

A voter-led *cordon sanitaire*: coordination failure on the right and negative voting in Portugal's 2026 presidential elections*

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Abstract

Right-of-center candidates won close to two-thirds of the first-round vote in Portugal's 2026 presidential election, yet none reached the presidency. Right-wing fragmentation was a coordination failure that sent André Ventura (*Chega*; Enough) to the run-off, where António José Seguro (Socialist Party) beat him two to one. Right-wing voters coalesced against Ventura without their parties asking them to. For 28.5 percent of Seguro's voters this was negative voting: a ballot cast *against* Ventura, not *for* him. Among right-wing voters, attitudes and ideology distinguished those who crossed the left-right divide to vote for Seguro from those who chose Ventura, while partisanship did not. They drew a line their parties would not, because it rested on what they believed rather than on whom they followed.

Keywords: Presidential elections, radical right, negative voting, electoral coordination, *cordon sanitaire*, semi-presidentialism, *Chega*, Portugal.

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1 Introduction

On 18 January 2026, Portuguese voters went to the polls in the country's eleventh presidential election since the transition to democracy in 1974. Several right-of-center candidates split close to two-thirds of the first-round vote among them. Yet the right did not reach the presidency. António José Seguro, of the center-left Socialist Party (PS), advanced as plurality winner with under a third of the vote, and three weeks later defeated André Ventura, leader of the radical right *Chega* (Enough), by more than two to one. It was the first run-off since 1986, and the first to feature a radical right candidate. The puzzle is why those two-thirds did not translate into a right-wing presidency.

The result is best understood against a rapid transformation of the Portuguese party system. Once seen as resistant to the rise of the populist radical right (Carreira da Silva and Salgado, 2018), Portugal saw *Chega* reach a presidential run-off just seven years after the party's creation. Together with *Iniciativa Liberal* (Liberal Initiative, IL), *Chega* broke the bipartisan equilibrium between the PS and the center-right Social Democratic Party (PSD) that had organized Portuguese politics since the 1980s, turning a two-bloc system into a tripolar one (Ferrinho Lopes, 2025; Mendes, 2025; Pimenta and Magalhães, 2025; Russo, 2026). The fragmentation of the right in 2026 was a symptom of that change. It was also a coordination failure in the sense of Cox (1997): four candidacies competed for one electorate in a first round that rewards concentration, and the split sent Ventura, rather than a center-right candidate, to the run-off.

We make two arguments. The first concerns the first round. Fragmentation determined which right-wing candidate reached the run-off, and it sent forward the one who could not build a majority. The second is about the run-off. Right-wing voters crossed over to Seguro without any party on the right asking them to, and most of them did so *against* Ventura rather than *for* Seguro, a case of negative voting. We illustrate these arguments using official electoral returns, polling and municipal-level data,

an exit poll, and a post-electoral survey. Along the way we trace who voted for each candidate, and show that fragmentation on the left proved costless.

This anti-Ventura convergence invites a comparison with France, where the *front républicain* against the radical right has been built by parties. In Portugal it was not. Only on the left did parties coordinate against Ventura during the run-off. The center-right took no position in the run-off and cooperates with *Chega* at the legislative level, yet most voters on the right still chose Seguro over Ventura. The implication is that the barrier that mattered was raised by voters, not by parties. The question is why some right-wing voters chose Seguro and others Ventura. We show that the answer lay political attitudes and ideology, not in the party they felt close to. Because it rested on attitudes rather than partisanship, the barrier did not need parties to hold.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section situates the evolving role of the presidency within Portuguese semi-presidentialism, with particular attention to the legacy of the outgoing president. We then trace the transformation of the party system that reshaped the contest. The subsequent sections turn to the candidates and the campaign, the first-round result and the fragmentation of the right, and the run-off and the negative voting that decided the margin of victory. We conclude on what the election reveals about Portuguese democracy.

2 Semi-presidentialism and the Portuguese presidency

In Portugal, a presidential election does not decide who governs. The system of government is conventionally classified as semi-presidential: it combines a directly elected president with a prime minister who leads a cabinet whose survival depends on parliamentary support (Duverger, 1980; Elgie, 1999). Most scholars classify the post-1982 system as ‘premier-presidential’, in which the president lacks the power to dismiss the

government unilaterally (Shugart and Carey, 1992; Magalhães, 2007).² Yet this classification is contested. Article 195/2 of the Constitution allows the president to dismiss the government “when necessary to ensure the regular functioning of democratic institutions,” a reserve power that blurs the boundary with the ‘president-parliamentary’ subtype (Amorim Neto and Lobo, 2009; Passarelli, 2010).

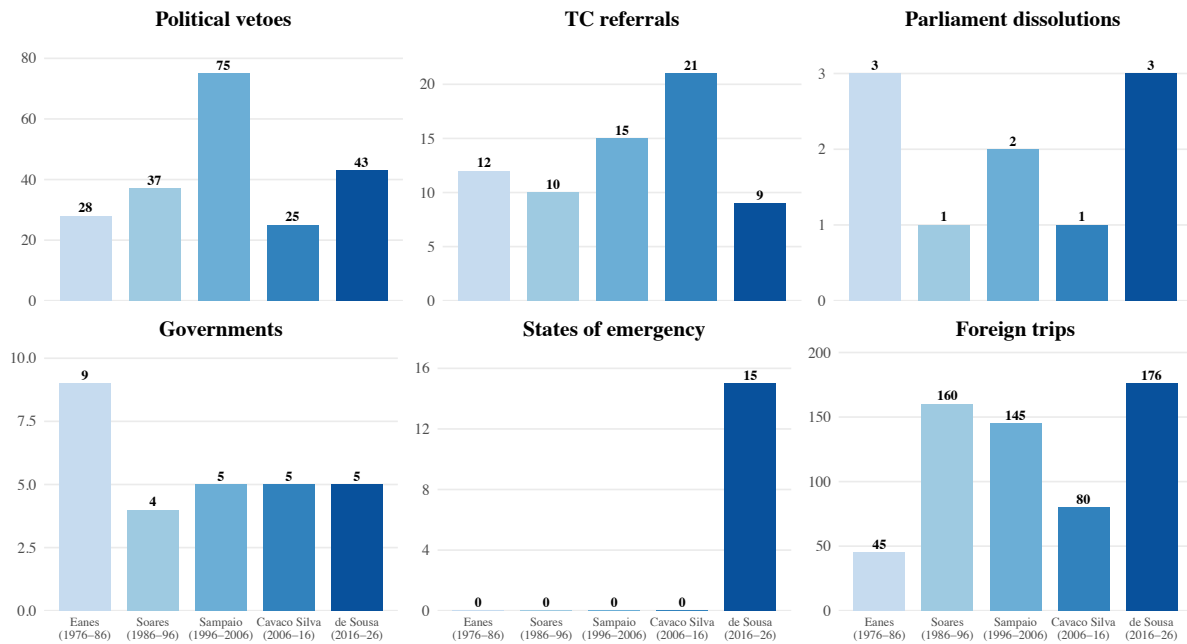
In practice, presidents have generally exercised restraint, leading some to characterize the system’s operation as closer to quasi-parliamentary (Jalali, 2011; Wu, 2011). Yet in comparative European terms, Portugal remains among the semi-presidential systems with the broadest formal presidential powers, with the president retaining a large capacity for intervention (Shugart and Carey, 1992; Feijó, 2018). This includes the power to veto legislation (through political vetoes or referrals to the Constitutional Court), dissolve parliament and call snap elections after consulting the State Council, appoint the prime minister (in practice the leader of the most-voted party), declare states of emergency, and serve as commander-in-chief (Amorim Neto and Lobo, 2009; Franco, 2020).

The exercise of these powers has varied across incumbents. As Figure 1 illustrates, the five presidents who served since 1976 deployed their prerogatives in different ways. Ramalho Eanes (an independent military officer) combined an active legislative veto (28 political vetoes) with three parliament dissolutions. Mário Soares (PS) adopted a more restrained domestic posture but became the most internationally active president of his era (160 foreign trips, 48 state visits). In turn, Jorge Sampaio (PS) holds the record for political vetoes (75), reflecting a confrontational relationship with conservative governments. Cavaco Silva (PSD) relied on referrals to the Constitutional Court (21, the highest of any president), particularly during the austerity period (Fernandes and Jalali, 2017; Franco, 2020).

² The 1982 constitutional revision reduced presidential powers and, by abolishing the military Council of the Revolution, completed the transition to civilian rule.

³ “175 viagens ao estrangeiro, 2.500 condecorações e 43 vetos: os 10 anos de Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa

Figure 1: Presidential activity.



Source: Feijó (2018), Franco (2020), Freire and Pinto (2011), parliamentary records, and media retrospectives.³ Political vetoes: legislation returned to parliament or refused promulgation. TC referrals: requests for constitutional review.

Portuguese presidents have all experienced periods of “cohabitation” with prime ministers from rival political families. Portuguese cohabitation tends to produce subtle tensions through vetoes, public statements, and threats of dissolution rather than either open institutional conflict or complete presidential subordination (Franco, 2020). Presidential intervention has generally been higher during cohabitation, particularly in their second (and last, given constitutional limits) term of office (Amorim Neto and Lobo, 2009). Amorim Neto and Anselmo (2024) show that presidential intervention depends on institutional conditions, above all the second term and the absence of a unified majority government, rather than on popularity, and that formal powers alone do not secure presidential success.

em Belém em números,” *Observador*, 9 March 2026, <https://observador.pt/programas/emissao-especial/os-10-anos-de-marcelo-rebello-de-sousa-em-belem-em-numeros/>; “De Belém para 60 países: o rasto diplomático das 176 viagens de Marcelo,” *Público*, 7 March 2026, <https://www.publico.pt/2026/03/07/politica/noticia/belem-60-paises-rasto-diplomatico-176-viagens-marcelo-2166869>.

Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa's decade in office reshaped expectations of the presidency. Elected in 2016, the former PSD leader drew on his career as a television pundit to cultivate a presidency of proximity and media omnipresence that contrasted with his predecessors (Fernandes and Jalali, 2017). The pandemic dominated the second half of his first term and the start of his second: between March 2020 and April 2021 he declared fifteen states of emergency, the first ever declared under democratic rule (Figure 1). Each required parliamentary authorization, which the center-right opposition consistently granted while the newer right-wing parties increasingly opposed it (Santana-Pereira et al., 2025). Across his presidency he vetoed 43 pieces of legislation and undertook more than 170 foreign trips to 60 countries. His second term (2021–2026) was, then, defined by institutional activism born of successive political crises, including three parliamentary dissolutions.

Marcelo's popularity followed the arc of his presidency. He entered office in 2016 with near-universal approval, 97 percent positive in a *Centro de Estudos e Sondagens de Opinião da Universidade Católica Portuguesa* (CESOP) poll that November, the highest the pollster had recorded. Approval stayed high into the second term, then fell as the political crises accumulated.⁴ By May 2024 his positive ratings had dropped to 60 percent, and one Aximage barometer of September 2025 put them at 37 percent, an outlier against the CESOP series, which had him at 72 percent in December 2025.⁵ He left office far below his own starting point but well above the 48 percent Cavaco Silva held in 2015.⁶

The office he leaves behind carries more weight in Portuguese political life than it

⁴ CESOP data: "Sondagem. Portugueses dão a pior avaliação a Marcelo em oito anos," *RTP*, 24 May 2024, https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/politica/sondagem-portugueses-dao-a-pior-avaliacao-a-marcelo-em-oito-anos_n1573731.

⁵ Aximage: "Popularidade de Marcelo em queda na reta final do mandato, indica barómetro da Aximage," *Observador*, 15 September 2025, <https://observador.pt/2025/09/15/popularidade-de-marcelo-em-queda-na-reta-final-do-mandato-indica-barometro-da-aximage/>.

⁶ CESOP data: "Marcelo deixa Belém com nota positiva e ultrapassa avaliação a Cavaco Silva em 2015," *Público*, 16 December 2025, <https://www.publico.pt/2025/12/16/politica/noticia/marcelo-deixa-belem-nota-positiva-ultrapassa-avaliacao-cavaco-silva-2015-2158289>.

did for much of the post-1982 period. Party system fragmentation, discussed in the next section, has reinforced this, making majority governments harder to form and placing the presidency closer to the center of government formation and survival.

3 A party system in flux

Between 2022 and 2025, Portugal held three legislative elections, a sign of acute institutional instability. The sequence began with the January 2022 snap elections, called after the opposition voted down the PS government's budget. That election produced a surprising single-party majority for the PS under Prime Minister António Costa (Santana-Pereira and De Giorgi, 2022; Ferrinho Lopes, 2023). Costa's government then collapsed in November 2023 when he resigned amid a judicial investigation into alleged corruption connected to lithium mining contracts and clean energy projects (Santana-Pereira and Nina, 2024).

The snap elections of March 2024 produced a narrow victory for the center-right Democratic Alliance (AD, *Aliança Democrática*) coalition, led by Luís Montenegro (Ferrinho Lopes, 2025). The coalition united PSD, the People's Party (CDS-PP) and the Monarchist Party (PPM) but lacked a parliamentary majority, and therefore formed a minority government reliant on ad hoc agreements with smaller parties. The *Spinum-viva* scandal then emerged, involving a consultancy firm connected to Montenegro's family (see Mendes, 2025), triggering a motion of no confidence that brought down the government. Marcelo dissolved parliament once again. The May 2025 snap elections returned AD to power with a slightly improved but still insufficient result for a majority cabinet (Russo, 2026).

A recurring feature of this period was the entanglement of electoral politics with judicial and prosecutorial initiatives. Two consecutive governments fell in the shadow

of investigations rather than policy defeats: Costa's in 2023, and Montenegro's in 2025. The same logic resurfaced during the presidential campaign, where allegations affected several candidacies before any judicial finding. This is more than a succession of contingent scandals. It reflects a broader feature of Portuguese democracy: the combination of highly visible "corruption politics," autonomous prosecutorial action, and judicial institutions that, since democratization, have been substantially insulated from elected power. The result is a political environment in which investigations and even preliminary allegations can structure political competition before courts end up reaching any conclusion whatsoever. In this sense, Portugal illustrates a recurrent form of judicialization of politics, close to what the Southern European literature describes as the criminalization of political responsibility (Tate and Vallinder, 1995; Hirschl, 2004; Magalhães et al., 2006): reputational damage often precedes, and sometimes substitutes for, formal adjudication.

The central structural development underlying these crises was *Chega's* consolidation as a major party. Portugal had long been seen as resistant to radical right success, an outcome attributed to the rejection of the previous right-wing authoritarian regime, low immigration salience, and the mainstream parties' capacity to absorb protest votes (Carreira da Silva and Salgado, 2018; Mendes and Dennison, 2021). Founded in 2019, *Chega* entered parliament that year with a single seat and 1.3 percent of the vote. Its growth was rapid: 7.4 percent and 12 seats in 2022, 18.9 percent and 50 seats in 2024, 23.7 percent and 60 seats in 2025, making it the second-largest parliamentary force, ahead of the PS (58 seats). This transformed the party system from the bipolar PS-PSD configuration that had dominated since democratization (Jalali, 2007; Lisi, 2015) into a three-bloc structure (Mendes, 2025; Pimenta and Magalhães, 2025).

This party system restructuring had direct implications for the presidential election. Every Portuguese president since 1976 had been elected with the backing of PS or PSD, and all but Eanes had served as prime minister or party leader before taking

office. The emergence of *Chega* raised a prospect that would have seemed implausible a decade earlier: a candidate from outside the traditional party establishment reaching the second round.

Until recently a low-salience issue (Carvalho and Duarte, 2020; Mendes and Denison, 2021), immigration emerged as a new axis of political competition during 2024–2025. The foreign resident population grew from approximately 421,000 in 2017 to about 1.54 million by the end of 2024, reaching roughly 15 percent of the total population, one of the fastest growth rates in the European Union (EU). Eurobarometer data show that immigration salience nearly doubled between the spring and autumn 2025 waves, rising from roughly one in ten to nearly one in five respondents, one of the largest single-wave increases recorded in any EU member state (see also Russo, 2026).

The systemic turning point had come earlier, with *Chega*'s breakthrough and the tripolarization of the party system around 2024; what ended in 2026 was the decade-long Marcelo presidency. The country that, as recently as 2019, had appeared a bastion of Southern European political stability, with a functioning *geringonça*⁷ coalition (Fernandes et al., 2018; De Giorgi and Cancela, 2021) and no radical right presence, was now grappling with the challenge of integrating that party into democratic competition (Santana-Pereira and Nina, 2024; Russo, 2026).

⁷ Literally “contraption”, a term coined to describe the contract parliamentarism arrangement (see Bale and Bergman, 2006: 422) under which the 2015–2019 Socialist minority government was supported by the radical left in parliament.

4 Candidates and campaign

4.1 The candidates

The 2026 presidential election attracted a record number of candidates. Fourteen candidacies were submitted to the Constitutional Court, of which eleven were admitted.⁸ The high number reflected the open-seat nature of the contest and the fragmentation of the party system. Yet five candidates dominated the race.

Henrique Gouveia e Melo, a retired admiral who had coordinated Portugal's COVID-19 vaccination campaign, then a vice-admiral, ran as an independent, non-partisan candidate on a platform of national unity and technocratic competence. He was the early front-runner in most polls conducted until the fall of 2025 (see Figure 2a), but his support eroded as his media exposure increased and Ventura announced his candidacy.

Ventura had placed third in the 2021 presidential election with 11.9 percent. His 2026 candidacy came only after months of public hesitation over whether to run at all. In December 2024 *Chega's* party leadership decided against endorsing Gouveia e Melo and committed to fielding its own candidate,⁹ with former prime minister Passos Coelho as the preferred choice. Yet Ventura himself kept the door open to supporting Gouveia e Melo into mid-2025, conditional on alignment on immigration and anti-corruption.¹⁰ Gouveia e Melo made no gestures toward *Chega*, Passos Coelho de-

⁸ Three were rejected for failing to meet the ballot-access signature requirement. However, because the ballot had already been printed, the three rejected names remained listed, and votes cast for them counted as null. Still, null votes (1.1 percent of the total, as shown in Table 1) were in line with the preceding elections (0.9 percent), suggesting a negligible effect on election outcome.

⁹ "Chega não vai apoiar Gouveia e Melo e aposta em candidato próprio," *Observador*, 15 December 2024, <https://observador.pt/especiais/chega-nao-vai-apoiar-gouveia-e-melo-e-aposta-em-candidato-proprio/>.

¹⁰ "Presidenciais. Ventura não rejeita apoio a Gouveia e Melo, mas descarta Marques Mendes: Representa o pior que o sistema tem'," *Observador*, 27 May 2025, <https://observador.pt/2025/05/27/presidenciais-ventura-nao-rejeita-apoio-a-gouveia-e-melo-mas-descarta-marques-mendes-representa-o-pior-que-o-sistema-tem/>.

clined to run, and Ventura announced his own candidacy in September 2025. He campaigned on anti-corruption messaging and calls for tougher sentencing, but his most visible strategy was outdoor advertising: anti-immigration billboards bearing the slogan “this isn’t Bangladesh” and ethnocentric posters in areas with Roma populations, where his support tends to be higher (Afonso, 2021).

The third candidate, António José Seguro, led the Socialist Party as opposition leader during the troika austerity period, between 2011 and 2014. After losing the 2014 Socialist leadership primary to António Costa, he withdrew from front-line politics for a decade, returning to public life only in June 2025 to announce his presidential candidacy. He initially polled in the mid-teens, far behind the early front-runners. Running on a platform of moderation and institutional stability, he positioned himself as the centrist alternative to a fragmented right. As polls increasingly suggested that two right-wing candidates might contest the run-off without him, he reframed the election as a choice between democratic pluralism and radical right populism, targeting traditionally moderate voters.

João Cotrim de Figueiredo, a former IL leader and member of the European Parliament (MEP), represented the liberal-conservative wing. Cotrim declared his candidacy on 13 August 2025 after Mariana Leitão, IL’s original candidate, withdrew to contest the party leadership. He campaigned on economic liberalism and tax reform, positioning himself as a “serious right-wing alternative” distinct from both PSD and *Chega*. Throughout the campaign he accused the media of marginalizing his candidacy in favor of a “top four” that excluded him.

Luís Marques Mendes announced his candidacy in February 2025, the first major candidate to do so. Like the outgoing president Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, he was a former PSD leader who had become a household name through a weekly television commentary slot. He was the center-right establishment candidate, backed by both PSD and CDS-PP, and campaigned on institutional moderation, cooperation with the

government, dialogue with parliament, and continuity with the outgoing presidency.

The remaining major candidates were on the left, and reflected its fragmentation. Catarina Martins, MEP and former leader of the radical Left Bloc (BE), campaigned on housing and labor rights; António Filipe, former member of parliament (MP), was supported by the Communist party (PCP/PEV); and Jorge Pinto, MP from the left-libertarian *Livre* (Free), considered withdrawing to avoid fragmenting the left-wing vote. He stayed on the ballot, and days before the election issued a public letter saying he understood voters who might prefer a stronger candidacy to defend the Constitution. Outside these, Manuel João Vieira, a performance artist who promised each voter a Ferrari and wine on tap in every household, attracted international media coverage.

4.2 The campaign

The campaign was marked by an exceptionally high number of televised debates. A total of 28 head-to-head debates were broadcast between 17 November and late December 2025, followed by a two-week official campaign period. A single run-off debate took place on 27 January. It reached 3.9 million viewers (48.7 percent audience share), making it the most-watched political event in Portugal in over a decade.¹¹ The debate covered healthcare, immigration, labor law, and the candidates' contrasting models of presidential activity: Seguro emphasized institutional restraint, while Ventura pledged to use the veto and dissolution powers aggressively. The Portuguese Constitution, with its flexible allocation of presidential prerogatives (Samuels and Shugart, 2010), permits either model, and the choice between them was itself a stake of the election.

Beyond television, the election was the most social media intensive in Portuguese electoral history. Candidates published over 8,000 posts across social media, concen-

¹¹ "Presidenciais. Debate entre Seguro e Ventura foi o mais visto de todos os confrontos," *Observador*, 28 January 2026, <https://observador.pt/2026/01/28/presidenciais-debate-entre-seguro-e-ventura-foi-o-mais-visto-de-todos-os-confrontos/>.

trated on Facebook and Instagram (29 percent each), with TikTok rising to third place at 16 percent (Canavilhas and Di Fátima, 2026). Ventura led engagement by a wide margin, accumulating 5.5 million interactions in December 2025 alone, more than four times any rival.¹² Yet a monitoring study found Ventura responsible for 23 of the 26 documented disinformation cases on candidates' official pages, most often by discrediting mainstream media and circulating polls from entities not accredited by the media regulator (Canavilhas and Di Fátima, 2026). An analysis by the Iberian Digital Media Research and Fact-Checking Hub (IBERIFIER) identified immigration as the most frequent disinformation topic across platforms (Vasconcelos et al., 2026). Such content found a receptive public: Eurobarometer 104.2 data from weeks before the election show that 74 percent of Portuguese citizens reported fake news as a problem for the country, up nine percentage points from six months earlier.¹³

The campaign also revealed substantive disagreements about the issues facing the country. The same Eurobarometer wave showed that 37 percent of Portuguese respondents identified public health as the main issue facing Portugal, 34 percent cited the cost of living, and 32 percent cited housing, all well above the EU averages. Candidates from left to right acknowledged the housing crisis. Immigration, Ventura's signature issue, was cited as a main issue by 18 percent of Portuguese respondents, below healthcare, cost of living, and housing, but now the fourth priority for voters, above economic concerns, unemployment, and defense (Eurobarometer 104.2). The government's proposed labor law reform (*pacote laboral*) emerged as a central dividing issue: Seguro pledged to veto it, arguing it would "create more instability," while Cotrim and Ventura supported liberalization. Euthanasia divided the field: Seguro supported the existing law, while Gouveia e Melo and Marques Mendes said they would refer it to the Constitutional Court.

¹² FOXP2, "Presidenciais 2026 – redes sociais performance," https://foxp2.pt/politica/presidenciais_2026/.

¹³ Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3378>.

Candidates invested in different campaign modes. Data from the Entity for Political Accounts and Financing shows declared campaign expenditure of approximately €5.4 million.¹⁴ Marques Mendes reported the highest budget (€1.32 million), followed by Seguro (€1.13 million), Gouveia e Melo (€1.03 million), Ventura (€900,000), and Cotrim (€500,000). The main contrast was between the establishment campaigns, which invested in professional consultancy and advertising, and Ventura's, which spent on direct contact with supporters. Marques Mendes and Gouveia e Melo allocated roughly 30 percent of their budgets to campaign design and professional agencies. Gouveia e Melo, likely reflecting the absence of party infrastructure, reported the highest share of administrative and operational costs among the leading candidates (34 percent), while Seguro directed the largest share of his budget to print and outdoor advertising (roughly 40 percent). Ventura, by contrast, spent only 6 percent on agencies but devoted a third of his budget to merchandise and supporter gifts, four times the share of any other leading candidate, a pattern consistent with radical right grassroots mobilization elsewhere (Albertazzi et al., 2025). The left-wing candidates ran on far smaller budgets and spent almost nothing on professional agencies.

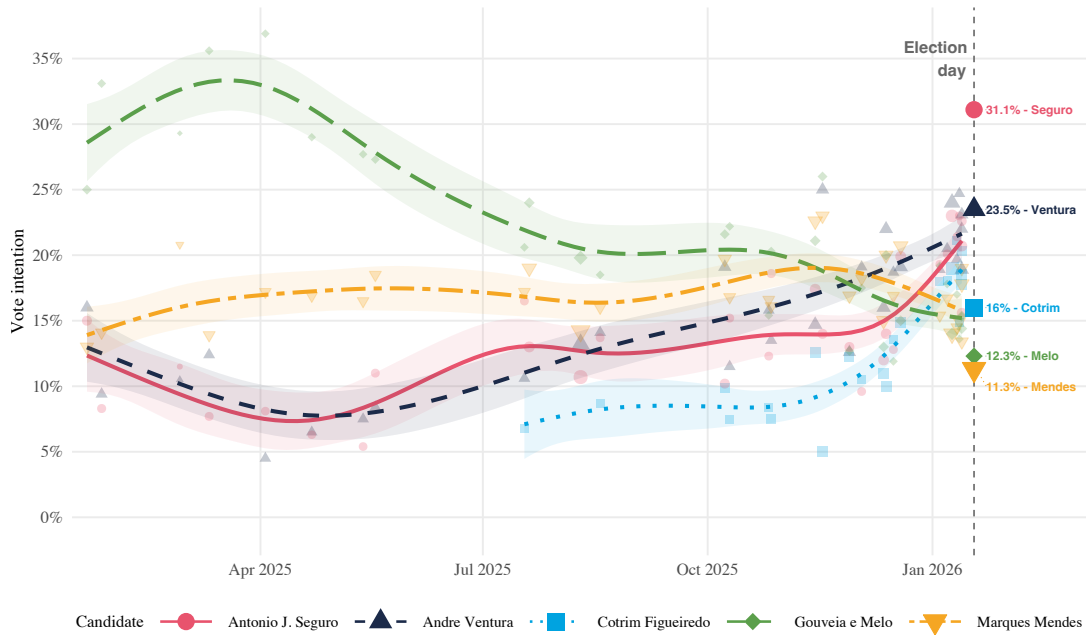
Figure 2 plots voting intentions for the main candidates. The weeks leading to the election increasingly favored Ventura and Seguro at the expense of the other three front-runners. The center-right candidates focused their fire on one another. The mutual attacks between Gouveia e Melo and Marques Mendes were particularly intense, each seeking to establish himself as the “serious” right-wing alternative. This benefited Ventura, who kept attacking his rivals while consolidating his base as they weakened each other. In Meguid's (2005) terms, the center-right adopted neither a “dismissive” nor an “adversarial” strategy toward *Chega*, instead competing in ways that inadvertently reinforced Ventura's candidacy.

¹⁴ *Entidade das Contas e Financiamentos Políticos, Tribunal Constitucional*, https://www.tribunalconstitucional.pt/tc/contas_eleicoes-pr.html.

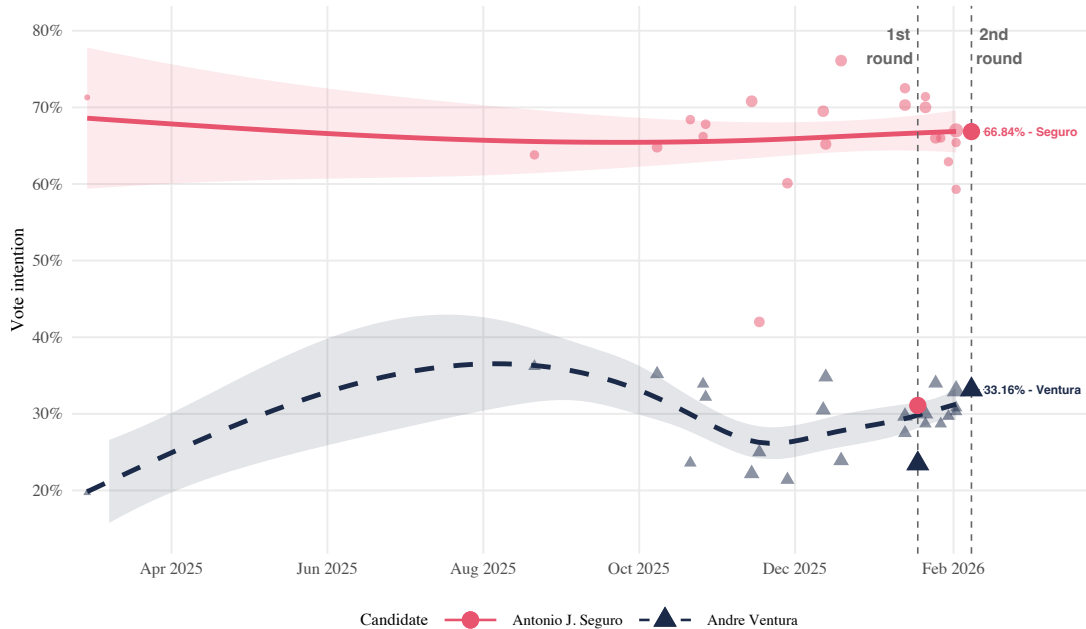
¹⁵ *Público*, “Grande Portal das Sondagens,” <https://www.publico.pt/interactivos/grande-porta>

Figure 2: Voting intentions for the 2026 presidential election.

(a) First round: top-5 candidates.



(b) Second round: Seguro vs. Ventura.



Notes: Calculations based on polling data retrieved from the *Grande Portal das Sondagens*.¹⁵ Individual polls shown as markers scaled by sample size. Trend lines estimated using generalized additive models with thin plate regression splines ($k = 10$), weighted by $\sqrt{N}$. Smoothing penalty $\gamma = 0.5$. Shaded bands represent 80 percent confidence intervals (CIs). Vertical lines indicate election results. Before the first round, second-round polls were hypothetical. The earliest was fielded in February 2025, and the next only in August 2025; because few data points inform the trend line in that interval, the CIs are wider there than in the later period.

A series of controversies then accelerated the decline of the center-right front-runners. First, in mid-December, Marques Mendes was confronted with reports that he had earned €709,000 in two years from a consultancy arrangement with one of Portugal's largest law firms, whose client list he refused to disclose publicly.¹⁶ Second, days later, Gouveia e Melo faced a judicial investigation into 57 navy contracts with the company Proskipper, totaling approximately €2.1 million and approved during his tenure in the naval staff, opening him to charges of the kind of institutional opacity he had campaigned against.¹⁷ Third, Cotrim de Figueiredo, though rising in the polls, faced two controversies in the final week. On 12 January 2026, asked whether he would exclude supporting Ventura in a hypothetical run-off, he replied that he would "not exclude any candidate," a statement he retracted the following day, calling it "an extremely unfortunate moment."¹⁸ He also faced allegations of sexual harassment, which he denied.¹⁹ Fourth, Ventura's campaign provoked its own legal confrontation: outdoor billboards bearing the message "Roma must obey the law" ("*Os ciganos têm de cumprir a lei*") were ordered removed by a Lisbon court on grounds of discriminatory speech, with a daily fine of €2,500 for non-compliance.²⁰ Yet Ventura still finished second.

These shifts are visible in Figure 2a. Gouveia e Melo led for much of the year, reach-

1-sondagens/.

¹⁶ "Marques Mendes não revela origem de 709 mil euros e alega 'sigilo profissional'," *Jornal Económico*, 18 December 2025, <https://jornaleconomico.sapo.pt/noticias/marques-mendes-nao-revela-origem-de-709-mil-euros-e-alega-sigilo-profissional/>.

¹⁷ "MP investiga contratos de ajustes diretos na Marinha que terão sido aprovados por Gouveia e Melo," *SIC Notícias*, 29 December 2025, <https://sicnoticias.pt/pais/justica/2025-12-29-mp-investiga-contratos-de-ajustes-diretos-na-marinha-que-terao-sido-aprovados-por-gouveia-e-melo-e7f5a488>.

¹⁸ "Presidenciais: Cotrim Figueiredo não exclui 'apoio a nenhum candidato' (incluindo André Ventura) numa eventual 2.ª volta," *SIC Notícias*, 12 January 2026, <https://sicnoticias.pt/especiais/eleicoes-presidenciais/2026-01-12-video-presidenciais-cotrim-figueiredo-nao-exclui-apoio-a-nenhum-candidato--incluindo-andre-ventura--numa-eventual-2.-volta-e7ff318b>.

¹⁹ "Ex-assessora acusa Cotrim Figueiredo de assédio sexual. Candidato nega: 'Há gente com medo de eu estar a crescer'," *Jornal de Notícias*, 12 January 2026, <https://www.jn.pt/nacional/artigo/ex-assessora-acusa-cotrim-figueiredo-de-assedio-sexual-candidato-nega-ha-gente-com-medo-de-eu-estar-a-crescer/18039709>.

²⁰ "Tribunal ordena que Ventura retire cartazes sobre comunidade cigana," *Observador*, 22 December 2025, <https://observador.pt/2025/12/22/tribunal-ordena-que-ventura-retire-cartazes-sobre-comunidade-cigana/>.

ing 25–30 percent before his support eroded from October onward. Marques Mendes briefly took the lead in late 2025, only to fall back after the revelations about his income. Cotrim de Figueiredo rose as both declined, entering January 2026 in the top three. On 14 January, four days before the vote, he publicly appealed to Prime Minister Montenegro to recommend that PSD voters support his candidacy rather than Marques Mendes, arguing he was the only right-of-center candidate capable of reaching the run-off. Montenegro did not respond. It was an attempt at exactly the coordination the right never achieved. The final-week controversies reversed Cotrim’s momentum, and Seguro was the candidate who gained from the late consolidation. As each rival on the right faltered, he rose steadily to a first-round plurality. Público’s GPSondagens forecasting model had placed his upper bound at 25 percent, but he exceeded it by six points.²¹ Ventura, by contrast, maintained a stable base throughout, consistent with loyalty patterns among radical right electorates (Mudde, 2019). Second-round polls (Figure 2b) projected him to lose to Seguro, or any opponent, by wide margins, reflecting rejection rates that extended well beyond the left into the center and center-right, which we discuss in the next sections.

5 First round results

The president is elected by absolute majority in a two-round system, unlike parliament, which is elected by proportional representation in multi-member districts. The first round took place on 18 January 2026. Table 1 presents the full results. Seguro led with 31.1 percent, followed by Ventura with 23.5 percent, and a fragmented right (Cotrim de Figueiredo with 16 percent, Gouveia e Melo with 12.3 percent, and Marques Mendes with 11.3 percent). The remaining six candidates collectively obtained less than 6 per-

²¹ Público, “Grande Portal das Sondagens,” <https://www.publico.pt/interactivos/grande-portal-sondagens/>.

cent. No candidate reached the threshold of an absolute majority, and a run-off between Seguro and Ventura was scheduled for 8 February.

Table 1: *First round results (18 January 2026).*

Candidate	Party/Support	Votes	Vote share (%)
António José Seguro	PS	1,755,563	31.11
André Ventura	Chega	1,327,021	23.52
João Cotrim de Figueiredo	IL	903,057	16.00
Henrique Gouveia e Melo	Independent	695,377	12.32
Luís Marques Mendes	PSD/CDS-PP	637,442	11.30
Catarina Martins	BE	116,407	2.06
António Filipe	PCP/PEV	92,644	1.64
Manuel João Vieira	Independent	60,927	1.08
Jorge Pinto	Livre	38,588	0.68
André Pestana da Silva	Independent	10,897	0.19
Humberto Correia	Independent	4,773	0.08
<i>Valid votes</i>		5,642,696	97.82
<i>Blank votes</i>		61,275	1.06
<i>Null votes</i>		64,565	1.12
<i>Total voters</i>		5,768,536	52.39
<i>Registered voters</i>		11,009,803	

Source: National Electoral Commission. Vote shares for candidates are percentages of valid votes cast. Blank and null votes are percentages of total voters.

Turnout stood at 52.4 percent, a recovery from the 39.2 percent recorded in 2021 under COVID-19 restrictions, though below the historical average prior to 2011. The increase of approximately 1.5 million voters was likely driven by the competitive multi-candidate field and the absence of the incumbent.²² The perceived stakes of a possible radical right run-off qualification may also have played a role. The highest district-level turnout was in the larger urban districts (Braga, Porto, and Lisboa, all above 64 percent); the lowest in rural areas (Bragança and the Azores, below 49 percent). The overall turnout remains modest compared to legislative elections, consistent with the “second-order” character of presidential contests (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Magalhães,

²² While COVID-19 restrictions have raised questions about their effect on turnout decrease in the 2021 elections (Santana-Pereira et al. 2023: 15; Serra-Silva and Santos 2024: 392), it has been shown that they had no effect, at least in terms of belonging to a risk group and perceived threat (Belchior et al., 2024).

2007; Freire and Santana-Pereira, 2019).

The four right-wing candidates (Ventura, Cotrim, Gouveia e Melo, and Marques Mendes)²³ together captured approximately 63 percent of the vote. Cotrim, Gouveia e Melo, and Marques Mendes together drew 39.6 percent, more than either Seguro or Ventura. Had that vote consolidated behind one of them, a center-right candidate might have reached the run-off in Ventura's place. Right-wing fragmentation was thus decisive for the outcome, and a coordination failure in the sense of Cox (1997): with several candidates competing for the same electorate, the right could not concentrate. Ventura's 23.5 percent nearly doubled his 2021 presidential result of 11.9 percent, though his absolute vote count of 1.33 million fell slightly below *Chega's* 2025 legislative result of 1.44 million. He nonetheless retained a large core electorate as the sole force on the radical right. The fragmentation cut deepest on the center-right: Marques Mendes, the candidate backed by the governing coalition, drew about the same share of 2025 AD voters as Cotrim did. He scored the weakest first-round result for a government-backed candidate in the history of Portuguese presidential elections.²⁴

Seguro's result was well above what polls had predicted (Figure 2a), suggesting that strategic voting took place. Data from the ICS-Iscte/Pitagórica/GfK exit poll show that late deciders were central to his victory.²⁵ Among the more than 30 percent of vot-

²³ We group Gouveia e Melo with the right-of-center field while acknowledging that his positioning was ambiguous. He ran as a non-partisan placing himself at "the center," yet the post-electoral sample referred to in the next section shows that voters placed him at 5.7 on a 0-10 left-right scale, just right of the midpoint, and more than a quarter of respondents could not place him at all. Still, the attitudinal results reported in the next section do not depend on this classification. They hold when the right-wing electorate is defined by left-right self-placement or by party identification rather than by first-round vote, and excluding Gouveia e Melo's voters leaves the two strongest predictors intact: satisfaction with democracy and left-right placement remain significant and similar in size. Hostility to immigration is stronger in that smaller sample, which fits his being the most centrist of the four (Figure 8).

²⁴ "Mendes teve tantos votos da AD como Cotrim," *Expresso*, 18 January 2026, <https://expresso.pt/politica/eleicoes/presidenciais-2026/2026-01-18-mendes-teve-tantos-votos-da-ad-com-o-cotrim---e-acaba-com-o-pior-resultado-em-presidenciais-de-um-candidato-apoiado-pelo-governo-9bb46101>.

²⁵ "Quase um terço dos eleitores decidiram o seu voto na semana final, 38% deles votaram em Seguro," *Expresso*, 18 January 2026, <https://expresso.pt/politica/eleicoes/presidenciais-2026/2026-01-18-quase-um-terco-dos-eleitores-decidiram-o-seu-voto-na-semana-final-38-deles-vot>

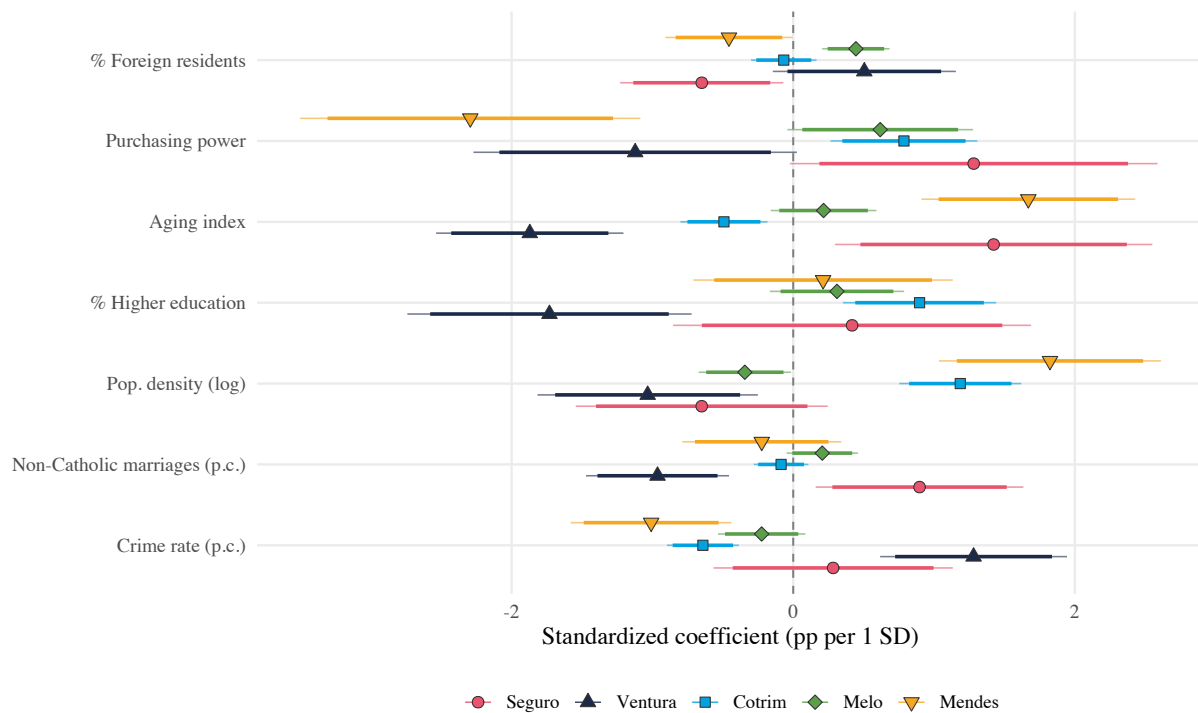
ers who made up their mind in the final week, including 14 percent who decided only on election day, Seguro captured the largest share (38 percent), far ahead of Cotrim (19 percent) and Ventura (14 percent). This points to a late consolidation among left-leaning voters who feared a run-off without a center-left candidate. The weak performance of left-wing candidates other than Seguro reinforces this reading (Table 1). Catarina Martins, António Filipe, and Jorge Pinto together obtained less than 4.5 percent. The left, in other words, solved the coordination problem the right did not.

The same exit poll reveals sociodemographic patterns. Women favored Seguro over Ventura more than men did. Cotrim performed best among voters aged 18–34, Ventura among the 35–54 cohort, and Seguro among the over-55 age group. Seguro did better among the youngest voters than the Socialist Party has done in recent legislative elections. At the individual level, education divided the electorate most sharply: among voters with higher education, Seguro captured approximately 38 percent of the vote and Cotrim 25 percent, while Ventura remained at 12 percent. Ventura’s strongest support came from voters with less than secondary education, where Cotrim was almost absent.

At the aggregate level, municipal ecological regressions show two patterns (Figure 3). The first sets Ventura apart from the rest: he performed worse in municipalities that are more educated, more secular, and more densely populated, and better where crime rates are higher. Cotrim and Seguro fall on the opposite side of this line: Cotrim on education and density, Seguro on secularism. On education, the gap runs from roughly 2 percentage points against Ventura to roughly 1 point in favor of Cotrim, per standard deviation (SD), and secularism moves Seguro and Ventura by about 1 point each in opposite directions. The second pattern divides the right itself. Older municipalities favored Marques Mendes, while Ventura performed better in younger areas. Marques Mendes also did better in denser municipalities and worse where purchasing

power is low, a profile that opposes Ventura's on almost every dimension. One result falls outside both patterns: the share of foreign residents is associated with Gouveia e Melo's vote but not with Ventura's. This suggests that if immigration salience operates at the local level, it does so through attitudes rather than direct exposure, a finding that contrasts with the Greek case (Dinas et al., 2019), and for which we provide support in the next section.

Figure 3: Municipality-level correlates of first-round vote share.



Notes: Standardized OLS coefficients with robust standard errors. Coefficients represent change in candidate vote share in percentage points (pp) per one standard deviation (SD) increase in each covariate. $N = 308$ municipalities (all domestic municipalities, including the Azores and Madeira). p.c. = per capita. *Sources:* Statistics Portugal and Census 2021. Thick and thin bars represent 90 and 95 percent CIs, respectively.

Figure 4 maps each candidate's vote share across continental municipalities.²⁶

²⁶ Throughout the manuscript, we distinguish the 278 mainland (continental) municipalities from the full set of 308 domestic municipalities (which adds the Azores and Madeira) and votes cast abroad. Presidential elections use a single nationwide constituency that includes citizens registered abroad, whereas legislative elections divide the electorate into constituencies, two of them reserved for voters abroad, one for Europe and one for the rest of the world.

Across all 308 domestic municipalities, Seguro won 225, Ventura 80, and Marques Mendes 3. Seguro won 18 of 20 domestic districts. His strongest results were in the Alentejo, the Lisbon metropolitan area, and parts of the central littoral. Ventura won two districts, Faro (Algarve) and the autonomous region of Madeira. Among votes cast abroad he took 40.9 percent, his strongest result anywhere. His support was concentrated in the south and interior, areas where perceptions of political neglect tend to be higher (Magalhães and Cancela, 2025), with his strongest municipalities in the Algarve and parts of the interior Alentejo. Cotrim's vote was mostly urban, concentrated in the Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas.

6 The run-off

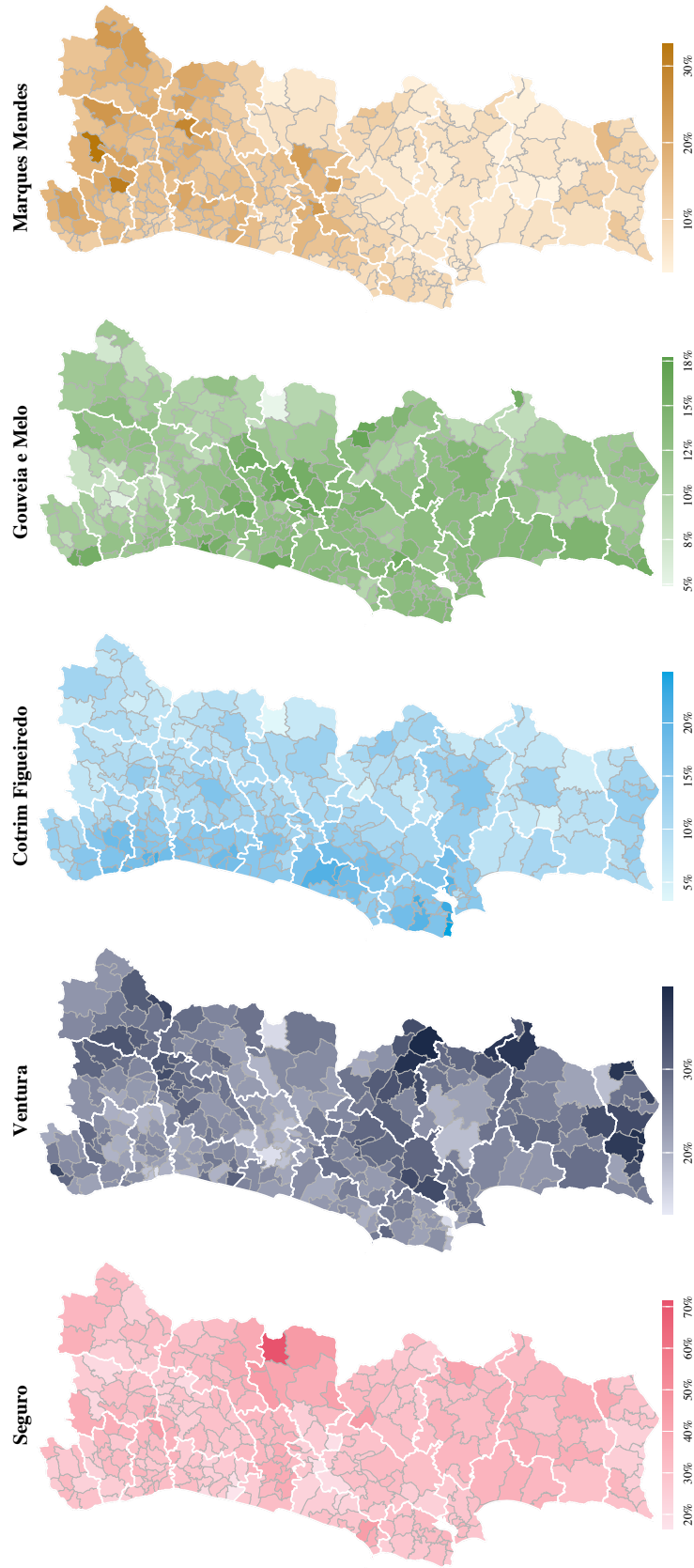
6.1 The inter-round campaign

The three weeks between the two rounds were dominated by the question of how voters of the eliminated candidates would redistribute their preferences. In France, that question has been settled by parties: voters have coalesced behind whichever candidate faced the radical right because their parties told them to (Stockemer, 2017). In Portugal the parties said little, and the question was left to voters.

Seguro sought to broaden his coalition beyond the left. He adopted a prominent anti-corruption stance and signaled institutional continuity, to reassure moderate conservatives that his presidency would not represent a leftward turn or serve the Socialist Party. His rhetoric shifted from “democratic stability” to a choice between “a president who unites” and “a president who divides.” He recast the contest as one of democratic temperament rather than ideology.

The inter-round period also produced the “Non-Socialists for Seguro” (*Não Socialistas por Seguro*) manifesto. This public declaration brought together intellectuals, former

Figure 4: *Vote share of the top five candidates by municipality.*



Source: Ministry of the Interior. 278 mainland (continental) municipalities. The Azores and Madeira regions, as well as the votes cast abroad, are not shown. District boundaries overlaid in gray.

politicians, and other public figures with no Socialist affiliation. They framed their support not as an endorsement of Seguro's program but as a defense of democratic institutions and norms, citing Ventura's "lack of institutional sense," his "divisionism," and his party's proposals for "ethnic confinement" (see also Magalhães and Costa-Lopes, 2024).

Center-right party leaders took varied stances. Prime Minister Montenegro declared that the PSD would stay out of the run-off altogether, neither endorsing Seguro nor opposing Ventura. Marques Mendes went further, announcing he would vote for Seguro. The Liberals moved in the same direction but more reluctantly. IL president Mariana Leitão said she would vote for Seguro "without enthusiasm," though the party issued no endorsement.²⁷ Cotrim de Figueiredo initially refused to endorse either candidate, calling the choice "dreadful." On 23 January he ruled out voting for Ventura and on 27 January ruled out a blank ballot. Yet he never endorsed Seguro outright.²⁸

These were individual choices, not party positions, and the distinction matters beyond the campaign itself. On the right it runs along two levels. At the executive level, the center-right has kept a barrier: in 2024 the PSD-led AD ruled out a governing agreement with *Chega* (Ferrinho Lopes, 2025), and the PSD has since refused to bring it into government (Russo, 2026). In the Azores, the center-right regional government rules with *Chega's* parliamentary support while still refusing to admit it into the executive. At the legislative level, no such barrier holds. The PSD has cooperated with *Chega* case by case, including joint votes on immigration and nationality reform.²⁹ In the terms of

²⁷ "Presidenciais: IL não apoia nenhum candidato mas Mariana Leitão vota 'sem entusiasmo' em Seguro," *Jornal de Negócios*, 22 January 2026, <https://www.jornaldenegocios.pt/economia/politica/eleicoes/presidenciais/detalhe/il-nao-apoia-nenhum-candidato-mas-mariana-leitao-vota-sem-entusiasmo-em-seguro>.

²⁸ "Cotrim afasta voto em branco e diz preferir um Portugal 'parado' a 'andar para trás'," *Público*, 27 January 2026, <https://www.publico.pt/2026/01/27/politica/noticia/cotrim-afasta-voto-branco-preferir-portugal-parado-andar-tras-2162617>.

²⁹ This cooperation is not exclusive to the right, since the PS too has voted with *Chega* on specific bills. See "Chega viabilizou mais propostas com o PS do que com o PSD no novo Parlamento," *Renascença*, 18 May 2026, <https://rr.pt/especial/politica/2026/05/18/chega-viabilizou-mais-propostas-com-o-ps-do-que-com-o-psd-no-novo-parlamento/470793/>.

Heinze (2022), the center-right practices ad hoc toleration and selective legislative cooperation, not exclusion. The left, by contrast, did coordinate at the party level: the PS, the Left Bloc, the Communists, and *Livre* all positioned against Ventura, and the Left Bloc publicly criticized the PSD and the IL for taking no position. The anti-Ventura convergence on the right was therefore driven by voters rather than parties, a claim we substantiate with individual-level data below.

Ventura framed the run-off as a struggle against “Socialism” and sought to claim leadership of the entire Portuguese right. He softened his rhetoric on Roma communities and argued that a Seguro presidency would enable the return of António Costa’s “Socialist-era clientelism.” Polling data showed the strategy was failing: even among self-identified right-wing voters, a plurality said they would vote for Seguro or abstain rather than support Ventura.³⁰ The single debate contrasted the competing visions. Seguro presented himself as a unifying figure in the tradition of former Presidents Soares and Sampaio, while Ventura argued that the presidency required “someone who breaks with the system.”

6.2 Second round results

Portugal’s only previous run-off, in 1986, had been won by the candidate who came second in the first round. Seguro entered the 8 February run-off with a first-round plurality of only 31.1 percent and won 66.8 percent of the vote to Ventura’s 33.2 percent (Table 2), the largest margin of the two run-offs ever held. He also received the highest number of votes ever cast for a presidential candidate in Portugal.

Turnout fell from 52.4 percent to 50 percent, a modest drop given the circumstances. Between the two rounds, four successive storms struck Portugal, one of them the strongest on record. The damage included deaths, widespread flooding, and pro-

³⁰ ICS-Iscte poll, January 2026.

Table 2: *Second round results (8 February 2026).*

	Votes	Vote share (%)
António José Seguro	3,502,613	66.84
André Ventura	1,737,950	33.16
<i>Valid votes</i>	5,240,563	95.01
<i>Blank votes</i>	177,072	3.21
<i>Null votes</i>	98,342	1.78
<i>Total voters</i>	5,515,977	50.03
<i>Registered voters</i>	11,025,823	

Source: National Electoral Commission. Results include the three municipalities that voted on 15 February after a storm-related postponement. Vote shares for candidates are percentages of valid votes. Blank and null votes are percentages of total voters.

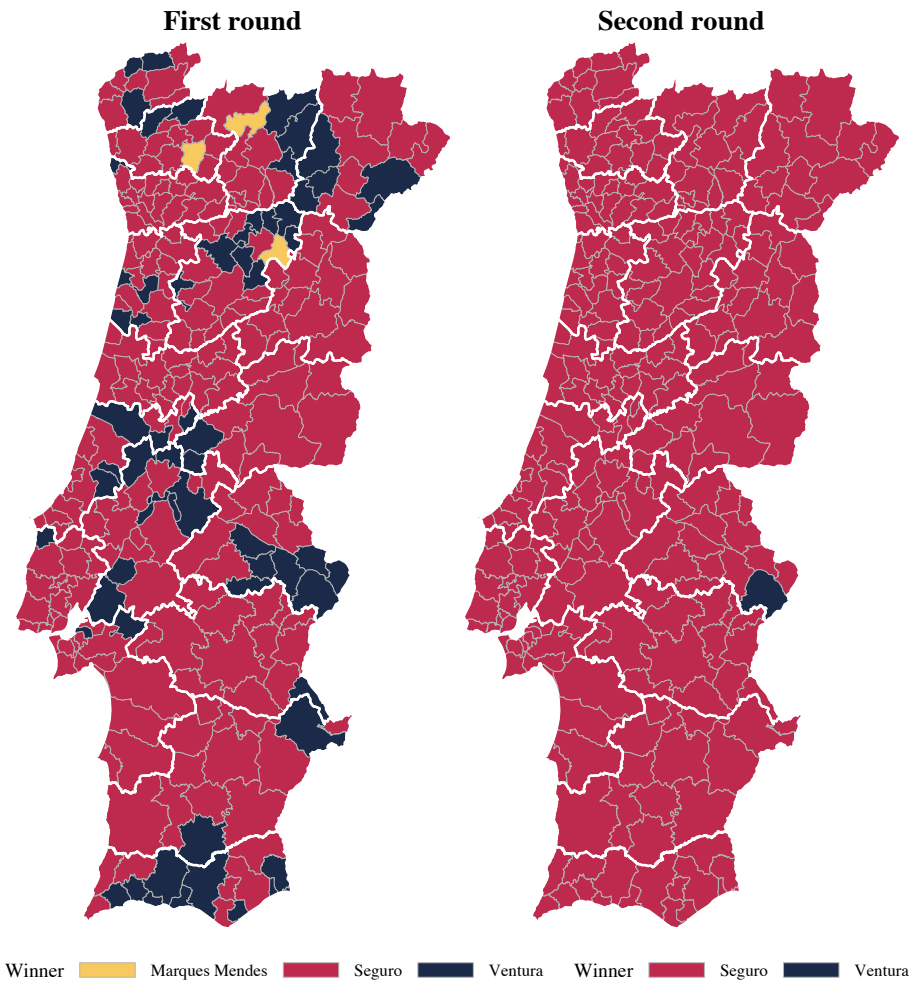
longed interruptions to electricity, water, and telecommunications. A state of calamity was declared in 68 municipalities, and three (Arruda dos Vinhos, Golegã, and Alcácer do Sal) postponed voting to 15 February, a decision without precedent in Portuguese electoral history. Turnout fell most in the municipalities under calamity, by about twice the national decline, and the drop was steeper in rural, poorer, and less educated areas (Pratas et al., 2026).

Figure 5 shows the geographic shift between rounds. Ventura had won 80 of 308 domestic municipalities in the first round. In the second, he held only two, Elvas (Portalegre) and São Vicente (Madeira). Seguro won all 20 domestic districts, including Faro, the only mainland district Ventura had carried in the first round. Ventura also won the external vote, though he led only among voters registered in the Americas while Seguro took the remaining regions.

Municipality-level ecological regressions for the run-off largely mirror the first round (Figure 6). Ventura performed worse in municipalities that are wealthier, older, more educated, more secular, and more densely populated, and better where crime rates are higher. The share of foreign residents, which showed no significant association in the first round, now favors Ventura, though only at the 90 percent level.

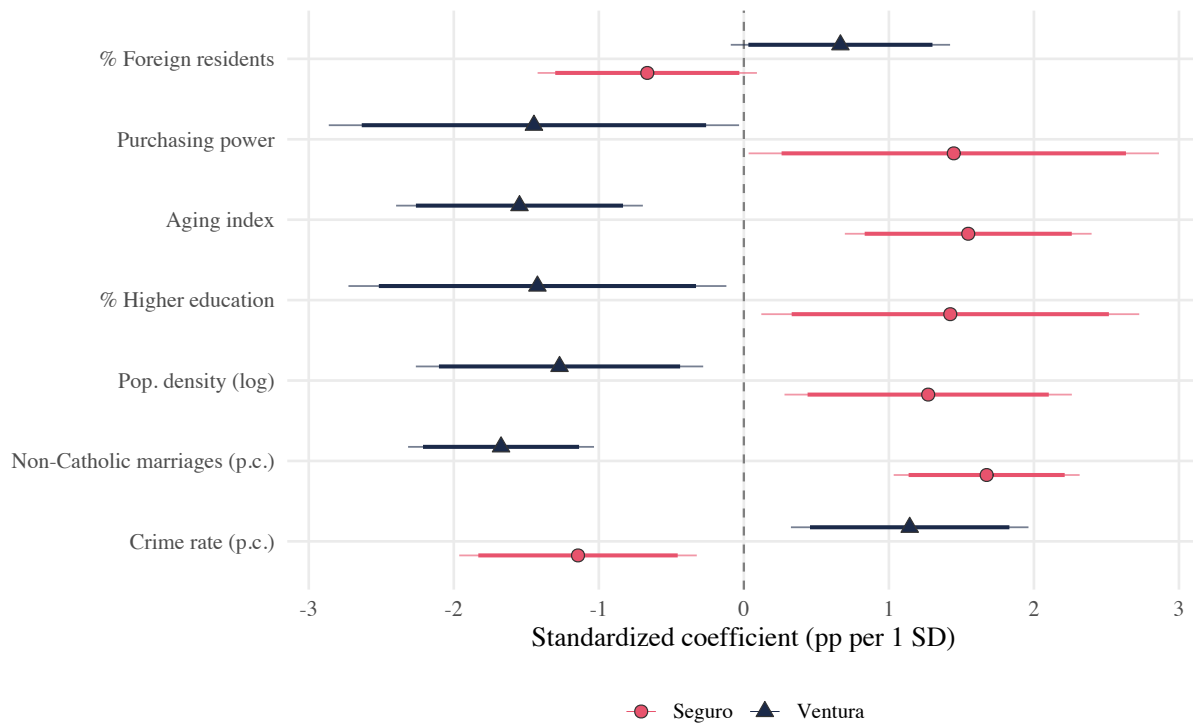
Data from the ICS-Iscte/Pitagórica/GfK exit poll further adds that the gender gap

Figure 5: *Winner by municipality.*



Source: Ministry of the Interior. 278 mainland (continental) municipalities. The Azores and Madeira regions, as well as the votes cast abroad, are not shown. District boundaries overlaid in white. Municipalities overlaid in gray. Three municipalities (Arruda dos Vinhos, Golegã, Alcácer do Sal) postponed to 15 February due to storms.

Figure 6: Municipality-level correlates of second-round vote share.



Notes: Standardized OLS coefficients with robust standard errors. Coefficients represent change in candidate vote share in percentage points (pp) per one standard deviation (SD) increase in each covariate. $N = 308$ municipalities (all domestic municipalities, including the Azores and Madeira). p.c. = per capita. Since only two candidates contest the second round, coefficients are symmetric. *Sources:* Statistics Portugal and Census 2021. Thick and thin bars represent 90 and 95 percent CIs, respectively.

may have widened in the second round: about 70 percent of women but 57 percent of men backed Seguro. His margin was also wider among voters over 65 and the university-educated. These patterns match comparative work on radical right voting, where support skews male and the gender gap is partly mediated by attitudes (Spierings and Zaslove, 2017; Mudde, 2019).

6.3 Who crossed over?

To trace these movements at the individual level, we draw on a post-electoral survey conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences (ICS-ULisboa) and the survey firm GfK

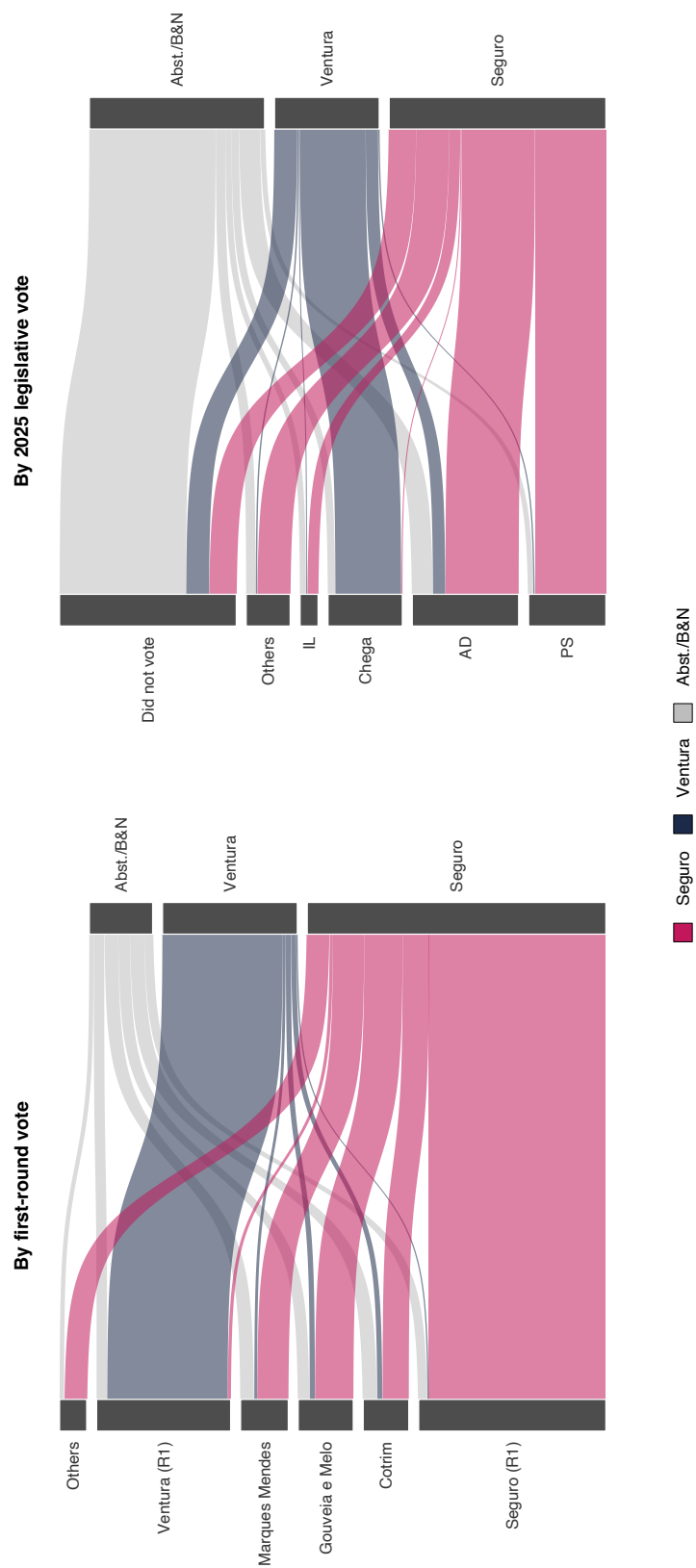
Metris (Lobo and Ferreira da Silva, 2026). It comprises a sample of 1,503 face-to-face responses across mainland Portugal, fielded between 14 February and 14 March 2026.

Vote transfers confirm a broad anti-Ventura convergence (Figure 7). Among Cotrim's first-round voters, Seguro drew 58 percent and Ventura about 11 percent, while just under a third backed neither. Among voters of Gouveia e Melo and Marques Mendes, Seguro drew roughly two-thirds and Ventura fewer than one in ten. On the left, almost nine in ten voters chose Seguro, the rest abstained or spoiled their ballot – and, at least in the sample, not one chose Ventura. First-round fragmentation on the left therefore proved largely costless: three candidates split that vote, but the division shaped the first-round arithmetic and not the second-round result. The same pattern emerges from the 2025 legislative vote: about two-thirds of AD voters chose Seguro, 12 percent chose Ventura, and a fifth backed neither.

For a sizable share of Seguro's vote, the run-off was an instance of negative voting, a ballot cast against one candidate rather than for another (Kernell, 1977; Gant and Sigelman, 1985). In the survey, 28.5 percent of his voters reported voting *against* Ventura rather than *for* him, compared with 3.6 percent of Ventura's voters who described their vote as anti-Seguro. The asymmetry was sharpest among the voters Seguro borrowed: one in ten of his own first-round electorate cast an anti-Ventura vote, against about half of those who came from the right and most of those who came from the left.

This shaped the size of Seguro's margin rather than the outcome. Had every anti-Ventura voter abstained, his share would have fallen from 66.8 to 59.1 percent, a narrower but still comfortable win. Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2024) report the same for the 2022 French run-off. The pattern repeats among the right-wing voters who crossed over: Seguro drew 88 percent of them, and 78 percent once negative voters are removed. Cotrim's voters relied on negative voting more than any other group. Removing negative voters cuts Seguro's share among them by eighteen points, and by seven among the voters of Marques Mendes.

Figure 7: Reported second-round vote by first-round vote (left) and by 2025 legislative vote (right).

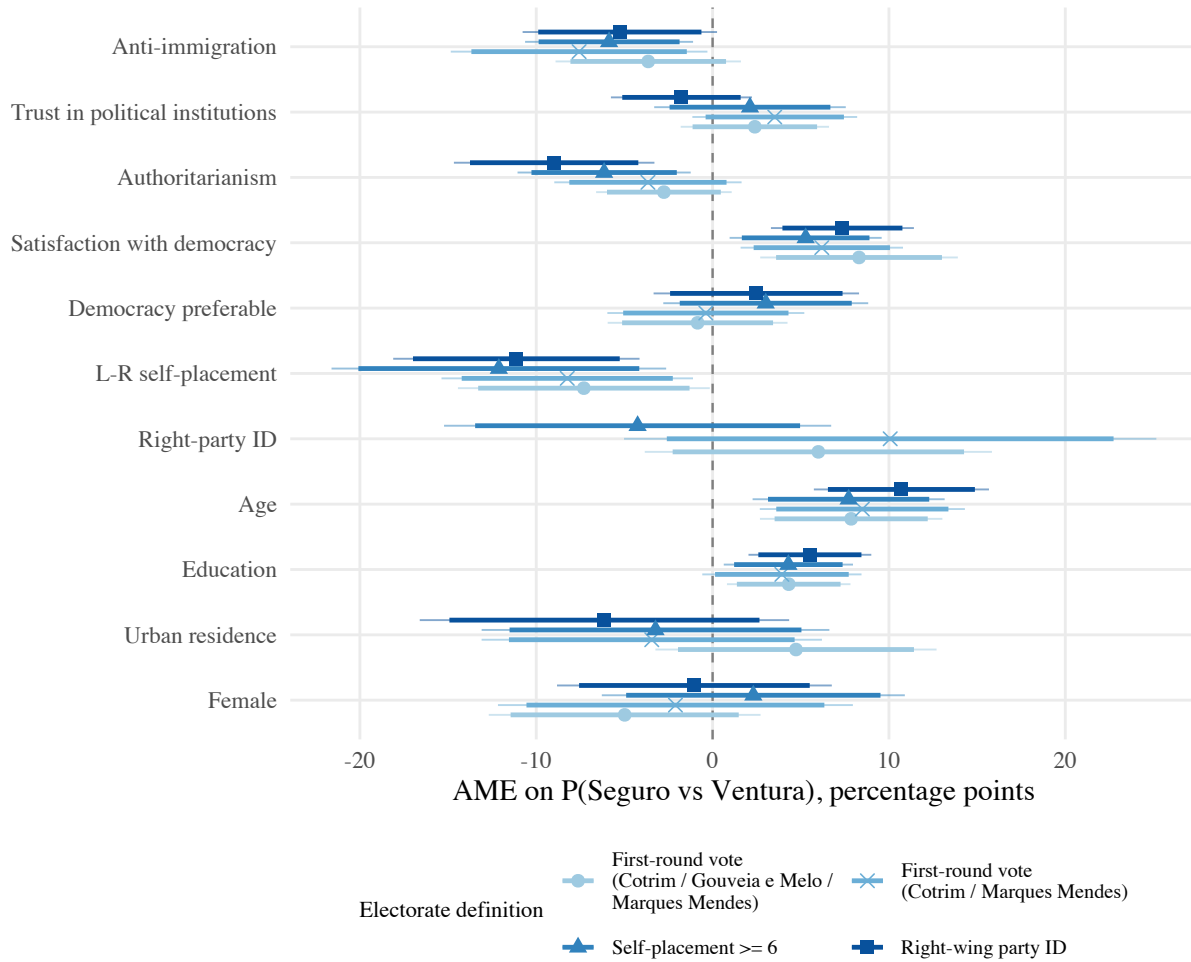


Notes: “Abst./B&N” groups those who abstained in the run-off with those who cast a blank or null ballot. “Others” groups the minor candidates in the left panel and the smaller parties in the right panel. Respondents who did not report a second-round vote are excluded, as are those who did not turn out or spoiled their ballot in the first round (left panel) or in the 2025 legislative election (right panel). Source: ICS-ULisboa/GfK Metris post-electoral survey.

Figure 8 shows logistic regressions of the choice between Seguro and Ventura in the run-off. The question is who crossed over, so we exclude Ventura's own first-round voters, 97 percent of whom stayed with him. The attitudinal correlates are an anti-immigration index (six items on immigration and its relation to the economy, crime, jobs, public services, and immigrant admission; $\alpha = 0.77$), an index of trust in political institutions (parliament, government, and parties; $\alpha = 0.81$), and single items for authoritarianism, satisfaction with democracy, and the belief that democracy is always preferable. The models also include left-right self-placement, identification with a right-wing party, and sociodemographic controls. Who counts as a right-wing voter is not self-evident, so we estimate the model on four sub-samples.

Two attitudinal predictors separate the two electorates in every sub-sample. A one standard deviation increase in satisfaction with democracy raises the probability of choosing Seguro by between 5.3 and 8.3 percentage points, and a one standard deviation move to the right lowers it by between 7.3 and 12.1 points. Hostility to immigration and support for strong-leader rule point the same way, at between 3.7 and 7.6 points and between 2.8 and 9.0 points, though they clear the 95 percent threshold in only two of the four sub-samples, which sample sizes of this order would lead one to expect. Three variables carry no weight: trust in political institutions, abstract endorsement of democracy as the best system, and identification with a right-wing party. The last matters most for our argument. Party identification here means identification with the PSD or IL, which covers between 90 and 97 percent of cases, and among those voters it did not distinguish who chose Seguro from who chose Ventura. Therefore, the cordon against Ventura followed from what center-right voters believed and where they placed themselves, not from cues their parties never sent.

Figure 8: *Choosing Seguro over Ventura in the run-off.*



Notes: Average marginal effects (AME) on the probability of voting Seguro rather than Ventura, estimated on four sub-samples defined by first-round vote (with and without Gouveia e Melo), left-right self-placement (at six or above on a 0-10 scale), and right-wing party identification. Samples exclude Ventura's first-round voters and comprise, in that order, 198, 132, 210, and 183 respondents. All estimates are weighted. The attitudinal predictors and age are standardized on the full sample, so a one-unit change is one standard deviation and the sub-samples remain comparable. Party identification is constant by construction in the fourth sub-sample. Thick and thin lines are 90 and 95 percent CIs. *Source:* ICS-ULisboa/GfK Metris post-electoral survey.

7 Conclusion

The 2026 Portuguese presidential election poses a puzzle about electoral coordination. Right-of-center candidates won close to two-thirds of the first-round vote, yet the presidency went to the center-left. The answer lies in where coordination failed and where it

was not needed. The first-round result illustrates a widespread coordination problem under two-round systems (Cox, 1997): the center-right electorate split across multiple candidacies, and no single candidate could concentrate the vote. Fragmentation did not merely weaken the right. It let through its candidate whose electorate had the lowest potential to expand in the second round.

The second half belongs to the run-off. Voters across the ideological spectrum coalesced against Ventura without any party explicitly asking them to do so. For a large share of Seguro's voters, this was negative voting, concentrated among those who had previously voted for other right-wing candidates. What distinguished those voters who crossed over the left-right divide to vote against Ventura was their greater ideological moderation, their lower hostility towards immigration, and their lower political disaffection. This negative voting did not decide who won the election, but widened Seguro's margin significantly.

Two qualifications should be noted. First, the voter-led barrier against Ventura operated almost entirely outside his existing electorate: *Chega* sympathizers were the most loyal, as 97 percent of his first-round voters stayed with him from the first to the second rounds. Second, given the sub-sample sizes and the cross-sectional design, we cannot tell whether attitudes drove the choice or were reported to fit it.

Still, these findings qualify how researchers think about reactions to the radical right. Parties matter for coordination, but voters do not always need parties to coordinate for them: a sufficiently large attitudinal distance from the radical right may produce a barrier across partisan lines, even where mainstream parties stay ambiguous between exclusion and accommodation. Portugal is currently such a case, with the center-right excluding *Chega* from government while practicing ad hoc toleration and selective legislative cooperation (Heinze, 2022). Partisanship is also a weaker constraint on the vote than is often assumed, and it can fail even among those who are supposed to be a party's most loyal voters (Ferrinho Lopes and Lisi, 2025). The con-

trast with the French *front républicain* may therefore not be that Portugal built a weaker barrier, but that it built one at a different level, and without the parties that built the French one. How long such a barrier can hold is an open question, resting as it does on the attitudinal structure of an electorate whose parties no longer agree on where the boundary lies (on voter responses to accommodation, see Krause et al., 2023; Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2026).

Seguro was inaugurated on 9 March 2026 with the highest vote total ever recorded for a Portuguese president, into an office that has gained weight as parliamentary majorities have become harder to assemble. He faces a legislature in which the governing coalition lacks a majority and *Chega* holds the largest opposition bloc. How he uses the veto and the dissolution prerogative, and how visible a president he chooses to be, will shape Portuguese semi-presidentialism in an era of three-bloc competition.

The election confirmed that the radical right is now a structural feature of Portuguese politics, in presidential as well as legislative arenas. It also showed both the strength of the barrier against it and how contingent that barrier is, resting as it does on what non-*Chega* voters happen to believe rather than on what their parties do. Under what conditions voters can sustain a cordon their parties will not is a question for future work.

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