

The Higher the Office, the Narrower the Path?

Youth Political Representation in Portugal

Hugo Ferrinho Lopes[†] 

Patrícia Silva[‡] 

Forthcoming, *Political Youth Representation — A Global Perspective* (Palgrave),
edited by Kira R. Kurz and Brittany Anlar

Abstract

This chapter explores youth political representation in Portugal, focusing on how the election of young adults has evolved across different institutions and government levels. It argues that national and executive positions present greater barriers to youth representation compared to local and legislative roles. Using three data sources, the study reveals a decline in youth representation over time. Young adults are more represented in legislative bodies, especially at the subnational level, but remain underrepresented in higher offices. The study also shows that patterns of youth representation vary across parties and regions. Radical left parties challenge the idea that lower-level offices are steppingstones for young politicians. Youth representation is more common in less populated interior regions than in urban coastal areas. These findings suggest that factors like incumbency advantage, electoral rules, political competition, and intra-party dynamics shape access to office and influence candidate recruitment. The chapter contributes to broader debates on whether decentralization fosters descriptive representation.

Keywords: youth political representation; political elites; decentralization; political parties; Portugal.

[†]Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon. Av. Prof. Aníbal Bettencourt 9, 1600-189 Lisbon, Portugal. [hugo.lopes@ics.ulisboa.pt]

[‡]Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies (GOVCOPP), University of Aveiro, Campus Universitário de Santiago, 3810-193 Aveiro, Portugal. [patriciasilva@ua.pt]

Introduction

Political parties hold the key to political office, yet for young adults, this key often remains out of reach. Despite voter preferences for younger candidates (Sevi, 2021; Eshima and Smith, 2022; McClean and Ono, 2023; Kurz et al., 2025), young people remain underrepresented in political institutions (Stockemer and Sundström, 2022). Party leaders act as gatekeepers of generational renewal, favoring experienced, older candidates while limiting young members' access to eligible positions on electoral lists (Gherghina, 2021).

The underrepresentation of young people raises concerns about democratic legitimacy and representation (see Bruter and Harrison, 2009). Limited youth political influence affects policy outcomes, such as social spending (McClean, 2022). Younger parliamentarians advocate more consistently for youth interests than their older counterparts (Rentrop, 2022), and even when senior MPs champion youth-related issues, this often stems from internal pressure by younger legislators (Borghetto et al., 2022).

Portugal follows this broader pattern. Young people face structural and institutional barriers, including limited financial resources, restricted access to influential networks, and party hierarchies that favor seniority. As a result, their representation remains largely symbolic, with a presence in key political roles lagging behind their demographic weight. Although youth underrepresentation in Portugal is not unique, the country provides a relevant case of study. At the national level, the closed-list proportional representation (PR) system often disadvantages young candidates, as party leadership controls candidate ranking and tends to place them in lower or unelectable positions (Dhima et al., 2021). At the subnational level, young adults may find a stepping stone for national political careers. As Sipinen and colleagues (2024: 1) emphasize, there is an “unspoken assumption that young people’s political careers typically begin in local politics,” yet little research has examined this trajectory. A lack of systematic data on youth recruitment at the subnational level further obscures this process.

Portugal is thus an important case for studying youth representation — not only due to its limited presence in international scholarship (with exceptions such as Jalali et al. 2024) but also because of its centralized political system and closed-list PR rules. These factors make it a less likely case for youth inclusion at the national level. This chapter presents longitudinal data on Portugal, examining both national and local elected offices. We argue that legislative bodies provide greater opportunities for youth inclusion than executive roles. Holding a government position—particularly a ministerial portfolio—is widely regarded as the pinnacle of a political career (Blondel, 1985). Consequently, the transition from legislative to executive office is expected to follow Putnam’s “law of increasing disproportion” (1976), whereby access to higher positions becomes increasingly restricted, leading to increasing disproportion relative to the general population. While this pattern does not hold for women’s representation in Portugal (Tavares de Almeida, 2022), evidence suggests it may apply to age (Ferrinho Lopes et al., 2021). Moreover, we hypothesize that decentralization facilitates youth representation, as more decentralized systems tend to create more inclusive candidate selection processes (Harmel, 1981; Sipinen et al., 2024). We therefore expect youth to be better represented in local than in national politics.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we contextualize the Portuguese case within broader trends, highlighting the limited research on youth representation in the country. Next, we present our data sources and empirical strategy. We then analyze the results before concluding with implications for scholarship and future research directions.

Youth Representation in a Centralized Political Landscape

Portugal offers a relevant case for studying youth political representation. As a centralized state, it is expected to have more restrictive candidate selection processes, favoring

party elites over grassroots participation (Jalali and Sanches, 2022; Jalali et al., 2024). In contrast, more decentralized systems typically allow for more inclusive selection, facilitating the emergence of younger politicians (Harmel, 1981). Political parties play a central role in the candidate selection process. In Portugal, they hold a constitutionally protected monopoly over political representation (Jalali, 2007), making them the sole legitimate vehicle for parliamentary candidates. The country’s closed-list PR system further strengthens party leadership’s control over electoral lists (Gallagher et al., 1988).

Electoral competition in Portugal has been largely dominated by the center-right Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the center-left Socialist Party (PS), which have alternated in government since the democratic transition in 1976. These parties are highly cartelized (Pratas and Bizzarro, 2022), having emerged through a top-down process after democratization (Jalali, 2007). As Katz (2001) points out, cartelized parties maintain strict control over candidate selection while creating an illusion of inclusiveness by involving rank-and-file members to some extent. However, ultimate decision-making power remains concentrated within party leadership.

Youth representation in Portuguese politics has remained low, particularly at the national level. Portuguese political elites—especially MPs—are predominantly middle-aged men (Teixeira, 2009; Ferrinho Lopes, 2025b). The share of young MPs has remained below 20% since the 1990s (Ferrinho Lopes et al., 2021), declining further in recent years. In 2019, only 14.78% of MPs were 35 or younger, dropping to 10% in 2022 and 8.65% in 2024. These figures contrast with the declining share of young people in the population (from 20.5% to 16.3%, according to Pordata), suggesting that barriers to youth representation extend beyond demographic shifts.

Comparative data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) further highlight Portugal’s shortcomings. Between 2013 and 2022, the average age of Portuguese MPs increased from 45.8 to 49.04 years. The IPU’s youth representation targets for 2035—at least 15% of MPs under 30 and 45% under 45—remain far from being met. While 37% of MPs are

under 45 (8 percentage points below target), only 5.6% are under 30, underscoring the persistence of generational barriers in candidate selection.

Although party youth wings have played a role in promoting younger candidates, their influence appears more symbolic than substantive. Between 2002 and 2019, youth wings nominated 32% of all MPs under 30, but their members report that despite internal support, they struggle to secure winnable positions, as senior party leaders ultimately control electoral lists (Jalali et al., 2024). This reinforces generational power imbalances, where youth involvement is encouraged but rarely translates into real decision-making power.

This pattern extends to local and European Parliament (EP) elections, despite differences in the number of seats available. Youth participation is generally higher in local elections, where larger assemblies create more opportunities. However, while selection processes can be more open at the local level, party youth members are often sidelined in EP elections, where candidate selection is more centralized (Jalali et al., 2025).

Portuguese local elections offer a distinct opportunity for younger candidates. Unlike the national government, which is formed through parliamentary approval, municipal assemblies, and executives are directly elected. This structure introduces a more personalized dimension to local elections, where candidates' individual qualities and connections to the electorate play a greater role.

Other institutional factors also influence youth representation. The closed-list PR system at the national level obscures individual candidate characteristics and gives party leadership greater control over selection. This makes it more difficult for younger or lesser-known candidates to win seats, particularly compared to open-list systems (see, e.g., Hofmane's chapter in this volume, for Latvia). In contrast, at the local level, voters elect a collegial executive body consisting of a mayor and several councilors, depending on the municipality's size. Mayors, in particular, have gained increasing prominence and authority compared to other elected officials. The use of first-past-the-post plurality for

mayoral elections and closed-list PR for municipal councilors, combined with broad executive powers, reinforces personalized voting (Fernandes et al., 2016). Consequently, voters may place greater emphasis on individual candidates’ traits—including demographic factors—when making electoral decisions, potentially improving youth representation.

This contrast between local and national institutions presents a puzzle for youth representation and serves as a test of the “higher, the fewer” hypothesis (Bashevkin, 1985) or, as Putnam (1976) termed it, the “law of increasing disproportion”, as it raises critical questions about how varying institutional contexts influence the engagement and representation of young people in political processes. While local elections offer more direct voter engagement and an emphasis on personal appeal, national-level offices are expected to remain largely inaccessible to young politicians due to party control and the centralized political system. This chapter explores these divergent patterns, shedding light on how political structures can either facilitate or obstruct the inclusion of younger voices in governance.

Empirical Strategy

This chapter examines youth political representation in Portugal’s local and national institutions, highlighting disparities across legislative and executive bodies. It investigates how these differences evolve over time and across parties, with a particular focus on the role of decentralization in shaping youth inclusion. The guiding hypothesis is that the higher the office, the narrower the path, meaning that higher-level and executive positions impose greater barriers to youth representation than legislative roles, particularly at the local level.

We rely on three data sources. First, we update existing datasets on MPs (Freire, 2009a,b; Freire et al., 2012, 2016; Ferrinho Lopes et al., 2021). Second, we use data on government ministers from the SEGov project (Camerlo et al., 2021). Third, we lever-

age original data on municipal assemblies and executives (councils), collected through a partnership between the Permanent Youth Observatory (OPJ) at the Institute of Social Sciences (University of Lisbon), the Portuguese Presidency, and the Interior Ministry. While the national data spans five decades and the municipal dataset covers elections from 2001 to 2021, we present all available national data points to provide a comprehensive view of youth representation trends in Portugal.

To compare youth representation across institutions, we measure both the share of different age groups in political bodies and the Youth Representation Index (YRI). The YRI is a relative measure, calculated by dividing the proportion of individuals aged 18–35 in a given institution by their share in the adult voting-age population (see Sundström and Stockemer, 2021). A YRI score of 1 indicates proportional representation, while values below or above 1 indicate underrepresentation or overrepresentation, respectively.

We define young individuals as those aged 18–35, following common practice in political science research (Joshi, 2013; Krook and Nugent, 2018; Stockemer and Sundström, 2018; Stockemer et al., 2023). This age bracket is widely used in international datasets, such as the Age Representation Index, which compares the share of different age groups in cabinet positions relative to their proportion in the electorate (Stockemer and Kolodziejczyk, 2024). The Inter-Parliamentary Union also applies multiple thresholds, sometimes extending the upper limit to 45. Similarly, Norris and Franklin (1997) conceptualize the “younger generation” as those aged 35 or younger. Since this study covers youth representation across different political institutions, including executive bodies, it is important to acknowledge that political cabinets worldwide rarely include individuals under 30 in prominent leadership roles (see Stockemer and Kolodziejczyk, 2024: 7). The 18–35 category thus provides a consistent and widely accepted benchmark for analysis.

As a single-country case study, we rely on official population data from the Census and Pordata, aligning it with the closest election year. However, the closest available age group to our definition of young adults is 20–34 years. Additionally, municipal assemblies include

both directly elected members and parish presidents, but our dataset accounts only for the former. As a result, our estimates may slightly overstate youth representation.

Results

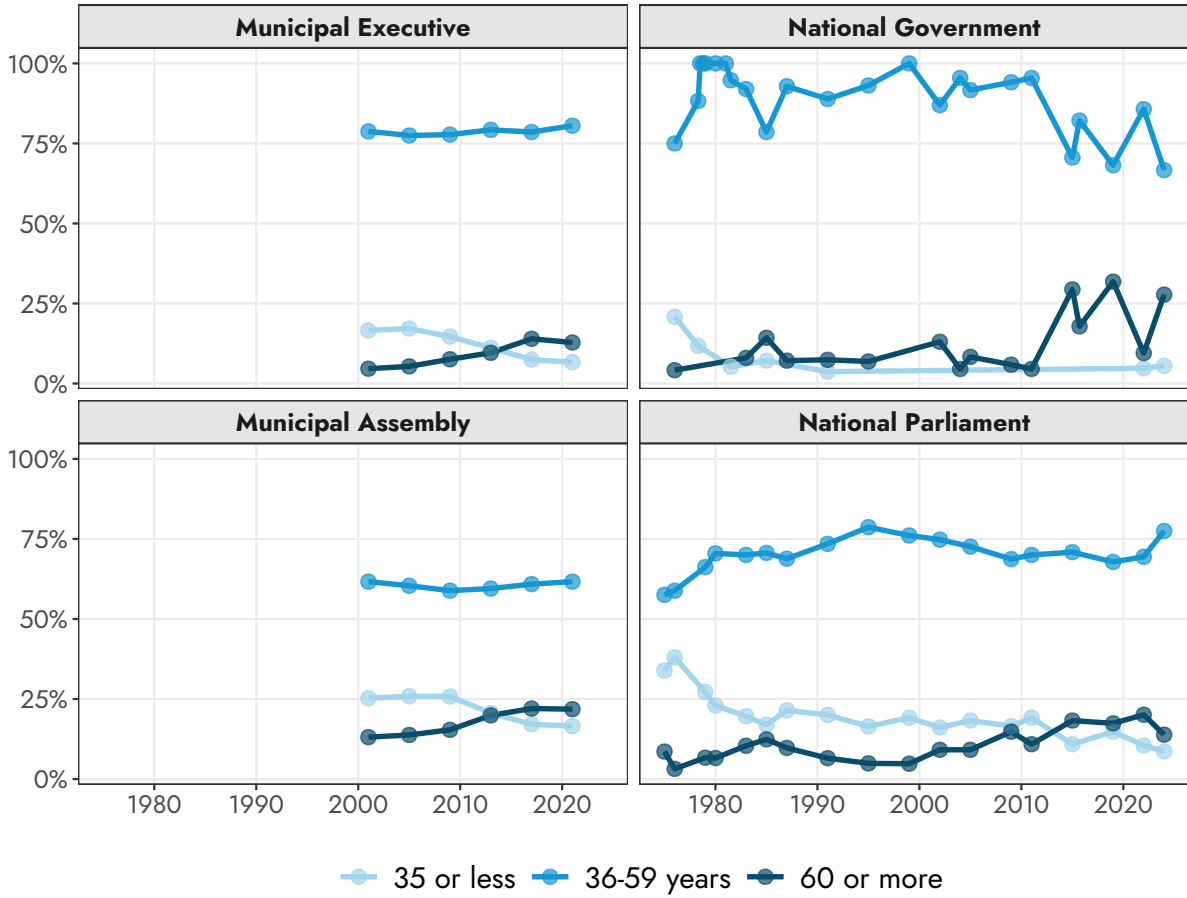
The Share of Young Politicians in Institutions and Parties

Portuguese elected officials have gradually aged throughout the democratic period. At the national level, the average age of MPs has risen steadily over five decades, from 41.7 years in 1975 to 48.3 years in 2024, while the average age of ministers increased from 45.3 to 54.3 years. At the subnational level, this trend is also evident but less pronounced. Between 2001 and 2021, the average age of municipal assembly members rose from 45 to 48.4 years, while municipal executives saw an increase from 44.7 to 48.7 years (data not shown). This indicates that aging is occurring at both levels but more gradually at the local level. However, it is important to note that the national data spans 50 years, while the subnational data covers only 20.

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of age representation over time across three age groups: up to 35 years, 36–59 years, and 60 years or older. Across all institutions, middle-aged politicians have consistently dominated political representation, maintaining a strong hold on power. In contrast, younger cohorts have faced persistent challenges, with their numbers declining as older politicians replace them.

The decline in youth representation appears to reflect the aging of part of the initial cohort of young politicians who entered office after the democratic transition, rather than a direct displacement of younger individuals by older ones. As these representatives aged beyond the 35-year threshold, their continued incumbency contributed to the decline in youth representation. This suggests that declining youth representation stems more from incumbency than from demographic shifts among new officeholders—an observation that

Figure 1: Age group representation in national and subnational political institutions (%).



aligns with Hofman's (this volume) analysis on how turnover benefits descriptive youth representation. However, without individual-level career data, this interpretation remains tentative.

This trend is particularly evident in the national executive, where only 12 ministerial portfolios have been held by individuals aged 35 or younger. The first government of Mário Soares (1976–1978) appointed four young ministers to five portfolios: António Barreto (Commerce and Tourism, July–November 1976; Agriculture and Fisheries, from November 1976 onward), José Medeiros Ferreira (External Affairs), Mário Sottomayor Cardia (Education and Scientific Research), and Henrique Medina Carreira (Finance). His second government (1978) included Jaime Gama as Interior Minister, while the eighth

government (1981–1983) under Balsemão appointed Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa as Minister for Parliamentary Affairs. After a four-decade gap, young ministers returned to the ministerial elite. The government of António Costa (2022–2024) included Marina Gonçalves (Housing), and the government of Luís Montenegro (2024–present) appointed Margarida Balseiro Lopes (Youth and Modernization).

In Parliament, youth representation has declined over time, with the oldest age cohort surpassing the youngest only after the 2015 elections. After the 1976 general elections, 84 MPs (38% of the legislature) were aged 35 or younger, and 7 MPs (3.17%) were 60 or older. Since then, the proportion of young MPs has steadily decreased. As of the current legislature (2024 onwards), only 20 MPs (8.7%) are aged 35 or younger, while the number of MPs aged 60 or older reached a peak of 46 (20.1%) by 2022.

At the subnational level, our data is available only from the early 2000s onward, but observed trends align with those at the national level. With the exception of the national executive, where this shift occurred earlier, older politicians began surpassing their younger counterparts in the early 2010s, mirroring patterns in the national legislature. More importantly, Portuguese local political bodies underwent a major institutional reform in 2013 with the introduction of term limits for presidents of municipal executives and parishes, which introduced exogenous variation with significant consequences for incumbency advantage and fiscal policy (see Lopes da Fonseca, 2017; Veiga et al., 2017; Lopes da Fonseca, 2020). This reform was expected to promote generational renewal in municipal executives, thereby increasing youth representation. However, our findings indicate the opposite trend. A recent study on presidents of municipal executives identified a discontinuity following the reform, with a decline in the share of older presidents and an increase in middle-aged presidents. However, this effect did not persist beyond the subsequent election in 2017, after which the pre-reform linear trend resumed (Ferrinho Lopes, 2025a). These findings raise important questions for future research on why term limits may, contrary to expectations, have no effect or even hinder youth representation.

If voters express a preference for younger politicians (Sevi, 2021; Eshima and Smith, 2022; McClean and Ono, 2023), why has Portugal experienced the emergence of an aging political elite? Following the transition to democracy, the initial need for generational renewal facilitated the rise of a younger cohort of leaders. However, over time, the criteria for selecting political elites—anti-dictatorship credentials, presidential influence, and party loyalty (Tavares de Almeida, 2022) — waned, leading to stagnation in government rejuvenation (Ferrinho Lopes et al., 2021).

To what extent does youth representation vary across political parties? Table 1 presents the percentage of young politicians across parties and institutions, offering insight into the generational composition of political representation at different levels of government. To clarify the scope of the analysis, Table 1 includes only politicians elected while explicitly running for the party under study. This approach ensures that the focus remains on individuals directly associated with the party’s platform and identity. Consequently, at the local level, coalitions and citizen electoral groups were excluded, as their composition often involves multiple parties and/or independent candidates, making it difficult to attribute electoral success or representation solely to a single party.

Our findings do not fully support the expectation of increasing disproportionality in political representation, particularly when accounting for variation across parties. This hypothesis suggests that access to higher political offices becomes increasingly restricted, creating a pattern where younger politicians are more prominent at the subnational level (e.g., municipal executives and assemblies), while national institutions exhibit a sharp decline in their representation. Indeed, national office—especially government positions—is often considered the apex of a political career (Blondel, 1985: 7), which may explain why ministers tend to be older than junior ministers, as well as members of both the national and European parliaments (Ferrinho Lopes et al., 2021), and older than municipal executives and assembly members (Figure 1).

The comparison between the representation of younger politicians in municipal assem-

Table 1: Youth representation across institutions, by political party (%).

	Municipal Assembly	Municipal Executive	National Parliament	National Government
BE	23.2	2.2	28.2	—
CDS-PP	20.1	13.2	19.2	2.7
CH	10.3	0	9.5	—
IL	17.4	0	23.5	—
L	50	0	16.7	—
PAN	24.5	—	28.6	—
PCP	24.1	0	24.3	—
PEV	16.7	0	30	—
PS	21.4	11.7	15.5	5
PSD	23.1	13.5	20.2	2.5
Total	21.5	12.1	18.5	2.3

Notes: This table shows the share of elected officials elected by each political party. At the subnational level, coalitions and citizen electoral groups are excluded to ensure each elected official is matched to their respective party. Party abbreviations: BE: *Bloco de Esquerda* (Left Bloc); CDS-PP: *CDS-Partido Popular* (CDS-People’s Party); CH: *Chega* (Enough); PCP: *Partido Comunista Português* (Portuguese Communist Party); PS: *Partido Socialista* (Socialist Party); PSD: *Partido Social Democrata* (Social Democratic Party); IL: *Iniciativa Liberal* (Liberal Initiative); L: *Livre* (Free); PAN: *Pessoas-Animaís-Natureza* (People-Animals-Nature); PEV: *Partido Ecologista “Os Verdes”* (Ecologist Party “The Greens”).

blies and the national parliament, however, reveals significant variation across parties. While Putnam’s law suggests a decline in youth representation at higher levels of governance, Table 1 shows that radical left parties tend to deviate from this expectation. For instance, the Left Bloc (BE) increased its share of politicians aged 35 or younger from 23.2% in municipal assemblies to 28.2% in the national parliament. A similar pattern is observed in the PEV, where youth representation rose from 16.7% in municipal assemblies to 30% in the national parliament and, to a lesser degree, in PCP (from 24.1% to 24.3%, respectively). Conversely, mainstream parties show a decline. In the Socialist Party (PS), youth representation drops from 21.4% in municipal assemblies to 15.5% in the national parliament. A similar but less pronounced decline occurs in the Social Democrats (PSD) and the People’s Party (CDS-PP).

These findings suggest that while some parties align with Putnam’s predictions, others deviate considerably, with younger politicians achieving higher or consistent representation at the national level, particularly in left parties. These variations underscore the importance of party-specific factors and broader political dynamics in shaping representation patterns. Moreover, it has been consistently demonstrated that youth representation is influenced by candidate selection dynamics and structural differences in electoral contexts Belschner (see 2023); Jalali et al. (see 2025). At the municipal level, the larger number of seats facilitates broader candidate inclusion, enabling greater representation of younger politicians. This expanded pool of opportunities allows parties to accommodate diverse candidates, including youth, without significant trade-offs. In contrast, at the national level, where the number of seats is more limited, competition for candidacies intensifies, reducing youth representation. Notably, this pattern appears most pronounced in parties with autonomous youth wings, which seem better positioned to integrate younger candidates at the subnational level.

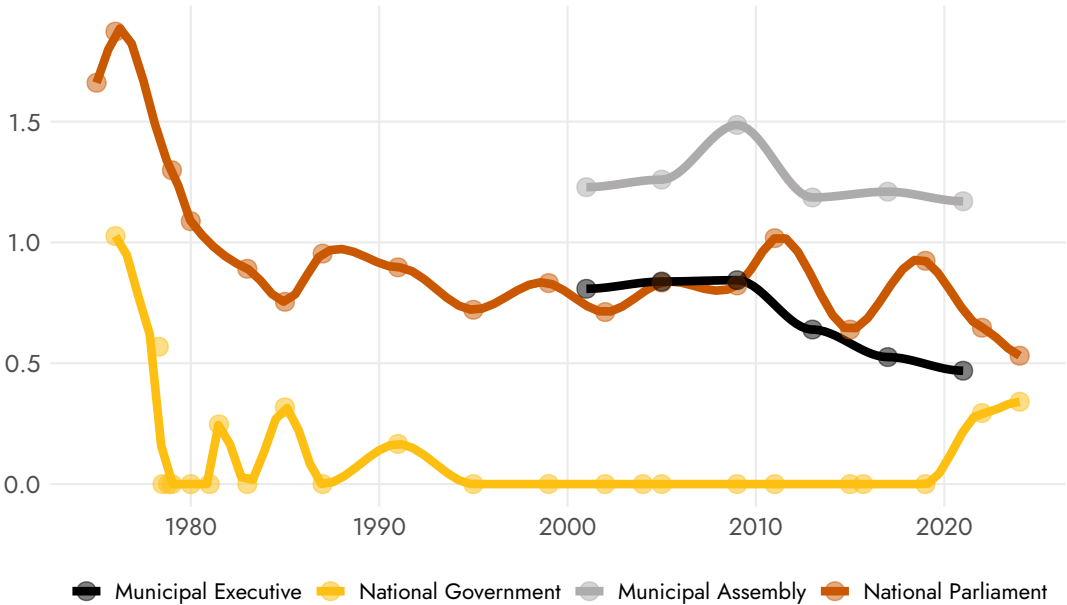
Youth Representation Relative to the Young Population

Thus far, we have not examined the extent to which youth representation aligns with the share of young people in the voting-age population. From a substantive representation standpoint, research on gender and race suggests that women and minorities are better represented by politicians from their respective groups (Mansbridge, 1999; Swers, 2002). Recent studies extend this argument to age, showing that young adults are more effectively represented by young political elites, while older citizens are not disadvantaged by their presence (McClean, 2022). Accordingly, the proportion of young MPs should ideally reflect their demographic weight in policymaking.

Figure 2 illustrates the Youth Representation Index (for those aged 35 and under). Across most political institutions, youth are persistently underrepresented, as indicated

by YRI values consistently below 1. Municipal assemblies, however, are an exception. While most Portuguese political institutions have shown stable patterns of youth underrepresentation from 1975 to 2024, municipal assemblies have consistently reported YRI values above 1. Notably, in 2009, the YRI for municipal assemblies peaked at 1.49, indicating a nearly 50% overrepresentation of young adults. Overall, municipal assemblies have demonstrated youth representation levels that exceed their demographic weight. However, we reiterate that, due to data limitations (see section on data and methods), our measure may slightly overestimate representation.

Figure 2: Youth Representation Index in national and subnational political institutions.



Notes: The YRI compares the share of young adults in political institutions to their share in the voting-age population. A score of 1 indicates proportional representation, values above 1 signify overrepresentation, and values below 1 indicate underrepresentation.

This contrast underscores the varying accessibility of political roles for young adults, revealing that local-level positions in municipal assemblies are generally more attainable than national roles within government or parliament. This disparity suggests that the pathways to political engagement for youth may be more favorable at the local level, potentially encouraging greater participation in community governance. The national

parliament shows a slightly higher YRI than the national government but has remained below 1 for most of the observed period since 1980. By comparison, municipal executives, though faring better than the national government (which has maintained a near-zero YRI), have seen youth representation decline over time.

This trend is particularly relevant given the 2013 institutional reform that introduced term limits for presidents of municipal executives and parishes. As noted earlier, while not as-if random, the reform was expected to foster generational renewal by increasing competition and expanding opportunities for younger politicians. Term limits, as highlighted by Anlar (2024), can play a crucial role in enhancing youth representation in U.S. State Legislatures by creating opportunities for young candidates to enter office. The Portuguese case, however, suggests that, instead of rising, youth representation in municipal executives declined from 0.81 in 2001 to 0.47 in 2021, with the steepest drop occurring when the reform came into effect: from 0.84 in 2009 to 0.64 in 2013.

This counterintuitive result raises important questions about the unintended consequences of term limits. One possibility is that rather than facilitating the entry of younger politicians, the reform reinforced the dominance of long-serving politicians already embedded in party networks, who had accumulated experience in other roles. As a result, term-limited incumbents may have been replaced not by younger candidates but by older, well-established figures from within party ranks or by candidates who previously held office in other municipalities. This dynamic mirrors findings in other contexts, where term limits have failed to ensure the representation of underrepresented groups, such as women. For instance, studies have demonstrated that term limits often result in the loss of experienced legislators, including women, without guaranteeing that their seats will be filled by other women or minorities (see, for example McLin, 2000).

Additionally, term limits may inadvertently strengthen the control of party leaders over candidate selection. By increasing turnover, party leaders may prioritize candidates with more experience and perceived electoral viability over younger, less politically entrenched

individuals. If parties viewed experience as a key electoral asset, this could explain why the reform failed to improve youth representation in municipal executives.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the YRI at the subnational level. Notably, YRI values are consistently higher in interior and less populous regions than in coastal and more densely populated areas. There is also notable geographical variation: municipal executives report higher YRI values in central and southern regions, whereas municipal assemblies show higher YRI values in northern regions. This pattern may be linked to differences in political competition. In larger cities and highly urbanized areas, such as the North and the coast, political competition tends to be more intense, with more parties and candidates vying for office. In contrast, in interior and southern regions, where populations are smaller and fewer parties contest elections, young politicians may find it easier to stand out and secure representation.

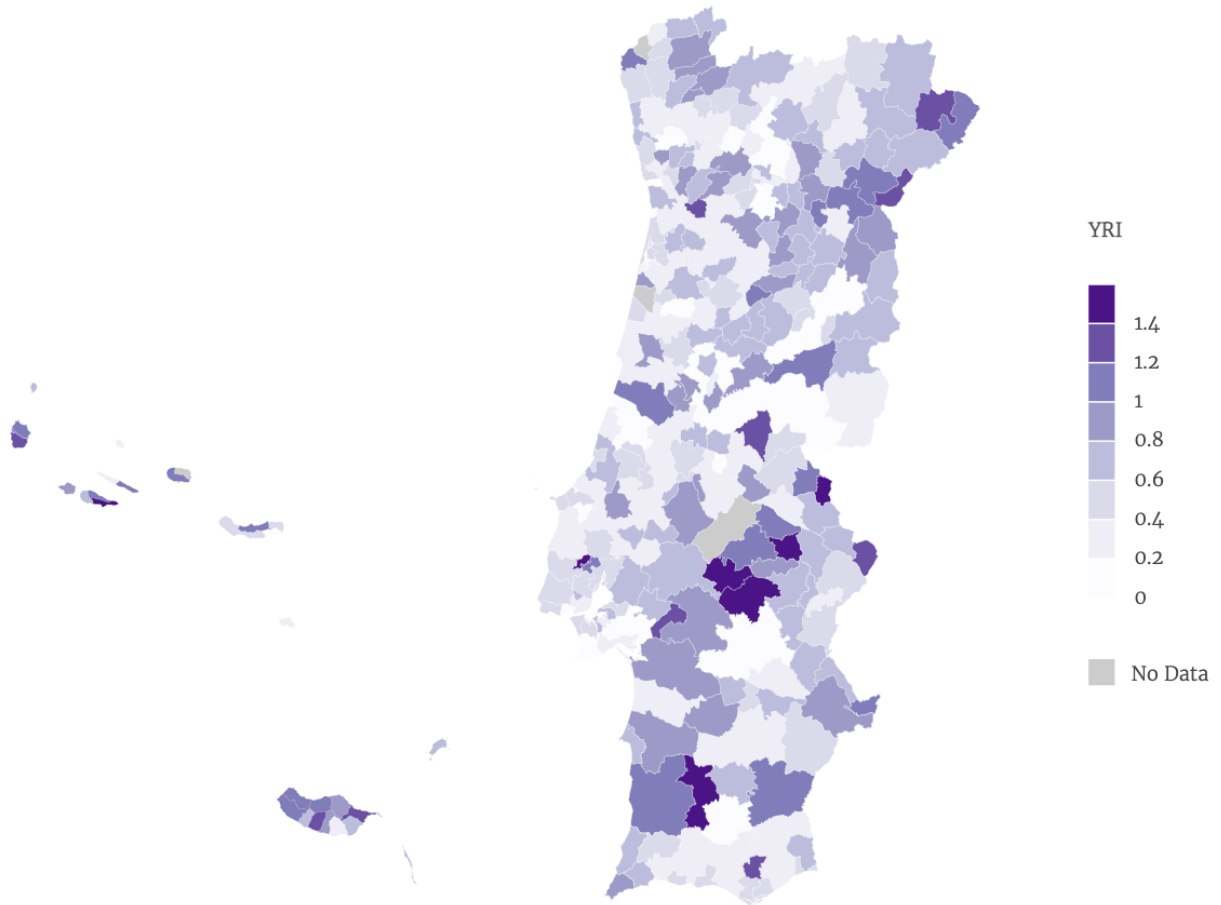
Overall, these findings reinforce the main argument: legislative bodies provide a more accessible entry point for young politicians, whereas executive roles remain largely dominated by older officials.

Concluding remarks

This chapter examines youth political representation in Portugal's national and subnational legislative and executive bodies. It analyzes how the election of young adults has evolved over time, across parties, and between regions, with particular attention to the role of decentralization. The central hypothesis is that the higher the office, the narrower the path—meaning that national and executive positions create greater barriers to youth representation than local and legislative roles.

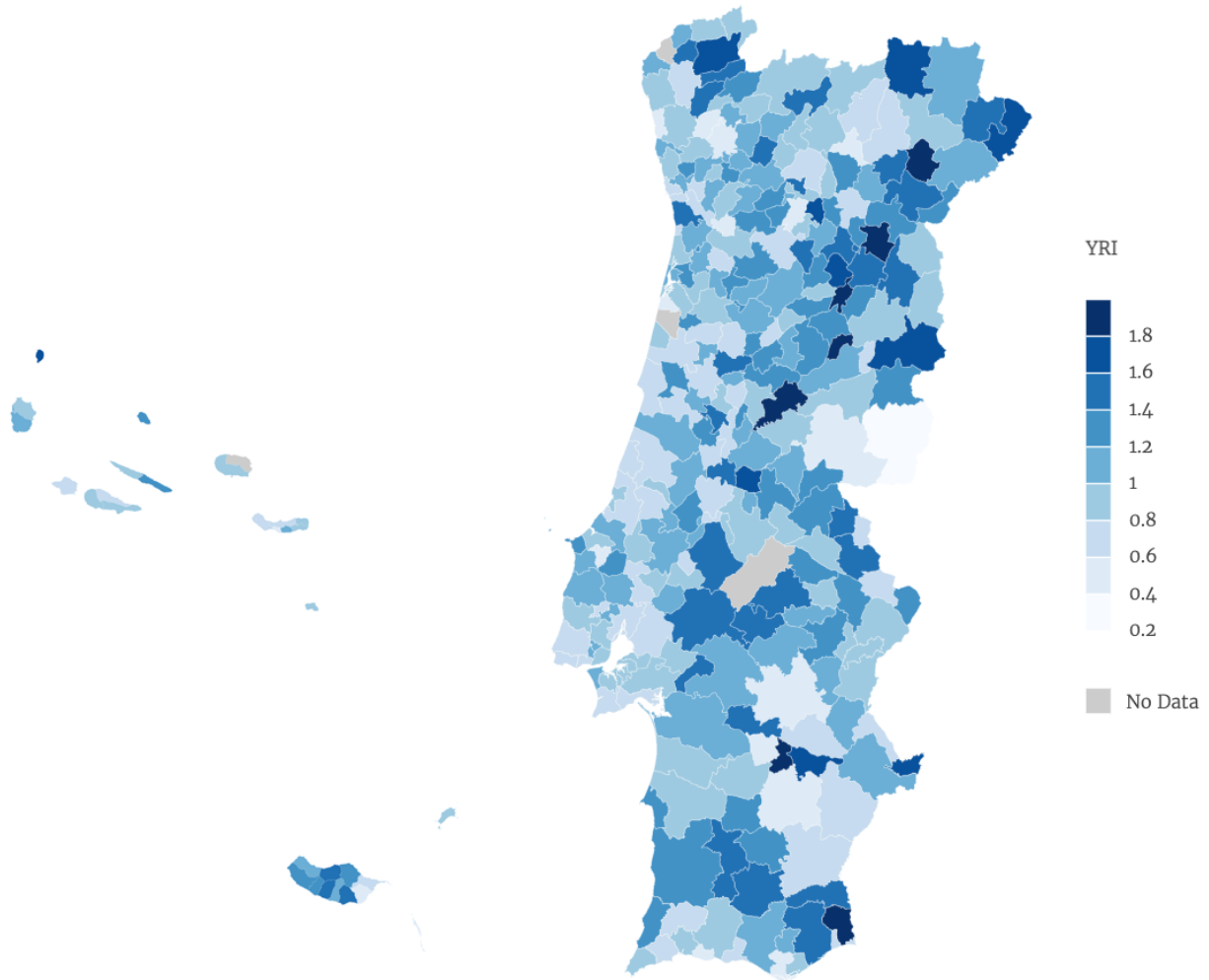
The results reveal a persistent trend of youth underrepresentation, both in comparison to older age groups and relative to their share of the young voting-age population, with this disparity intensifying after the 2010s. By the mid-2010s, political elites aged 60 or older

Figure 3: Youth representation in municipal executives (2001–2021) relative to their share in the voting-age population (YRI).



Notes: The map displays the Youth Representation Index (YRI) for municipal executives. YRI is calculated by dividing the proportion of municipal executive members aged 18–35 by their share in the voting-age population within each municipality. A YRI score of 1 indicates perfect representation, while values below 1 signify underrepresentation and values above 1 indicate overrepresentation.

Figure 4: Youth representation in municipal executives (2001–2021) relative to their share in the voting-age population (YRI).



Notes: The map displays the Youth Representation Index (YRI) for municipal assemblies. YRI is calculated by dividing the proportion of municipal assembly members aged 18–35 by their share in the voting-age population within each municipality. A YRI score of 1 indicates perfect representation, while values below 1 signify underrepresentation and values above 1 indicate overrepresentation.

outnumbered those under 35 in all political institutions. In government, youth exclusion is even more pronounced. Despite two recent exceptions, only a dozen young ministers have served in Portugal’s history, the vast majority of whom were appointed during the first decade and a half of the democratic regime.

The subnational level presents a contrasting picture. Municipal assemblies have consistently provided greater opportunities for younger politicians, exceeding their demographic share in the voting-age population. However, this pattern does not extend to municipal executives, where youth representation has declined over time — particularly following the 2013 introduction of term limits. Instead of fostering generational renewal, this reform may have benefited older, more experienced politicians over younger, less entrenched candidates.

These findings challenge certain expectations from [Putnam](#)’s “law of increasing disproportion.” While youth representation is generally higher at lower levels of governance, this trend is not uniform across institutions or parties. While most parties elect more young politicians at the subnational level than at the national level, radical left parties exhibit higher youth representation in the national parliament than in municipal assemblies. This suggests that party ideology and candidate selection strategies influence opportunities for young politicians.

The regional variation in youth representation at the subnational level further underscores these complexities. The share of young politicians relative to the young electorate is consistently higher in interior and less populous regions than in urban and coastal areas, where political competition is more intense. In smaller municipalities with fewer candidates, young politicians find it easier to secure a safe seat on electoral lists. This suggests that regional variation, alongside party competition, plays a key role in shaping opportunities for youth representation.

Overall, the decline in youth representation may stem from the persistence of long-serving officials, limiting opportunities for younger politicians to enter and advance within

the system. However, this is not only a matter of electoral success but also reflects entrenched political culture and party structures, where younger candidates struggle to overcome barriers imposed by older elites. Nevertheless, the results suggest that party-specific factors — such as candidate selection strategies, the degree of political competition, and the electoral context—also shape youth representation and influence the trajectory of generational renewal. Taken together, the evidence presented here highlights the need to move beyond institutional explanations and consider how intra-party politics affect political recruitment.

Ultimately, this chapter highlights a fundamental challenge for Portuguese democracy: although voters often express a preference for younger politicians, the structures of political representation, incumbency advantages, and intra-party concentration of power continue to marginalize youth in decision-making roles. This persistent underrepresentation contributes to political disengagement among young citizens, many of whom feel disconnected from formal politics. Studies indicate that young people are less likely to vote, join political parties, or participate in youth wings (e.g., Sloam, [2016](#); Costa, [2022](#); Magalhães, [2022](#)). Many perceive political elites as indifferent to their concerns and view party hierarchies as inaccessible (Costa, [2022](#); Silva and Costa, [2022](#)). Party tensions further exacerbate these frustrations, as young activists often find themselves at odds with older party members (Heinze, [2025](#); Kolltveit and Karlsen, [2025](#); McDonnell et al., [2025](#)), who frequently overlook or undervalue their ambitions and perspectives (Sanches et al., [2018](#); Ammassari et al., [2023](#)). The lack of generational renewal, combined with these frustrations, raises the question of whether reforms aimed at integrating youth into political institutions could help reconcile younger generations with conventional politics.

References

- Ammassari, Sofia, Duncan McDonnell, and Marco Valbruzzi. 2023. “It’s about the type of career: The political ambition gender gap among youth wing members.” *European Journal of Political Research* 62 (4): 1054–1077.
- Anlar, Brit. 2024. “Time, money, and support: Exploring young adult representation in state legislatures.” *Electoral Studies* 91: 102845.
- Bashevkin, Sylvia B. 1985. *Toeing the lines: Women and party politics in English Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Belschner, Jana. 2023. “Youth Advantage Versus Gender Penalty: Selecting and Electing Young Candidates.” *Political Research Quarterly* 76 (1): 90–106.
- Blondel, Jean. 1985. *Government Ministers in the Contemporary World*. London: Sage.
- Borghetto, Enrico, Marco Lisi, Julien Navarroc, and João Cancela. 2022. “Who cares for young people? An analysis of parliamentary questions in France and Italy.” .
- Bruter, Michael, and Sarah Harrison. 2009. “Tomorrow’s leaders? Understanding the involvement of young party members in six European democracies.” *Comparative Political Studies* 42 (10): 1259–1290.
- Camerlo, Marcelo, Juan Rodríguez-Teruel, and Antonino Castaldo. 2021. “SEGov Project: South European Governments Dataset.” ICS-ULisboa and Universitat de València.
- Costa, Patrício. 2022. *A Participação Política da Juventude em Portugal. Portugal em 2020*. [Report]. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.
- Dhima, Kostanca, Sona N Golder, Laura B Stephenson, and Karine Van der Straeten. 2021. “Permissive electoral systems and descriptive representation.” *Electoral Studies* 73: 102381.
- Eshima, Shusei, and Daniel M. Smith. 2022. “Just a Number? Voter Evaluations of Age in Candidate-Choice Experiments.” *The Journal of Politics* 84 (3): 1856–1861.
- Fernandes, Jorge M, Miguel M Pereira, and Carolina Plescica. 2016. “Strategic voting in local elections: evidence from Portugal (1979–2013).” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 26 (3): 312–335.
- Ferrinho Lopes, Hugo. 2025a. “Partidos Políticos, Grupos de Cidadãos Eleitores e a Eleição de Jovens e Mulheres como Presidentes de Câmara Municipal.” In *Manual de Direito Municipal, Vol. I*, edited by Tiago Serrão, Manuel F Ramos, and Luís F M Almeida. Coimbra: Almedina.
- Ferrinho Lopes, Hugo. 2025b. “Radical right advance and party system change: the 2024 Portuguese snap elections.” *West European Politics* 48 (1): 228–245.

- Ferrinho Lopes, Hugo, Pedro Silveira, and António H. Lopes. 2021. *Sub-representação de uma Geração. Jovens na Assembleia da República, Governo e Parlamento Europeu (1976-2019)*. Research Brief. Lisbon: Permanent Youth Observatory (OPJ), Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon.
- Freire, André. 2009a. “Biografias dos Deputados Portugueses, Eleições 1975-2005 – Bases de Dados.” In *Representação Política em Portugal – Inquéritos e Bases de Dados*, edited by André Freire, José Manuel Viegas, and Filipa Seiceira. Lisboa: Sextante.
- Freire, André. 2009b. “Biografias dos Deputados Portugueses, Eleições 2009 – Bases de Dados.” In *Projeto Eleições, Liderança e Responsabilização*, edited by André Freire, Marco Lisi, José Manuel Viegas, and Filipa Seiceira. <http://er.cies.iscte-iul.pt/>.
- Freire, André, Marco Lisi, and Emmanouil Tsatsanis. 2016. “Fichas dos Deputados Portugueses, Eleições 2015 – Bases de Dados.” In *Projeto Crise, Representação Política e Renovação da Democracia: O caso Português no Contexto do Sul da Europa (2016-2019)*, FCT: PTDC/IVC-CPO/3098/2014, <http://er.cies.iscte-iul.pt/>.
- Freire, André, Marco Lisi, and José Manuel Viegas. 2012. “Fichas dos Deputados Portugueses 2011 – Bases de Dados.” In *Projeto Eleições, Liderança e Responsabilização, 2012-2015*, FCT: PTDC/CPJ-CPO/119307/2010, <http://er.cies.iscte-iul.pt/>.
- Gallagher, Michael, Michael Marsh, et al., eds. 1988. *Candidate Selection in Comparative Perspective: The Secret Garden of Politics*. London: Sage.
- Gherghina, Sergiu. 2021. “Party members and leadership styles in new European democracies.” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23 (1): 85–103.
- Harmel, Robert. 1981. “Environment and Party Decentralization: A Cross-National Analysis.” *Comparative Political Studies* 14 (1): 75–99.
- Heinze, Anna-Sophie. 2025. “Drivers of radicalisation? The development and role of the far-right youth organisation ‘Young Alternative’ in Germany.” *International Political Science Review* 46 (1): 108–124.
- Jalali, Carlos. 2007. *Partidos e Democracia em Portugal, 1974–2005: Da Revolução ao Bipartidarismo*. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Jalali, Carlos, and Edalina Rodrigues Sanches. 2022. “Candidate Selection in Portugal.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Portuguese Politics*, edited by Jorge M Fernandes, Pedro C Magalhães, and António Costa Pinto, 325–338. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jalali, Carlos, Patrícia Silva, and Edna Costa. 2024. “Youth with clipped wings: Bridging the gap from youth recruitment to representation in candidate lists.” *Electoral Studies* 88: 102767.
- Jalali, Carlos, Patrícia Silva, and Edna Costa. 2025. “They (don’t) really care about us: youth representation in Portuguese political parties.” *European Political Science* <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00548-2>.

- Joshi, Devin K. 2013. "The Representation of Younger Age Cohorts in Asian Parliaments: Do Electoral Systems Make a Difference?" *Representation* 49 (1): 1–16.
- Katz, Richard S. 2001. "The problem of candidate selection and models of party democracy." *Party Politics* 7 (3): 277–296.
- Kolltveit, Kristoffer, and Rune Karlsen. 2025. "Radical or aligned? Assessing issue congruence between youth wing elites, parliamentary candidates and voters in Norway." *Party Politics* <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688241312372>.
- Krook, Mona, and Mary K. Nugent. 2018. "Not Too Young to Run? Age requirements and young people in elected office." *Intergenerational Justice Review* 4 (2).
- Kurz, Kira Renée, L Constantin Wurthmann, and Martin Gross. 2025. "The influence of age on citizens' preferences for age-related descriptive representation." *Politics and Governance* 13 (9251): 1–18.
- Lopes da Fonseca, Mariana. 2017. "Identifying the source of incumbency advantage through a constitutional reform." *American Journal of Political Science* 61 (3): 657–670.
- Lopes da Fonseca, Mariana. 2020. "Lame ducks and local fiscal policy: Quasi-experimental evidence from Portugal." *The Economic Journal* 130 (626): 511–533.
- Magalhães, Pedro. 2022. *A Participação Política da Juventude em Portugal. Um retrato comparativo e longitudinal, 2002-2019*. [Report]. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Should blacks represent blacks and women represent women? A contingent" yes"." *The Journal of Politics* 61 (3): 628–657.
- McClean, Charles T. 2022. "Does the Underrepresentation of Young People in Political Institutions Matter for Social Spending?" <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c69ae919d4149419f647fce/t/65d623efdfba8a397055e765/1708532719469/Does+the+Underrepresentation+of+Young+People+in+Political+Institutions+Matter%3F+Yes.pdf#page=50.68>.
- McClean, Charles T., and Yoshikuni Ono. 2023. "Too Young to Run? Voter Evaluations of the Age of Candidates." *Political Behavior* (Online First).
- McDonnell, Duncan, Sofia Ammassari, Niklas Bolin, Ann-Cathrine Jungar, Marco Valbruzzi, Hugo Ferrinho Lopes, Reinhard Heinisch, Carsten Wegscheider, and Annika Werner. 2025. "Young Radicals, Moderates, and Aligned: Ideological Congruence and Incongruence in Party Youth Wings." *European Journal of Political Research* <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.70000>.
- McLin, Rhine L. 2000. "The Hidden Effects of Term Limits: Losing the Voices of Experience and Diversity." *U. Tol. L. Rev.* 32: 539.
- Norris, Pippa, and Mark Franklin. 1997. "Social representation." *European Journal of Political Research* 32 (2): 185–210.

- Pratas, Mafalda, and Fernando Bizzarro. 2022. "Political parties and party system." In *The Oxford Handbook of Portuguese Politics*, edited by Jorge Fernandes, Pedro C. Magalhães, and António Costa Pinto, 353–370. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. 1976. "The Comparative Study of Political Elites." Englewood Cliffs, N.J.
- Rentrop, Robin J. 2022. "What's my age again? Substantive representation of young voters." .
- Sanches, Edalina Rodrigues, Marco Lisi, Isabella Razzuoli, and Paula Espírito Santo. 2018. "Intra-party democracy from members' viewpoint: The case of left-wing parties in Portugal." *Acta Politica* 53 (3): 391–408.
- Sevi, Semra. 2021. "Do young voters vote for young leaders?" *Electoral Studies* 69: 102200.
- Silva, Patrícia, and Edna F Costa. 2022. *A Participação da Juventude em Portugal. As juventudes partidárias e os movimentos associativos*. [Report]. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.
- Sipinen, Josefina, Jana Belschner, and Brittany Anlar. 2024. "Age gaps in political representation: Comparing local and national elections." *Electoral Studies* 88: 102763.
- Sloam, James. 2016. "Diversity and Voice: The Political Participation of Young People in the European Union." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18 (3): 521–537.
- Stockemer, Daniel, and Kamila Kolodziejczyk. 2024. "Introducing the World Age Representation in Cabinet (WARC) Dataset." *Representation* 1–13.
- Stockemer, Daniel, and Aksel Sundström. 2018. "Age representation in parliaments: Can institutions pave the way for the young?" *European Political Science Review* 10 (3): 467–490.
- Stockemer, Daniel, and Aksel Sundström. 2022. *Youth without Representation: The Absence of Young Adults in Parliaments, Cabinets, and Candidacies*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Stockemer, Daniel, Hanna Thompson, and Aksel Sundström. 2023. "Young adults' underrepresentation in elections to the U. S. House of Representatives." *Electoral Studies* 81: 102554.
- Sundström, Aksel, and Daniel Stockemer. 2021. "Conceptualizing, measuring, and explaining youths' relative absence in legislatures." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (2): 195–201.
- Swers, Michele L. 2002. *The difference women make: The policy impact of women in Congress*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tavares de Almeida, Pedro. 2022. "The Executive Political Elite." In *The Oxford Handbook of Portuguese Politics*, edited by Jorge M Fernandes, Pedro C Magalhães, and António Costa Pinto, 339–352. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Teixeira, Maria da Conceição Pequito. 2009. *O Povo Semi-soberano: Partidos Políticos e Recrutamento Parlamentar em Portugal, 1990–2003*. Lisbon: Almedina.

Veiga, Francisco, Linda Veiga, Bruno Fernandes, and João Martins. 2017. *Limitação de Mandatos. O Impacto nas Finanças Locais e na Participação Eleitoral*. Lisbon: Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos.

Short bios

Hugo Ferrinho Lopes is a PhD candidate at ICS, University of Lisbon. He studies how intra-party divisions influence party and voter behavior, as well as the pathways through which young people gain access to and shape political institutions. His work is published in the *European Journal of Political Research*, *West European Politics*, *International Political Science Review*, and *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, among others.

Patrícia Silva is an assistant professor and a researcher at the Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies Research Centre (GOVCOPP) of the University of Aveiro, where she has developed research work on political parties, the politicisation of recruitment of appointed elites, public administration and youth political participation. She has been involved in several research projects and has published articles in journals including *Electoral Studies*, *Public Administration*, and *South European Society and Politics*.