CDU accused the incumbents, stressing that their austerity-focussed government record had left deep scars in Portuguese society. Austerity was therefore to be abandoned, sovereign debt renegotiated, and workers' rights restored. The privatization of the Portuguese airline company TAP, promoted by the right-wing government, should also be revoked.

In turn, the PS proposed an alternative to austerity, but one not as radical as the parties to its left. Its programme was composed of three pillars: increasing families' disposable income, strengthening enterprise funding, and promoting employment. Divided between the need of being an alternative to the incumbents and of signalling willingness to respect Portugal's commitments to the foreign institutions behind the adjustment programme, the PS adopted a strategy of defending a higher speed of abandonment of austerity measures vis-à-vis what the PàF proposed (Lisi and Fernandes 2015). Also, the PS was less prone to criticize the harmful effect of the financial adjustment programme than the radical left (while the PàF completely disagreed that it had harmed the country), and to defend the proposition that the sovereign debt should be restructured: while the incumbents rejected and the radical left fully supported this measure, the PS only accepted debt restructuring if there was a European consensus on it (Lobo, Santana-Pereira and Sanches 2015).

While the official campaign did not start before the fourth week of September, the political *rentrée* of early September was very lively, with the echoes of the Greek electoral campaign and the transference of José Sócrates from jail to house arrest hitting the headlines. The main TV broadcasters produced a

series of political interviews and debates with the leaders of the main political parties. Amongst the several dyadic debates, three were of paramount importance: the debate between the prime-minister Passos Coelho and the Socialist leader on September 9th – the most watched debate ever in democratic Portugal (Lisi and Fernandes 2015) – which was very focused on the past, namely on who to blame for the crisis and the bailout, and which Costa is believed to have won; a second Passos/Costa debate (September 17th), this time with a stronger focus on the future and a more proactive incumbent, who is believed to have had the best performance; and, lastly, a debate between Costa and Catarina Martins (the BE leader), on September 14th, in which she presented the conditions under which her party would be willing to support a minority PS cabinet after the election.

The media's campaign coverage was now regulated by a new law, passed on July 23rd. Journals and broadcasters were no longer committed to an equal treatment of parties and candidates but more generally to the principles of balance, representativeness, and equity, according to the parties' and candidates' editorial relevance and the medium's own practical constraints. The new law was therefore bound to favour a considerable focus on the main political parties and lead to a virtual media invisibility of small and/or new contestants. While the Portuguese Media Regulatory Agency still has not published its 2015 legislative election report, with data on how different parties were treated by newspapers and television channels during the campaign, we have reasons to believe that this was indeed the case.

During the month of September, several shifts in terms of voting intentions can be observed. The incumbents were able to increase their expected vote share from 35% to 38%, therefore surpassing the Socialists, who fell from 38% to 34%. While PS and PàF were in a tie for most of 2015, this tie is broken in the last week of campaign, when it becomes clear that the incumbents would emerge as the political force with the most votes. Also, from mid-September onwards, voting intentions for the communists/greens suffered a small decrease (from almost 10 to 9), while the BE significantly increased its vote shares in the polls (from less than 5 to almost 7) – a result that may be due to a considerable improvement in the way its leader, Catarina Martins, was assessed by the public opinion.

ELECTION RESULTS

The October 4th 2015 national election results were a victory for the right-wing coalition PàF, although only a plurality of votes and seats was achieved: 38.6% and 46.5%, respectively (Table 1). The right lost around 700.000 votes, i.e., around 12 percentage points, and 25 seats with respect to 2011. In turn, the PS came in second: 32.3% of the votes and 37.4% of the seats. The totals for the left (BE, PCP-PEV, PS) summed up absolute majorities at both the electoral (50.8%) and the parliamentary (53.1%) levels.

The fact that the incumbent coalition won the election after four years of harsh and asymmetrical austerity may be explained by a decrease in the

severity of austerity policies, at least since 2014, and the fact that the majority of the electorate may still blame PS for having created the conditions for the 2011 bailout request, as they did in 2011 (Magalhães 2015). However, the incumbents lost their parliamentary majority and became dependent on the PS support to form a minority government.

Table 1 Elections to the Portuguese National Parliament: 2015, 2011, and 2009 official results

Parties	2015			2011			2009		
	Seats	%	Votes	Seats	%	Votes	Seats	%	Votes
PàF	107	46.5	38.56	-	-	50.4	-	-	39.5
PSD	89	39.0	32.0	108	46.9	38.7	81	35.2	29.1
PS	86	37.4	32.3	74	32.2	28.1	97	42.2	36.6
BE	19	8.3	10.2	8	3.5	5.2	16	6.9	9.8
CDS-PP	18	7.8	6.56	24	10.4	11.7	21	9.1	10.4
PCP/PEV	17	7.4	8.25	16	6.9	7.9	15	6.5	7.7
PAN	1	0.43	1.39	-	-	-	-	-	-
Others	0	0.0	5.16	0	0.0	4.4	0	0.0	3.1
Invalid and blank votes			4.14	-	-	4.0	-	-	3.1
Total	230	100	100	-	-	100	230	100	100
Turnout			56.1			58.0	-	-	60.5

Sources: data elaborated by the authors from the official results published in www.cne.pt

Notes:

1st) In Portuguese elections invalid and blank votes are counted as a percentage of the total vote;

2nd) PàF – Pre-electoral coalition between the PSD and CDS-PP (except in Azores and Madeira, where they ran separately: votes are summed anyway);

3rd) PàF total votes (38.56) were disaggregated using the proportion of the coalition's seats (107) each party has (PSD: 0.83; CDS-PP: 0.17) as a multiplier. PàF, i.e. PSD and CDS-PP only ran together in 2015, but for the sake of comparing the electoral strength of the right across elections we also calculate aggregate vote shares for the right for 2011 and 2009. PàF reads as «Portugal à Frente» which means «Portugal ahead»

As in previous presidential (2011), local (2013) and European elections (2014), the 2015 national elections were marked by a considerable amount of electoral apathy (increasing vis-à-vis 2011) as well as significant number of null and blank votes (Freire 2016). It seems that voters decided either to exit the electoral game or to protest through null and blank votes; in the presidential, local and European elections they also did that but they also voted for non-partisan candidates/lists (presidential and local elections) or new parties (European elections) to a greater extent than in 2015.

Three additional features of this election are worth mentioning. First, although volatility was relatively high (13.8 of total volatility; 11.8 of inter-bloc volatility), it was well below the highest levels observed in past elections (see Freire 2016, for data between 1975 and 2015). Second, in 2015, the joint vote for the two major parties (64.3%) was the lowest since 1987 (and closer to the figures observed during the «consensual period» of 1975-1987), while the levels of party system fragmentation (ENEP: 4.6; ENPP: 3.3) were the highest since 1987. Third, the highest level of disproportionality ever was also registered (7.6), showing that a considerable number of parties were competing but had no access to parliament, which may be partly due to mass media and electoral system biases.

GOVERNMENT FORMATION

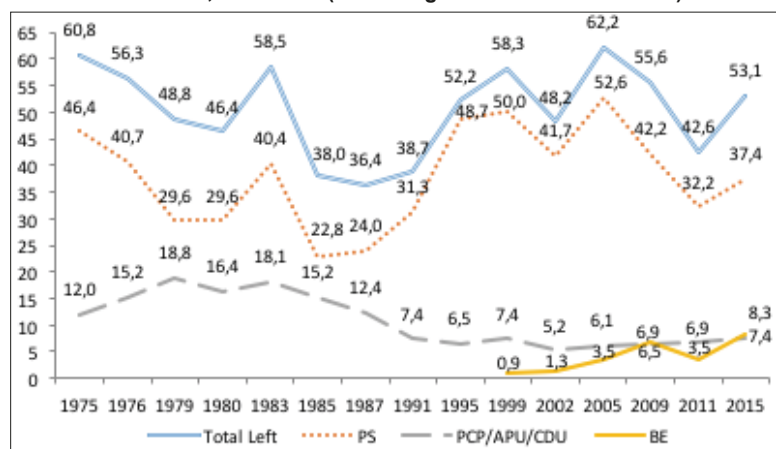
One of the most persistent traits of Portuguese politics is that only the right has been able to form coalitions and produce stable multiparty executives (March and Freire 2012; Freire 2016). However, the harshness of the austerity policies, the systematic violation of several election promises by the incumbent, and the risk of *pasokization* of the PS seemed to have created a potential to overturn this situation and motivate the left-wing parties to reach an understanding (Freire, Tsatsanis and Lima 2016).

Table 2 Portuguese attitudes towards a left-wing government, 2015, by party sympathy (% within each group)

'Imagine that tomorrow Legislative Elections would be held and that the PS would win without absolute majority. Which one of the following options would you consider to be better for the country (choose only one option)? It would be better for the country that the PS would...'					
	CDU/PCP	BE	PS	PSD	CDS-PP
Rule in minority	11.1	12.8	21.1	19.3	11.9
Coalesce with the radical left	69.1	66.7	41.8	7.5	7.2
Coalesce with the right	2.5	5.2	21.6	54.1	57.2
Coalesce with all the parties	17.3	15.4	15.4	19.3	23.8
N	81	39	227	161	42

Source: Survey of a representative sample of the adult Portuguese population living in the mainland, N = 1205 (1st Wave, 2014, and 2nd Wave, 2015) fielded between June 2015, 2nd Wave (see Belchior and Correia 2015).

Figure 1 National Parliamentary Performance of the Left Parties – Legislative Elections, 1975-2015 (Percentage of seats in Parliament)



Source: data elaborated by the authors on the basis of the official results published by CNE (National Electoral Commission) at www.cne.pt

Note: total left also includes UDP in the 1970s and 1980s.

Following the rejection of right-wing minority coalition government's programme in parliament in early November, the President had no alternative but to nominate as prime-minister António Costa, leader of PS, a party that,

although coming second in the election, would be able to receive a wider support in Parliament. In fact, a PS minority government gathered the support of the radical left parties (BE, PCP, PEV) after three separate bilateral agreements were signed. This is an absolute novelty in the Portuguese scenario, an event of major significance: it represents a sort of fall of the Berlin Wall in Portugal, 26 years after the Berlin events. The question is why only now, since in the recent past the parliamentary centre-left plus radical left majorities, quite common in the Portuguese case (Figure 1), did not turn into governmental majorities because the PS preferred to coalesce with the right (e.g. 1983) or govern with its occasional support (e.g. 1995, 1999, 2009). We believe that there are five major explanatory factors. First, there was a radical move to the right by the incumbent parties during the troika years, which made agreements between the centre-left and the centre-right less likely (Freire, Tsatsanis and Lima 2016). Second, the harshness of the austerity measures implemented by the right-wing parties, which went beyond the Troika requirements (deeper cuts in salaries, pensions, public employment, the welfare state, and more extensive privatizations) violated the electoral mandate the right-wing parties received in 2011. This did not favour an agreement between the right and the Socialists, since in the 2011 electoral campaign the PS said that it would not support any radical changes beyond the Troika's 2011 requirements and, during the 2011-2015 term, it expressed its disagreement with the harshness of the austerity measures implemented by the PSD and CDS-PP. Third, António Costa knew that if he did not become prime-minister of a left-wing government and the PS chose to support a right-wing government, his leadership would be endangered since other PS top officials would be more suitable for the role under those circumstances. Fourth, due to reasons related to the specific electoral schedules in 2015/2016, the President was not constitutionally allowed to dissolve the parliament: thus, although the President was not in favour of a leftwing government, he had no real alternative but to accept a minority PS government with the support of the radical left; these constraints also favoured an understanding within the left. Fifth, this left-wing governmental solution was a way to put the left wing party elites in tune with the left-wing voters' preferences in terms of cooperation and government formation (Table 2; March and Freire 2012; Freire 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

The 2015 national election introduced major changes in Portuguese politics. The current minority PS government supported by the radical left (BE, PCP and PEV) in parliament marks a major change in the left-wing parties' ability and willingness to cooperate. Thus, although we did not witness innovation in terms of new social movements generating successful new parties (like in Spain, Greece or Italy), the 2015 election results brought about an important innovation with respect to the previous 42 years of Portuguese democracy. Since 1989, the integration of the radical left in national governments had occurred in many West European countries (March and Freire

2012), but not in Portugal; therefore, the current government arrangements represents a collapse of the Berlin Wall in the country. If this governmental solution is successful and proves able to last a full term, it will inaugurate a new era in Portuguese politics, marked by more inclusiveness and responsibility and by a higher level of quality in terms of political representation (due to a better match between left wing voters' and elites' preferences concerning government solutions), which may foster higher levels of satisfaction with democracy amongst those who were unhappy with the lack of cooperation among left-wing parties. It may even lead to changes in Southern Europe in particular, and in Europe in general.

In short, Portuguese civil society was not able to innovate by means of new parties but the (old) political system was able to accommodate some of the new demands (as argued previously by Fernandes 2015, in a different but parallel context). What remains to be seen is this new government and majority's capacity to survive and implement its moderate left-wing programme in the adverse conditions of globalization and Europeanization. For the sake of democracy, the stakes are high.

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