

An unexpected Socialist majority: the 2022 Portuguese general elections

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Abstract

The Portuguese elections of early 2022 took place during the most severe wave of COVID-19 infections in Portugal. Nevertheless, the pandemic was not the most important issue in the campaign. Although opinion polls forecast a narrow election, the Socialists gained their second absolute majority in history. The electoral results marked a breakthrough for the radical right and Liberals. Every other traditional party had its worst electoral night in democratic history. The Christian Democrats and the Greens ended up exiting the parliament. The 2022 general elections saw the Socialists rise to dominance and the end of the Portuguese exceptionalism in keeping the radical right at arm's length.

Keywords: Elections; COVID-19; contract parliamentarism; radical right; Portugal

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Background to the election

The Socialist Party’s (PS) strong leanings to the left (Fernandes, 2016; De Giorgi and Cancela, 2021) came to an end when the radical left coalesced with right-wing parties to reject the State Budget on 27 October 2021, causing the termination of the government.¹ President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa called early elections for 30 January 2022. The coalition between the Left Bloc (BE), the Communists (PCP) and the Greens (PEV) — Costa’s former allies in the previous government — with right-leaning parties motivated a convoluted public debate. Unlike his first term in office (2015–2019), during which he enjoyed stable support in the legislature thanks to a contract parliamentarism arrangement — that is, a formally minority government whose relationships with its support parties (BE, PCP and PEV, in this case) ‘are so institutionalised that [it] come[s] close to being [a] majority government’ (Bale and Bergman, 2006: 422) —, Costa’s second government faced political instability, adding further evidence to the belief that minority governments tend to have a shorter duration in power (Krauss and Thürk, 2022).

Costa’s motivations in refusing a renewal of contract parliamentarism (*geringonça*) are puzzling. First, survey data shows that citizens liked *geringonça*. Most voters considered that left-wing parties did a good job in the 2015 contract parliamentarism and supported its renewal in 2019.² Second, after the 2019 elections, the Left Bloc showed a strong willingness to embark on a new government agreement. Third, unlike 2015, when Costa needed the Communists’ and the Left Bloc’s support, in 2019, the latter was sufficient to form a majority government. Fourth, in 2019, for the first time in democratic history, Portugal witnessed the emergence of the radical right, which should have further incentivized the Socialists to pursue political stability to tame the growth of illiberal parties.

Despite all these incentives, Costa chose not to have a new arrangement with the left, as it became clear that the Socialists would have sufficient political clout to govern alone and would face fewer constraints under President Marcelo than his predecessor, Cavaco

Silva. Thus, the Socialists managed to recalibrate their policy position to the centre-left. Importantly, Costa still favoured the left for legislative coalitions and maintained the leftist rhetoric to avoid being accused of flip-flopping (Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009).

In their public statements, political parties did not admit to wanting early elections. However, they all seemed to have something to gain. The Socialists were betting on having an absolute majority. The radical left wanted to weaken Costa's position and force him back to a contract parliamentarism arrangement. The rightist parties saw the opportunity to achieve office shortly before Portugal was to receive European recovery funds to help curb the pandemic, taking advantage of the disagreement within the left and betting on public fatigue over the economic slump caused by the pandemic. After several years of economic growth, economic activity declined by 7.6 per cent in 2020.³ Unemployment grew to 7.2 per cent, the deficit fell from a 0.1 surplus in 2019 to a 5.7 per cent negative in 2020, and GDP per capita reached negative levels (-8.6 per cent) in 2020, the first time since the financial crisis.

The rightist parties were expecting voters to punish Costa for unprecedented cuts in public investment during his term in office. By contrast, the government hoped to be rewarded for managing the pandemic. In April 2021, a polling institute showed that most voters were positive about Costa's response to COVID-19.⁴ Furthermore, the World Health Organisation praised Portugal for being one of the most highly vaccinated countries globally. Although almost a third of citizens have had their income decreased since the pandemic, they believed that massive number of COVID cases and deaths during the third wave in January 2021 were not due to the government's erroneous decisions but rather the lack of care taken by people. While COVID-19 was supposed to be at the core of campaign agendas and debates, surprisingly, political parties chose not to politicise it. The following section deals with how parties and candidates addressed the campaign.

Electoral campaign in times of COVID-19

These were the first general elections in Portugal since the beginning of the pandemic.⁵ The campaign took place amid the fifth and most severe wave of infections while voters were awaiting vaccine booster jabs. Since the rejection of the State Budget, infections had increased, peaking at 65,706 new daily cases on 27 January. The government decided on a ‘containment’ during Christmas and New Year that lasted until 10 January. Candidates and parties were thus confronted with a semi-paralysed country until five days before the start of the official campaign.

Table 1 suggests that COVID-19 affected party investments. Campaign budgets shrank by almost 243,000 euros compared to the 2019 elections. The radical left and the Christian Democrats (CDS-PP) cut their investment in the 2022 campaign by 42.6 per cent. The Socialists and the Social Democrats (PSD) increased their campaign spending marginally compared with previous elections. By contrast, emerging parties boosted their budgets by 811,000 euros thanks to state subsidies. A close inspection shows that investment decreased in the specific categories related to gatherings, rallies, and street campaigning (data not shown).

In this context, television and digital tools were essential for parties to communicate with citizens. Thirty-two television debates took place between 2 and 20 January. The Communists and the Greens, which traditionally formed an electoral coalition (CDU), refused to participate in one-on-one debates with candidates other than António Costa and Rui Rio (PS and PSD, respectively). They considered that television channels were not treating the parties fairly, insofar as PS and PSD enjoyed prime time in the main generalist TV channels while other candidates were largely limited to cable networks. However, Jerónimo de Sousa only debated with Costa, as he had urgent vascular surgery on 12 January that kept him away from the campaign for ten days — and was thus substituted by the Communist parliamentary leader, João Oliveira.

Table 1: Campaign budgets: party investment in the 2022 and 2019 elections (000 €).

	2022	2019	Change (2022-2019)
PS	2 450	2 407	43
PSD	2 055	2 050	5
BE	610	984	-374
PCP-PEV	695	1 200	-505
CDS-PP	350	700	-350
PAN	228	139	89
CH	500	150	350
IL	385	50	335
L	48	11	37
Other parties	640	514	126
Total	7 961	8 204	-243

Source: ECFP – Political Accounts and Financing Entity (http://www.tribunalconstitucional.pt/tc/contas_eleicoes-ar.html#1103).

Notes: PSD and CDS-PP ran together in Madeira’s electoral circle, as well as PSD, CDS-PP, and PPM (monarchists) in the Azores region. For statistical purposes, given that the MPs elected from these coalitions are all from PSD, the table shows the two coalitions’ budgets in Madeira and Azores as pertaining only to PSD. ‘Others’ include every other party that ran in the election (apart from Aliança, given that the party did not deliver the budget to ECFP).

The debate audiences reflect the competitive nature of the elections: over 20 million viewers in total, compared to less than 9 million in 2019.⁶ The debates with Costa or Rio attracted the most attention. The radical right candidate, André Ventura, was also a focus of interest. Moreover, data from parties using social media shows that right-wing parties performed better across such networks: the Social Democrats, the Liberals and the radical right enjoyed the best ratio between the number of followers, content and interactions. Together with the Left Bloc, they got the most interactions on social media.⁷

Eurobarometer data from September 2021 shows that citizens considered health the most critical issue in Portugal in line with the pandemic crisis.⁸ Interestingly, health did not gain much traction in the campaign despite its salience in the electorate. Candidates and parties barely discussed the government’s response to COVID-19. Policy proposals on the pandemic were restricted to mental health. Most proposals on health moved beyond COVID-19, focusing instead on the general quality of public services: delays in health

appointments; lack of family doctors; the low wages of health professionals; and increasing non-COVID-19 deaths. The opposition chose not to politicise COVID-19 matters due to Costa's perceived good handling of the crisis.

COVID-19 did not dominate the campaign as might be expected, given the importance of the pandemic in shaping political and social life since early 2020. Rather, the radical right party (Chega) set the agenda, forcing political parties to state their positions on a variety of topics that had not been politicised in Portugal thus far. Ventura emphasised several issues such as racism, the chemical castration of paedophiles, life sentences, and cuts in social benefits. The left criticised the PSD's normalisation of Chega, and Costa accused Rio of 'transacting humanist values' for 'electoral necessity'.

The most discussed issues were party strategies and government stability: specifically, coalitions and parliamentary agreements, since it was unlikely that any party would obtain an absolute majority. Both the Left Bloc and the Communists were willing to renew the contract parliamentarism arrangement that supported Costa's first government.⁹ Costa replied that the radical left's rejection of the State Budget was 'unforgivable'; hence, it was impossible to trust them again.¹⁰ The Socialists were betting on an absolute majority or a coalition with PAN (environmentalist-animalist party) and Livre (libertarian left). However, as Figure 1 illustrates, polls started to show an extremely competitive election, forcing Costa to demonstrate a willingness to negotiate with every party apart from Chega.

Notably, there were two changes during the campaign. The first is that the seemingly transition from traditional to digital campaigning only lasted until the official campaign period. Major parties ended up with massive street mobilisation in the last couple of weeks, especially after the television debates. The second concerns Rio's government strategy regarding Chega. All parties raised a 'cordon sanitaire' around Chega early in the campaign. Rio said that if PSD won, he would reject Chega's presence in a potential coalition. However, four days before the election day, Rio's Vice-President David Justino stated that 'PSD has no red lines' with respect to coalescing with the radical right.¹¹ Two

days later, Rio also opened the door to this possibility. He implied that if the PSD did not win the election, but the parliament had a right-wing majority, the Social Democrats would consider agreeing with Chega.¹²

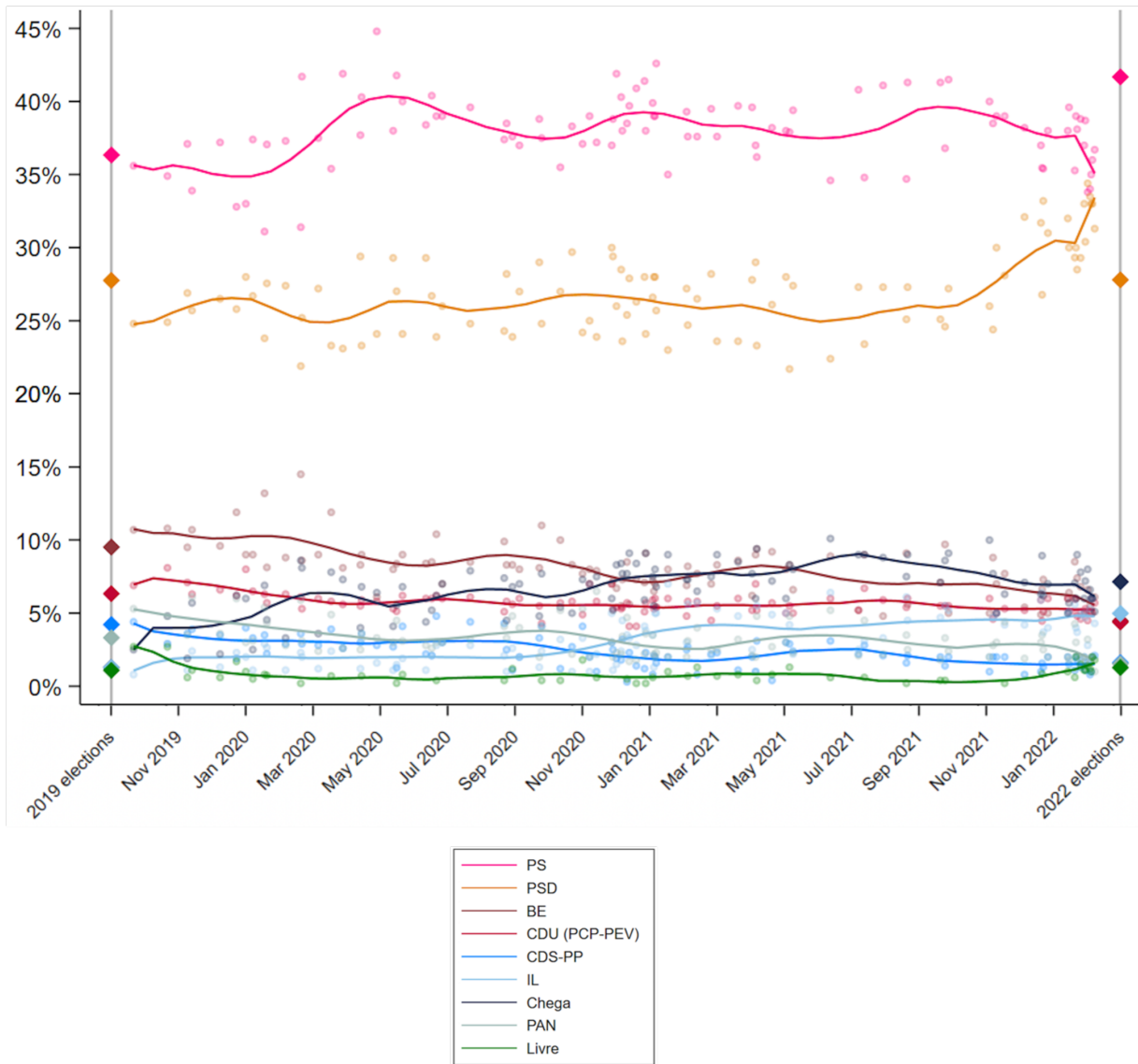
The electoral result

In January 2022, Portugal witnessed high COVID-19 infection rates. Early voting was permitted one week before the polling day. More than 300,000 citizens took advantage of pre-poll voting. Nonetheless, more than 1.2 million citizens were isolated on election day.¹³ They were allowed to vote in person, though recommended to do so in the last hour of voting. And yet, high infection rates seemingly did not have electoral consequences. As Table 2 shows, on 30 January, about 5.6 million Portuguese citizens went to the polls. In contrast to recent trends of increasing abstention, turnout grew in the 2022 elections — from 48.6 to 51.5 per cent. More than 400,000 additional voters cast a ballot than in 2019. Interestingly, municipalities with higher COVID-19 infection rates witnessed an increase in turnout, an apparent puzzle that deserves further research.¹⁴ Hence, although the pandemic seems to have negatively affected turnout in the 2021 Presidential and local elections, it did not influence the general elections.

Figure 1 plots voting intention trends over the two last general elections. There was a gulf between PS and PSD in the two years leading up to the 2022 election. And yet, in the final weeks before the election, polls started to predict a competitive race, with two polls suggesting a potential win for the opposition. However, the outcome was far from close. Table 2 shows the electoral results and compares parties' performance in the 2022 and 2019 elections. The Socialists had an overwhelming victory, the populist radical right became the third party, the Liberals came in fourth, and Livre maintained one MP. Every other party suffered a significant defeat.

The Socialists not only won the election but also achieved an absolute majority against

Figure 1: Voting intentions in the main political parties between the 2019 and 2022 general elections (local polynomial regression).



Source: Calculations based on polling data collected from ERC — Media Regulatory Entity (<https://www.erc.pt/>).

Notes: Circle markers represent each opinion poll. Lines show the smoothed values from kernel-weighted local polynomial regression. Diamond markers at the reference lines display the 2019 and 2022 general elections results.

all odds. Costa garnered an unexpected 42.5 per cent of votes and 120 seats (4.3 points and 12 seats up on 2019). The Socialists won the majority of votes in every mainland electoral district for the first time, making it the party's second absolute majority and the

Table 2: Results of the Portuguese general elections.

	2022			2019			Change (2022-19)		
	Seats (N)	Votes (000's)	Votes (%)	Seats (N)	Votes (000's)	Votes (%)	Seats (N)	Votes (000's)	Votes (%)
PS	120	2 303	42.5	108	1 904	38.2	12	399	4.3
PSD	77	1 618	29.9	79	1 454	29.2	-2	164	0.7
BE	5	245	4.5	19	499	10.0	-14	-254	-5.5
PCP-PEV	6	239	4.4	12	332	6.7	-6	-93	-2.3
CDS-PP	0	89	1.7	5	221	4.4	-5	-132	-2.7
PAN	1	88	1.6	4	174	3.5	-3	-86	-1.9
CH	12	400	7.4	1	68	1.4	11	332	6.0
IL	8	274	5.1	1	67	1.4	7	207	3.7
L	1	71	1.3	1	57	1.1	0	14	0.2
Others	—	91	1.7	—	207	4.2	—	-116	-2.5
Invalid and blanks	—	147	2.6	—	255	4.9	—	-108	-2.3
Total	230	5 565	100	230	5 237	100	—	328	—
Turnout		51.5%			48.6%			2.9%	

Source: CNE – National Electoral Commission (<http://www.cne.pt>).

Notes: PSD and CDS-PP ran together in Madeira region electoral circle, as well as PSD, CDS-PP, and the monarchists (PPM) in the Azores region. For statistical purposes, given that these coalition's elected MPs are all from the PSD, the table shows the results in the two regions as pertaining only to PSD.

fourth largest vote share in its history. If Costa remains in power through to 2026, he will be the longest-serving Prime Minister in Portugal, and the Socialists will have led the government for more than half of the democratic period. How did Costa win this big?

Results from two post-electoral surveys suggest *strategic voting*.¹⁵ Electors voted for the Socialists to punish the radical left for their role in bringing down the government. At the same time, leftist voters wanted, first and foremost, to forestall Chega from accessing the government. The Communists elected only six MPs and lost seats in historical electoral strongholds like Santarém and Évora. The Greens lost parliamentary representation for the first time since the early 1980s. The Left Bloc achieved only 4.5 per cent of the vote and dropped to 5 seats from 19. Both Jerónimo de Sousa and Catarina Martins blamed the PS for creating a ‘false’ and ‘extreme’ bi-polarisation that harmed its left-wing partners. This was the worst electoral night for the radical left in Portuguese history.

PAN was also punished, losing three out of four MPs, thus failing to constitute a

parliamentary group. During the campaign, PAN expressed a willingness to negotiate with the winner — either the Socialists or Social Democrats. In doing so, the leader Inês de Sousa Real did not assume that such a strategy might damage the party’s electoral performance. Still, her predecessor, André Silva, considered the results a consequence of PAN’s ‘left turn’ to a ‘godchild’ of Costa. Several key members resigned their office, calling for party elections. Unlike PAN and the radical left, Livre does not suffer from strategic voting. Despite a public breakout with the former MP elected in 2019, Livre maintained parliamentary representation. Media exposure and Rui Tavares’s performance in the debates, especially with Ventura, were crucial to getting him elected to parliament.

The most consequential defeats happened on the right side of the party system. Certainly, the PSD remains the second-largest party, slightly increasing its vote share. However, these were supposed to be highly competitive elections, and Rio could not draw strategic voting on the right, as Costa did on the left. Rio lost votes firstly to the Liberals (IL), secondly to PS and thirdly to Chega. The Social Democrats had their second-worst result since 1983, losing two MPs, dropping from 79 to 77. They lost to PS in historical electoral strongholds such as Leiria and Viseu, securing the lead only in the Madeira region and one of the foreign territories (outside Europe). Exit polls suggest that the Social Democrats faced a number of difficulties trying to convince their traditional voters, corroborating previous research (Cancela and Magalhães, 2020). Since Passos Coelho’s austerity measures during the bailout period (2011–2014), the Social Democrats have seen their party brand tarnished. They have since struggled to make headway with older, poorer and less educated voters.¹⁶ Although willing to (re)position the party towards the centre and to negotiate with PS over the past four years, Rio’s unclear position about Chega triggered fear of an arrangement with the radical right, mainly because the Social Democrats had already coalesced with Chega in the Azores region.

The Christian Democrats suffered the most significant defeat. The party garnered only 1.6 per cent of the votes and lost all seats. Despite gaining more votes than Livre, the lack

of electoral support in Lisbon’s electoral district pushed the Christian Democrats out of parliament for the first time since 1975. This is particularly relevant because the party is one of the ‘fathers of democracy’, having been in all legislatures since democratisation and participated in six governments. The entry of two right-wing parties into parliament in 2019 with electoral strategies focusing on cultural conservatism and economic liberalism damaged CDS’ electoral prospects, even though most of its voters have switched to PSD. On top of that, internal turmoil and lack of intra-party cohesion created the perfect storm.

The Liberals and the radical right were the critical winners on the right. Chega secured votes from former abstentionists, null and blank votes, and the Social Democrats, in that order. The Liberals grew from 1 to 8 MPs, and the populist right came in third with 7.4 per cent and 12 seats. In his election speech, Cotrim de Figueiredo said that Liberals were continuing to fight for lower taxes and less state intervention. Ventura, in his turn, said that he was going ‘after Costa’ to ‘restore the dignity of the country’.¹⁷

What have been the consequences of the 2022 elections for the party system? Table 3 shows the party system change over the democratic period. The party system seems to remain relatively strong. First, despite the growth of IL and Chega, the two main parties garnered 72.4 per cent of votes — 5 points up from 2019, which sets Portugal aside from increasing party fragmentation in the European context. Second, the effective number of electoral (ENEP) and parliamentary (ENPP) parties declined to the lowest values since 2005 (ENEP) and 2009 (ENPP). Third, despite a slight decrease in electoral disproportionality and increased volatility, the number of new parties above the 0.5 per cent threshold in 2022 is zero, which has not happened for the past 20 years. From this perspective, fragmentation decreased, with the electoral system still allowing absolute majorities, and the multiparty system remaining tendentially bipartisan.

However, if we look at the elections in more detail, there are relevant implications for the political system. The rise of IL and Chega suggests greater political polarisation. Both parties stand for more radical issues than CDS-PP. Furthermore, relations between

Table 3: Party system change

	1976	1979	1980	1983	1985	1987	1991	1995	1999	2002	2005	2009	2011	2015	2019	2022
Electoral volatility	—	9.2	4.3	10.5	22.5	22.7	10.4	20.5	4.7	8.8	13.0	8.9	13.1	13.1	10.1	13.7
Fragmentation: ENEP	3.7	3.0	2.9	3.7	4.8	3.0	2.8	3.0	3.1	3.0	3.1	3.8	3.7	3.7	4.4	3.8
Fragmentation: ENPP	3.4	2.6	2.5	3.3	4.2	2.4	2.2	2.6	2.6	2.5	2.6	3.1	2.9	2.7	2.9	2.6
Sum of the two main parties	59.0	70.3	75.1	63.3	50.6	72.4	79.7	77.9	76.4	78.0	73.8	65.7	66.7	71.0	64.6	72.4
Number of new parties	—	3	3	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	4	0
Polarisation	20.2	24.0	22.4	21.4	18.9	15.9	11.4	10.8	12.9	11.1	15.7	20.1	16.7	23.3	23.2	19.9
Disproportionality	4.0	3.7	3.9	3.0	3.6	6.1	6.1	4.6	4.9	4.6	5.8	5.6	5.7	6.8	9.2	8.0

Source: Data from 1976 to 2019 retrieved from Casal Bértoa (2022). The remaining results are based on our own calculations using the following methods. Electoral volatility: Pedersen's index (1979), taking every party into account. Effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) and Effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) use Laakso and Taagepera's formula (1979). Number of new parties: Sikk's (2005) formula on new parties above the 0.5 per cent threshold. Polarisation: the percentage of votes obtained by 'anti-political-establishment' parties (Casal Bértoa, 2022). Disproportionality: Gallagher's (1991) least squares index.

the government and the President and parliament will likely change with an absolute majority. Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa may be the first President to serve two terms with the same Prime Minister. Still, the President will be less capable of influencing policies and imposing himself on daily government life. Parliament will also have a lower stake in shaping policy making. The Socialists alone can now overcome Presidential vetoes in parliament, and Costa is free from pressures since he does not need to negotiate with other parties to approve State Budgets.

The new government

Government formation was delayed because over 80 per cent of the votes (157,205) in the electoral district of voters living abroad were deemed null by the Constitutional Court because they did not meet all voting rules. Elections were repeated solely for the European district, postponing government formation until late March 2022.

On 30 March, the Socialists formed a single-party cabinet. After having had the largest cabinet ever in his second term, Costa's third government reduced the number of ministers and junior ministers by 20 per cent. The shrinkage focussed primarily on junior ministers. Costa's third government has 18 ministers (including himself) and 38 junior ministers. The government is the first in Portuguese history to have gender parity. Helena Carreiras became the first woman to serve as Minister of Defence. However, at the junior minister level, gender balance decreases to one-third: 26 are men and 12 are women.

Most ministers are lawyers, economists and sociologists. Most are connected to the public sector and have strong links to academia. The oldest minister is 70, the youngest 43, with a mean of 51. They come predominantly from the Lisbon area, which speaks to the increased centralisation of ministerial elites. The paradigmatic example is Fernando Medina, the new Minister of Finance, who lost Lisbon's local elections in October 2021. His nomination breaks with a tradition of having technocrats as Finance Ministers. Despite

having seven non-partisan ministers, six of them have previously held positions in the Socialist Party or governments of that party.

Conclusions

The 2022 Portuguese general election took place during the most severe wave of COVID-19 infections. However, the pandemic did not impact the campaign and the elections. Firstly, COVID-19 was not one of the major issues of the campaign. Parties chose not to politicise COVID-19 due to Costa's perceived good handling of the crisis. Secondly, the transition from street to digital campaigning lasted only until the end of the debates. Thirdly, despite the pandemic turnout increased, breaking with a trend of declining electoral participation.

Still, the election triggered some critical changes in the Portuguese political landscape. Polls predicted a result too close to call. And yet, the Socialists won an unexpected absolute majority, and the Social Democrats failed in their aim to gain office. Costa fulfilled his desire, forming a politicised government with gender parity at the minister level. The rejection of the State Budget and early elections resulted in the worst aggregate result of Costa's former partners, the exclusion of the Greens and the Christian Democrats from parliament, the rise of Liberals, and, above all, the rise of the radical right to third place.

The Socialists remain a pivotal party and no longer need to negotiate with the parties to its left. Emerging parties were on the right, and they are now potential members of future cabinets, especially the Liberals who evolved sufficiently to replace CDS-PP as PSD's preferred junior coalition partner. However, two essential questions remain. The first is whether PS will return to minority government rule in the future, that is, whether the contract parliamentarism was an exception to the rule or not. The second is the extent to which the right will keep a 'cordon sanitaire' around Chega. PSD may find it difficult to regain office without André Ventura. Like most centre-right parties in Europe, there

is intense debate and dissent in the Social Democrats about how best to interact with Chega. Only future elections will permit us to understand whether the end of contract parliamentarism and the rise of the radical right impact party strategies and government formations.

Notes

1. For other recent articles in the Elections in Context series see Little (2021); Pilet (2021); Prosser (2021); and Faas and Klingelhöfer (2022).
2. Own calculations building on data from Freire et al. (2017a,b).
3. Source: Economic Bulletin, Bank of Portugal.
4. ICS-Iscte poll, April 2021.
5. However, the last 2021 Presidential (January) and local (September) elections, as well as the Azores Regional elections of October 2020, had already taken place during the pandemic.
6. See <https://www.publico.pt/2022/01/18/politica/noticia/vinte-milhoes-viram-debates-a-final-portugueses-querem-saber-politica-1992203>, and https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/politica/audiencias-dos-debates-nas-tv-atingiram-no-total-89-milhoes_n1173139.
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15. ICS-Iscte Poll, March 2022, and Intercampus Poll, February 2022.
16. <https://www.pedro-magalhaes.org/bases-sociais-do-voto-nas-legislativas-de-2022/>. See also Cancela and Magalhães (2020).
17. <https://sicnoticias.pt/especiais/andre-ventura/2022-01-31-ventura-costa-eu-vou-atras-de-ti-festa-do-terceiro-lugar-e-sova-aos-adversarios>

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