

Shattering the Duopoly: The 2025 Portuguese Elections and the Rise of the Radical Right

Rompiendo el duopolio: Las elecciones portuguesas de 2025 y el auge de la extrema derecha



David Pimenta
Instituto de Ciências Sociais,
Universidade de Lisboa.
davidjpimenta@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-8520-3058



Pedro C. Magalhães
Instituto de Ciências Sociais,
Universidade de Lisboa.
pedro.magalhaes@ics.ul.pt
ORCID: 0000-0001-8934-4552

Abstract

The 2025 Portuguese legislative elections consolidated a fundamental change in the country's party system. Triggered by a high-profile political scandal, the election returned the center-right AD to government. However, it also propelled the radical right Chega to second place in parliament, overtaking the center-left Socialist Party and effectively ending Portugal's historically duopolistic political landscape. This research note analyzes the electoral campaign dynamics, competing policy agendas, and voter realignments that shaped the electoral outcome.

Keywords

Elections; electoral campaign; government formation; party system; radical right; Portugal.

Resumen

Las elecciones legislativas portuguesas de 2025 consolidaron un cambio fundamental en el sistema de partidos del país. Impulsadas por un escándalo político de alto perfil, las elecciones devolvieron al gobierno a la coalición de centroderecha AD. Sin embargo, también llevaron a la derecha radical (Chega) al segundo lugar en el Parlamento, superando al Partido Socialista (centroizquierda) y poniendo fin, de forma efectiva, al histórico panorama político bipartidista de Portugal. Esta nota de investigación analiza las dinámicas de la campaña electoral, las agendas de políticas públicas en competencia y los realineamientos del electorado que configuraron el resultado electoral.

Palabras clave

Elecciones; campaña electoral; formación de gobierno; sistema de partidos; derecha radical; Portugal.

1. Introduction and background of the election

The 2025 Portuguese legislative elections, held on May 18th, were widely portrayed in the media as constituting a «political earthquake» (e.g., *Expresso da Meia-Noite*, 2025). This perception was primarily shaped by two closely interrelated outcomes. On the one hand, the fact that the radical right party *Chega* –a relatively recent actor in Portuguese politics, founded only six years ago– surpassed the 20% vote threshold and emerged as the second largest party in parliament, under the leadership of the party’s main founder, André Ventura. On the other hand, the center-left Socialist Party, historically the most electorally successful party in Portugal since the Carnation Revolution, would, for the very first time in its history, be relegated to the third largest parliamentary bench.

However, the tectonic movements behind this «earthquake» have been occurring for some time. Little more than a year ago, in March 2024, another snap election had already featured a sharp electoral debacle for the Socialists, following the resignation of Prime Minister António Costa. Under the new leadership of Pedro Nuno Santos, the Socialists lost their absolute majority in parliament, dropping 13 percentage points in their vote share, from 41 to 28%. The center-right Democratic Alliance (AD), led by Luís Montenegro, secured a narrow victory with nearly 29% of the vote and 80 seats, allowing it to form a minority government. And importantly, these 2024 elections had already brought a massive surge for *Chega*, from 7 to 18% of the vote.

Back then, the 2024 snap election had been prompted by a high-profile scandal, with Costa resigning in the aftermath of the announcement of a preliminary investigation of alleged corruption (which ultimately did not result in any actual prosecution). Now, one year later, the political landscape was destabilized by yet another scandal. A journalistic investigation uncovered that Prime Minister Montenegro had retained undisclosed financial interests in a family-owned company –*Spinumviva*– despite having previously claimed to have transferred his shares to his spouse, an operation subsequently deemed legally invalid under Portuguese law. Further revelations indicated that the firm had received regular payments from a prominent casino operator during Montenegro’s tenure in office. These developments sparked considerable political turmoil, including mounting calls for the Prime Minister’s resignation, a censure motion tabled by the Communist Party, and ultimately the announcement of a parliamentary vote of confidence. In March 2025, the government was defeated in that vote. New snap elections were called, the third time in little more than three years.

Understandably, the elections were often described as a plebiscite about Montenegro and his ethics (e.g., Oliveira e Silva, 2025). However, vast research has shown that ethical issues and corruption accusations produce much smaller electoral costs than political pundits tend to believe, especially in contexts, like the Portuguese, where political corruption is thought to be widespread and clean alternatives are perceived to be lacking (De Vries and Solaz, 2017). Furthermore, the economic context was favorable to the incumbent. Real GDP growth in 2024 was 1,9%, and the economy was projected to expand further by 2,2% in 2025. Inflation, which had reached 4,3% in 2023, had declined to 2,7% in 2024 and was expected to stabilize at 2,0% in

the medium term. The labor market remained strong, with unemployment projected to remain at 6,5% in 2025 and gradually decline to 6,0% by 2029 (Conselho das Finanças Públicas, 2025). On the fiscal front, the short-term outlook anticipated a balanced budget for 2025 and a persistent reduction of the public debt in the coming years. Together with the fact that Montenegro's government had been in power for less than a year, the uncertain electoral costs of ethical issues and the positive economic outlook –average growth, low unemployment, and improving fiscal fundamentals– were factors that spoke clearly against the chances of unseating the incumbent as the campaign started.

2. The electoral campaign

The narratives and debates of the electoral campaign were shaped by a complex interplay of socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors, bringing a diverse range of issues to the forefront. As it tends to happen when it is doing reasonably well, the economy was a minor issue during the campaign. Instead, concerns with the health system and housing, which recent studies have revealed to be particularly salient among the Portuguese public (Eurobarometer, 2025; Raposo Santos, 2025), featured prominently across the electoral campaign agendas of both right-wing and left-wing parties.

Regarding healthcare, the policy proposals of right-wing parties, AD (Aliança Democrática, 2025), *Chega* (*Chega*, 2025), and *Iniciativa Liberal* (IL) –a smaller economically liberal party (Iniciativa Liberal, 2025)– reflected a shared commitment to expanding access to care through increased reliance on public-private partnerships and the integration of private and social sector providers into the national system. Despite differences in emphasis, all three parties converged in advocating for structural reforms aimed at improving access, efficiency, and pluralism in healthcare provision. Conversely, the health policy agendas of left-wing parties, not only the PS (Partido Socialista, 2025) but also the Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda, 2025), the Communist Party (Partido Comunista Português, 2025), and *Livre* –a recent «Eurogreen» party (*Livre*, 2025)– converged on reinforcing the public National Health Service (SNS) through expanded access, improved working conditions, and increasing structural investment. All advocated for better salaries and careers for healthcare professionals. Collectively, they prioritized measures aiming at a stronger and more equitable SNS.

Regarding housing, right-wing parties tended to converge on a broadly market-oriented approach to housing policy, emphasizing combinations of supply-side solutions, fiscal incentives, and regulatory simplification. The Socialists proposed channeling public banking dividends into the construction of municipal housing, subsidizing rents for families with high housing cost burdens, applying reduced VAT to affordable housing projects, and regulating short-term rentals. The parties to the Socialists' left, in turn, emphasized large-scale public housing construction, stricter rent controls, limits on short-term rentals, and overall restrictions (and, in some cases, bans) on sales to non-residents.

In public opinion surveys, immigration appeared as a relatively minor concern, at least in comparison not only with the above issues but also with the salience of immigration among other European publics (Eurobarometer, 2025). However, immigration ended up featuring very prominently in the campaign¹. *Chega's* emphasis on immigration policy aligns with its broader ideological patterns. Although not very salient when the party first appeared on the political scene (Carvalho, 2023), the *Chega's* anti-immigration discourse has since then intensified, as the party positions itself as a radical right populist party with pronounced nativist characteristics (Zúquete & Pimenta, 2025) and in the context of a very sharp increase in foreign-born residents in Portugal in the last few years (nearly doubling since 2019). Therefore, in this election, *Chega* adopted a restrictive and securitized immigration agenda centered on cultural assimilation, national sovereignty, and economic selectivity (*Chega*, 2025). Key proposals included tightening nationality requirements, introducing skilled labor quotas, and deporting non-self-sufficient or criminally sentenced migrants. *Chega* also advocated criminalizing illegal residence, limiting immigrants' access to social benefits, and recovering healthcare costs from the origin countries.

The incumbent AD reiterated its uncompromising stance regarding the radical right, summarized in the slogan «no means no»: rejection of any post-electoral cooperation with *Chega*, while expressing openness to a potential understanding or coalition with IL. However, this did not prevent the rest of the right from responding to *Chega's* electoral success with more restrictive positions on the immigration issue, mirroring patterns previously observed in other European contexts (van Spanje, 2010). For example, both AD (Aliança Democrática 2025) and IL (Iniciativa Liberal 2025) proposed reforming immigration policy by tightening nationality criteria, enhancing integration, and improving administrative efficiency. The former emphasized securitization, proposing a new police unit, stricter residency verification, and faster repatriation of migrants' processes. The latter focused on modernization and transparency, advocating for digital self-regulation, stronger migration institutions, and open data. Despite differing in tone, both proposed to move to a more structured and controlled immigration system.

On the left, the Socialist Party felt unable to avoid the issue. Its leader, Pedro Nuno Santos, publicly acknowledged that the party had failed to manage immigration effectively during its tenure in government, underscoring the need for a more regulated and structured approach (Borges, 2025). Still, the PS converged with the rest of the left on a rights-based approach centered on integration, administrative efficiency, and expanded social protections, advocating for simplifying regularization procedures to ensure faster access to legal status. Emphasis was placed on language acquisition, inclusive education, and access to housing, healthcare, and employment. While PS focused on labor market integration through employer coordination, BE, PCP, and *Livre* highlighted anti-discrimination, political inclusion, and the expansion of migrants' rights.

1. A study conducted by All Comunicação indicates that, during a significant portion of the electoral campaign, immigration was by far the most discussed topic on the social media platform X (Verissimo, 2025).

Lastly, it is worth noting that the main challengers, PS and *Chega*, adopted distinct strategies concerning the *Spinumviva* affair during the campaign. While the PS persistently accused Luís Montenegro of being unfit to serve as Prime Minister due to the case's implications, *Chega* chose to spend less time on the specific case than on a general anti-establishment rhetoric, where PS and AD were portrayed as belonging to the same political elite characterized by corruption and cronyism.

3. The outcome of the election

The results, presented in Table I, highlight several key developments. First, right-wing parties collectively achieved a historic outcome, securing approximately two-thirds of the seats in Parliament. AD on its own earned more seats than all left-wing parties put together. And yet, at the same time, the center-right's result is historically low, winning the election with a lower share of the vote than it had obtained in 2019, when it had clearly lost to the Socialists. The key to understanding this paradoxical development is, of course, the collapse of the traditional two-party system in Portugal. From 2022 to 2025, the effective number of parliamentary parties changed from 2,7 to 3,6, the highest level of party system fragmentation since 1985. The two main center-left and center-right parties dropped below two-thirds of MPs, the qualified majority needed to amend the Constitution. Conversely, *Chega* became one of the most electorally successful radical right parties in Europe, with vote shares comparable to Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in the Netherlands (which achieved first place in the Netherlands' last elections) or to the Sweden Democrats (the country's largest party on the right).

Ecological inference analysis of vote transfers, using Pavía and Thomsen's (2024) approach applied to data on the 308 municipalities in Portugal, suggests the sources of *Chega*'s growth in the last two elections were manifold. However, three stand out: former center-right voters and abstainers in 2024 (see also Santana-Pereira & Rogeiro Nina, 2024); and former Socialist voters, in both 2024 and 2025. These findings warrant the hypothesis that the PS may have lost support in its traditional strongholds, particularly among less-educated voters. A look at the social bases of voting behavior in the last three elections lends tentative support to the idea (Cancela & Magalhães, 2025; Magalhães & Cancela, 2025). The PS experienced a significant erosion of its electorate between 2022 and 2025, losing support across all sociodemographic segments. However, they experienced their most dramatic decline among voters with lower than secondary education, 19 percentage points among men and 28 points among women. Conversely, *Chega* registered growth across all social groups, with particularly marked increases among men, younger voters, and those with lower educational attainment. The party became the most voted among men up to the age of 55 and in rural areas of the South.

Table I. Results of the 2025 Portuguese general elections.

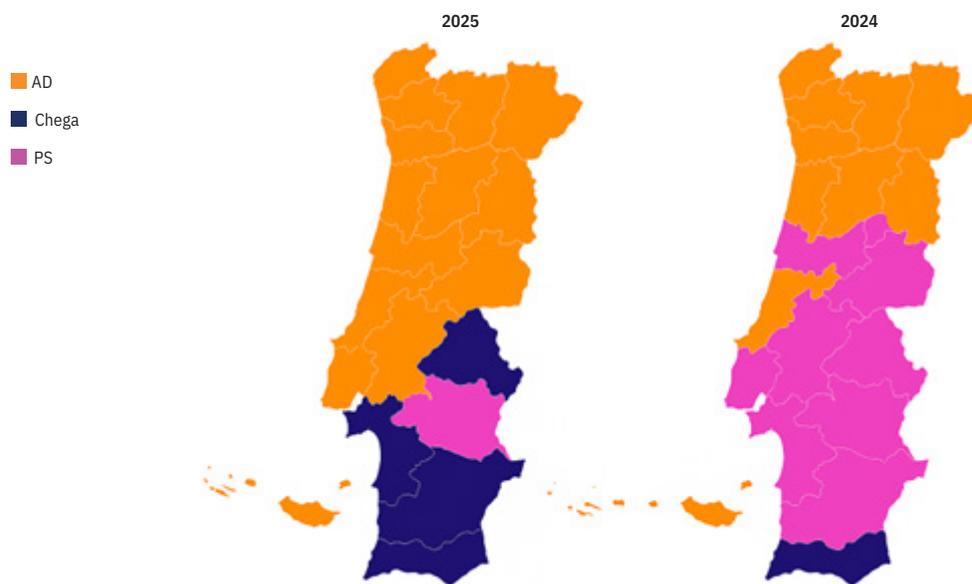
	2025			2024			Changes		
	Seats (N)	Votes (N)	Votes (%)	Seats (N)	Votes (N)	Votes (%)	Seat Δ (N)	Vote Δ (N)	VotesΔ (%)
AD	91	2.008.488	31,8	80	1.867.442	28,8	11	141.046	3
Chega	60	1.438.554	22,8	50	1.169.781	18,1	10	268.773	4,7
PS	58	1.442.546	22,8	78	1.812.443	28	-20	-369.897	-5,2
IL	9	338.974	5,4	8	319.877	4,9	1	19.097	0,5
Livre	6	257.291	4,1	4	204.875	3,2	2	52.416	0,9
PCP-PEV	3	183.686	2,9	4	205.551	3,2	-1	-21.865	-0,3
BE	1	125.808	2	5	282.314	4,4	-4	-156.506	-2,4
PAN	1	86.930	1,4	1	126.125	2	0	-39.195	-0,6
JPP	1	20.900	0,3	0	19.145	0,3	1	1.755	0
ADN	0	81.660	1,3	0	102.134	1,6	0	-20.474	-0,3
Others	0	74.484	1,2	0	85.022	1,6	0	-10.538	-0,4
Invalid and blanks	-	260.648	4,1	-	282.243	4,4	-	-21.595	-0,3
Turnout	-	6.319,97	58,21	-	6.476,95	59,8	-	-1,6	-1,6

Source: Comissão Nacional de Eleições. www.cne.pt

This trend may reflect a broader pattern already observed in other European contexts, whereby less-educated electorates increasingly support radical right parties, especially in response to the growing salience of immigration –a theme that *Chega* has progressively emphasized in the last few years (Zúquete & Pimenta, 2025). A substantial segment of the electorate lacks strong party identification and does not clearly position itself on the traditional left-right spectrum, facilitating *Chega's* populist narrative of a battle between «the people» and «the elite».

Regarding the smaller parties, IL has maintained a stable support base since 2022, predominantly composed of young, highly educated men. Recently, it has lost ground among young, educated women (a segment now increasingly contested by *Livre*) but gained traction among middle-aged male voters. *Livre* expanded its support across all demographic segments, but its most significant growth occurred among younger, highly educated women. In these groups, it is approaching the support obtained by IL and even PS, consolidating its position as a rising force among urban, qualified voters. The Left Bloc experienced a sharp decline in 2025, particularly among highly educated women (a segment that had previously sustained part of its electorate). The Communists, after successive losses between 2022 and 2024, stabilized in 2025 with a small but consistent support base, primarily among older and less-educated voters; notably, it reached parity with BE among young, highly educated men (an isolated but symbolically relevant shift given recent trajectories).

Figure 1. Winning parties by district, 2025 and 2024 general elections.



Source: Comissão Nacional de Eleições. www.cne.pt

As shown in figure I, regarding overall geographical patterns *Chega's* rise was particularly visible in the South of the country, where it surpassed the PS. Overall, compared to the previous year, the 2025 election reshaped the Portuguese political landscape: the previously divided map between AD and PS gave way to an orange-dominated center and north, a blue south, and the Socialists retaining only a single district while suffering major losses in key districts such as Lisbon. However, the ongoing transformation of the party system has been consistent across regions and social strata, with PS in national decline, AD registering moderate gains, and *Chega* expanding across virtually all geographic and demographic categories, though most notably among men and in less urbanized areas.

Voter turnout deserves a final note, as abstention increased slightly (by approximately 1,6%) compared to 2024. Nevertheless, it remained relatively low, consistent with the downward trend observed since 2019, the year in which *Chega* was founded.

4. The «old-new» government and conclusion

After the elections, the cabinet changes announced by Prime Minister Luís Montenegro constituted a minor government reshuffle, largely preserving the political continuity of the executive. Nonetheless, the reconfiguration includes elements of arguable significance, most notably the creation of a dedicated Ministry for State Reform. The cabinet reshuffle involved the departure of four ministers and the appointment of three new figures,

signaling continuity more than any significant change. In comparison to the immediate aftermath of the 2024 elections, AD is expected to enjoy more time to govern, given the dramatic losses of the left and the perception that they were caused by the triggering of early elections. The PS faces internal reorganization and leadership renewal, as it contends with the dilemmas caused by the need to stop the erosion of its traditional voter base (particularly among older and less-educated segments) and, at the same time, attract younger and more diverse demographics.

Many uncertainties remain concerning the relationship with *Chega*. On the one hand, the early statements by André Ventura suggest the party may be entering a new phase, positioning itself as a more structured opposition force capable of presenting legislative proposals and alternative leadership. As the second-largest party in a Parliament without a working majority, the party is going to be called upon participation in key appointments in areas such as internal security, justice, and defense, creating the opportunity to fulfill some office-seeking goals. On the other hand, so far, the party's anti-establishment rhetoric and confrontational posture have served it well, and *Chega* may feel the need to show that cabinet stability in Portugal is impossible until the party is fully integrated as a partner in a governing solution.

A comparative perspective with other European cases underscores how Portugal has increasingly aligned with broader continental trends in the rise of the radical right. Although each national context presents distinct historical, institutional, and socio-political configurations, this mirrors patterns observed elsewhere in Europe. Portugal's exceptionality was not only in how belatedly, but also how rapidly, the radical right's electoral growth turned out to be. Created just in 2019, *Chega* is now one of the largest far right parties in Western Europe with almost 23% of the vote and more than one quarter of all seats in parliament, the party only lags behind much older far right parties, such as the Freedom Party of Austria, France's National Rally, the Swiss People's Party or the Dutch Party for Freedom. Even Brothers of Italy, created in 2012 and today the largest party in Italy's parliament and government, has organizational roots in much older parties and factions, such as the National Alliance. *Chega's* emergence and consolidation represent a radical disruption of traditional electoral dynamics, drawing significant support not only from the center-right but also from disenchanted segments of the center-left electorate.

The 2025 legislative elections consolidated the transformation of Portugal's political landscape, disrupting its longstanding bipartisan stability. The ascent of *Chega* poses critical strategic dilemmas for all political actors. Will centrist parties continue to uphold a *cordon sanitaire*, preserving liberal norms and policies but risking governmental paralysis? Or will Portugal transition towards polarized blocs, integrating the radical right and thus reshaping the nature of the left-right dynamics? Many other European political systems have faced this dilemma, and answers have varied. To be sure, the system may still revert to earlier configurations if *Chega's* support declines, but the sheer magnitude and sustained growth of *Chega's* popular support in Portugal speaks increasingly louder against this scenario.

Note

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