

Portuguese Elections: What Next After Years of Left-Wing Government?

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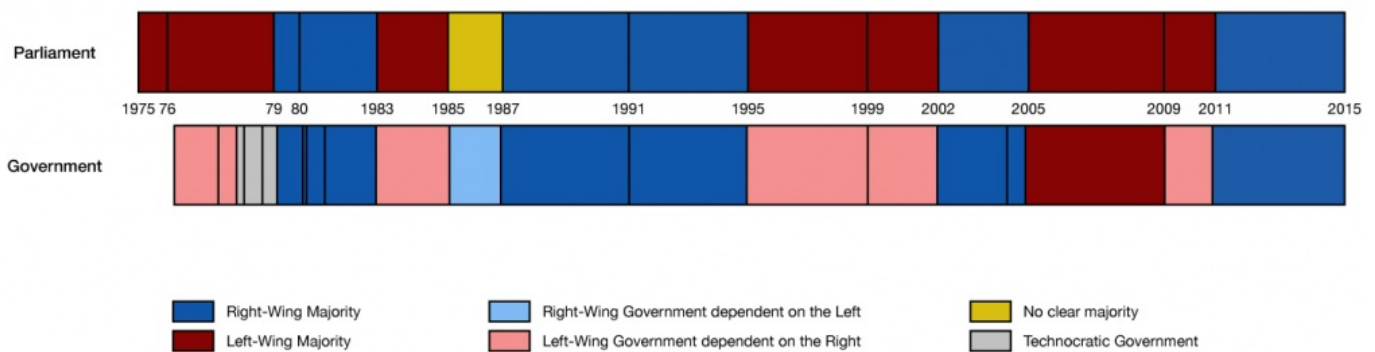
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Portugal heads to the polls in a week. For years an outpost for successful progressive government in the European Union, Portugal's Socialist-led government lost its majority in late 2021. What can we expect from the snap elections? What place will Portugal's green political forces have in shaping the country's future?

Portugal is commonly thought to be a left-wing country. There are good historical, political, and sociological grounds for this assumption. In 1974, a left-wing revolution overthrew a fascist and colonialist empire that had lasted nearly half a century. Leftist principles shaped the party system that emerged following the revolution and their influence can still be seen today. The largest centre-right party and member of the European People's Party is still known as the Social Democratic Party and uses orange as its primary colour. Its traditional right-wing frenemy was known until the 1990s as the Democratic and Social Centre. Unique among Western liberal democracies, Portugal's constitution even calls for the establishment of a "path towards a socialist society".

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Left vs Right in Parliament and Government (1975-2015)



A graphic displaying the political position of different Portuguese governments from 1975 to 2015.

Yet these left-wing roots have not always produced governments on that side of the political spectrum. Since its return to democracy, Portugal has had 21 years of right-wing government, 11 years of centre-left governments supported by the Right, and only 5 years (2005 to 2009) of a single-party centre-left government.

Everything changed in 2015. After a long social and economic crisis and six years of pro-austerity right-wing rule, the Portuguese Left won a majority in parliament. Burying their differences, they installed one of the most stable governments in the country's short democratic history. Despite (or perhaps because of) its plurality, the alliance of three parties – the centre-left Socialist Party, the radical Left Bloc, and the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party together with its sister-party The Greens – proved remarkably solid.

From 2015 to 2019, the Portuguese Left used their majority to restore social rights that had been stripped away under the guise of austerity, raise wages, and combat precariousness in the labour market. Consequently, Portugal experienced its lowest budget deficit as well as the highest economic growth since it joined the Eurozone. The government also managed to slow the massive wave of emigration of more than half a million Portuguese. The fragility of the coalition gave parliament prominence, which arguably raised the standards of this relatively young democracy.

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In the 2019 elections, public support for this political solution was clear. The ruling Socialist Party increased its vote share by 4 percentage points, while the Left Bloc maintained its historically high 10 per cent vote share. The Communist Party lost a quarter of its voters, partly due to a demographic decline in its strongholds. Having entered parliament in 2011 and joined a party system that had been mostly unchanged since 1975, the People, Animals, Nature party (PAN) also quadrupled its representation in 2019.

While previously, the Socialists had required the agreement of both the Left Bloc and the Communist Party to pass legislation.

After the 2019 elections, the support of only one of those parties was necessary. A Socialist proposal could be accepted even without either's approval, provided the other parties abstained.

It was only a matter of time before the political solution through which the Left had ruled since 2015 crumbled. In 2020, the Socialist Party and the Left Bloc voted in favour of the proposed budget and the Communists and PAN abstained. Later that year, the revision of the budget due to the pandemic was opposed by the Communists, while the 2021 budget lacked support from the Left Bloc. In 2022, the budget was rejected altogether, after PAN abstained and all other parties voted against it.

Despite having the largest left-wing majority in any European parliament, the Portuguese Left was unable to form a stable government and new elections were called. The political games of the Left parties thus brought a successful governing model to an end.

The campaign has seen politicians talk more about themselves rather than how to build a better country in the post-pandemic world.

The three Greens

Portugal has the unique distinction of having its three green parties, which are not divided by personal differences but rather their diverse political histories and worldviews.



(Right to left) The logos of Ecologist Party "The Greens", LIVRE and People, Animals and Nature Party

The oldest of these actors is the Ecologist Party "The Greens" (PEV), founded in 1982 under the influence of the Communist Party. PEV works closely with the Communist Party and has run alongside them in every election at every level of government since its inception. While their cooperation is very close, and their policies similar in most areas, PEV tends to differ from the Communists on progressive and cosmopolitan topics, with the Communists taking more conservative positions. Bullfighting is one such exception. A Portuguese tradition in rural areas where the Communists are popular, PEV prefers to distance itself from the practice. The party has always had two members of parliament, giving them a Green parliamentary group. This election might prove difficult for the Greens and both MPs risk losing their seats.

People, Animals, and Nature party is currently the strongest green political force. Founded in the early 2000s as an animal rights party, it was modelled after the Dutch and German parties for the animals and led by the president of Portugal's Buddhist Union. It eventually shed its animalist and religious elements and evolved into a full-fledged centrist green party. The party entered parliament in 2015. In 2019, it gained four MPs and one member of the European Parliament. Since then, it has experienced deep challenges including a change in leadership, defections of one of its MPs and its sole MEP, and strong attacks from the agricultural lobby.

Finally, LIVRE (which means free but stands for Freedom, Left, Europe, Ecology) was created in 2014 with the goal of establishing an independent green-left party in the image of the European Greens. LIVRE elected one MP in 2019, but only four months later it dismissed its sole lawmaker due to a lack of trust between her and the party. The dispute was broadly seen as the end of the party. Nonetheless, the pre-election debates established Rui Tavares, the party's lead candidate and former MEP, as a force to be reckoned with, particularly after receiving praise from across the political spectrum in a debate with the far-right candidate.

In most nations, these three threads of green politics would coexist, somewhat peacefully, in a single party. But this has not yet happened in Portugal.

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political histories and worldviews.

While PEV will strive to keep its two MPs, its future is inextricably linked to that of the Communist Party. Unlike most of its European counterparts, the Portuguese Communist Party has been a driving force for progress and a crucial player in securing democracy in the country. Its sustained strength at the local level and its action at the national level have upheld social and economic rights. However, it has failed to rejuvenate its electorate. This election could determine its future.

PAN and LIVRE, on the other hand, have much in common. Both aim to elect MPs in Lisbon, Porto, and Setúbal, and will most likely be competing for those seats. Despite their distinct political backgrounds, their current election campaigns converge on topics: climate action, universal basic income trials, working time reduction, energy efficiency, and specific ongoing environmental issues including the construction of a new airport in Lisbon and the development of lithium mining. Both aim to be strong enough to join the ruling majority.

In future, we might look back at the 2022 elections as a watershed point in the emergence of a strong and independent green voice in Portugal. Considering that green parties have developed productively across Europe as alliances of different political origins, there is no reason to believe this cannot happen in Portugal.

After the elections

With Covid-19 numbers skyrocketing across the country, the campaign has moved from the streets to TV and social media, with a frustrating fixation on possible governing coalitions. The campaign has seen politicians talk more about themselves rather than how to build a better country in the post-pandemic world.

The big stories of next week's election could be the growth of new actors on the Right, particularly Iniciativa Liberal (Liberal Initiative) and the far-right Chega. Though possible, a right-wing win remains unlikely. Even if the main centre-right party stages an upset and wins the election, it will struggle to find a majority that excludes the far-right Chega. If this occurs, Portugal, which was without a parliamentary far-right until 2019, may find itself in the all-too-familiar predicament of being forced into disliked political solutions (such as a grand coalition) to maintain a cordon sanitaire. Alternatively, we could watch the centre-right yield to anti-democratic forces once again.

Portugal seems headed for another period of political turmoil.

The most likely scenario is that the centre-left Socialist Party will again win the elections. The country's plural Left political majority that ruled the country from 2015 to 2019 was well liked and gathered social approval. Yet its main actors now distrust each other so a repeat seems unlikely. The Socialists have two potential alternatives. If they have significant electoral strength, newer actors such as Green parties PAN and LIVRE could join a new governing majority. Otherwise, the centre-left Socialists could once again look to their right for support in approving budgets and lead a minority government.

In any event, Portugal seems headed for another period of political turmoil. It all might just end when António Costa tries his move to Brussels in 2024. It would not be a first. José Manuel Durão Barroso left his post of Prime Minister in 2004 to lead the European Commission. António Costa makes no secret of his wish to move to a European job, adding that he was offered the chance to replace Donald Tusk as President of the European Council in 2019.



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