

European Elections: The Silence of the Lambs and the Dangerous Political Resignation – The Portuguese Perspective

June 3, 2019

European Elections: The Silence of the Lambs and the Dangerous Political Resignation – The Portuguese Perspective

Catarina Santos Botelho (Universidade Católica Portuguesa)

A week after 2019 European Parliamentary (EP) elections, there are several reflections worth considering. To begin with, the two traditional blocs – centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) and the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D) – lost their significant political prominence and must now undertake bridging approaches with other centre, left and nationalist right parties. Such fractured European Parliament is the result of *growing fragmentation* of the vote, *a blurred left-right division* between mainstream parties, and the creation of anti-system parties.[1]

In Portugal, centre-left Socialists (PS – Partido Socialista) won the elections, with 33.4% (almost two points higher than in 2014). Although this was not an impressive result, it was quite peculiar, for two reasons: (i) the governing Party usually gets penalized in European or local elections; (ii) and, thus, it marks the first time in 20 years that a sitting government has won an European election.[2] The major centre-right opposition party, the Social Democrat Party (PSD – Partido Social Democrata) had the unsatisfactory result of 21.9%. Comparing to the results of 2009, the last time PSD ran alone in an EP election, the party lost more than 400.000 votes.[3]

The parties that support the Government, far-left party Left Bloc (BE – Bloco de Esquerda) and the Communists (PCP – Partido Comunista Português) had, respectively, 9.8% and 6.9%. If the Left Bloc secured its place as the third force in Portuguese politics and improved its performance compared to the 4.6% result it reached in 2014, in turn, the Communist Party decreased its result in almost 6 points.

The right-wing CDS-PP (Centro Democrático Social – Partido Popular) achieved a meager 6.2% of the votes. The electoral surprise was the single-

issue People-Animals-Nature party (PAN – Pessoas-Natureza-Animais). PAN, which entered Parliament in 2015, achieved the startling result of 5.1% and won its first seat at the EP.[4] Newly founded Aliança and Basta, as well as PDR reached less than 2%.

Another interesting consideration is that, after two decades of EP elections, turnout rate peaked, increasing its rate in 20 of 28 EU states.[5] Overall support for the European integration project “is at historic highs”. [6] By contrast, the turnout rate in Portugal was very disappointing and it only scored 31.40%, leaving the remain 68.60% to abstention.[7] Notwithstanding this voting behaviour, two disclaimers are needed.

First, the decline of electoral turnout in Portugal (along with many other European states) is most expressive regarding EP elections.[8] In this sense, a high abstention rate was expected. Second, the actual abstention level is overestimated. In fact, although the number of voters did rise from 2014 to 2019 EP elections (up to 14.000 votes), the increased abstention was due to the automatic census that introduced more than one million voters (Portuguese living abroad) in the electoral poll.

Still, how can we explain such electoral passivity and demobilization? And which lessons might our political parties learn from this decaffeinated election?

1. As Miguel Poiães Maduro humorously wrote, “where European elections were European, Europe won”. [9] Challenges facing the UE (such as Brexit, migration flows to Europe, the increased competences of the EP, rise of populist forces, *eurozone’s economic* performance, global climate change) were noticeably absent in the Portuguese political debates and in the campaign appeals.

The motto “Europe” was replaced by the *domestic political arena*: degradation of public services (mainly the distressing problems in our National Health Service), unblocking of pay increases for teachers, responsibility for Portugal’s 2011-2014 international bailout [10], Mario Centeno’s popularity, which political party triggers austerity policies the most, the need for increased public investment, etcetera.

Apart from the expected loss of European funds in the EU’s new long-term budget, other significant subjects were not acutely discussed. [11] The nationalization of European issues (perhaps as a political tactic to some) was obvious in the electoral campaigns, which evidently did not foster improved electoral mobilization. If legislative elections are to be held in October, why bother voting now?

2. The main political parties seemed to agree upon their European perspectives. The *decreasing politicization of Europe* in Portuguese politics – when compared with what happened with the “hard” Eurosceptic position of the Communist Party or the “soft” Euroscepticism of the right-wing CDS-PP in the 90’s (until the demise of Manuel Monteiro’s leadership) – might explain the

absence of a “European cleavage” in voting behaviour and, thus, a higher abstention rate.[12]

3. The centre-right political spectrum (PSD and CDS) undeniably needs a well-designed *strategic refoundation*[13]. Their crises reveal numerous red flags: internal political disputes exploited by social media, autistic traits, not strong enough leaderships, unappealing campaigns, capitulation to the politically correct discourse, a high percentage of politics with a “career” only in politics, political opportunism and so on.[14]

4. The Socialist Party also suffers from almost all the above-mentioned fragilities, besides high-profile corruption scandals, and probably won't win (with absolute majority) the legislative elections, on October 6. In the case of forming a minority government, it will have to rely again on a “geringonça”(contraption/post-electoral alliance) with other minor parties. The success of the environmentalist PAN and the debut of three anti-socialist new parties – Aliança (led by a former Prime-Minister from the Social Democrat Party), Iniciativa Liberal (more urban and free from the same old mediatic people) and Chega – clearly transpire the *political crisis of the Portuguese traditional parties*. [15] While some of them might be consistent political projects with a good perspective of political enhancement, others plainly capture the protest vote that would instead be addressed by abstention rate.

5. *Abstention rates* in the Portuguese 2019 EP elections *hit record levels*. There are several studies devoted to: (i) explaining the several social and attitudinal variables that cause overall abstention; (ii) and how to increase electoral turnout.[16] That being said, in this concrete electoral process, new measures were introduced to boost voting, such as advanced vote, pilot experiences with the electronic vote, and postal vote abroad. The result, however, was discouraging.[17]

Alternatively, some argue for the more radical solution of introducing mandatory vote. I utterly disagree with that fast-track paternalist “answer”.

As I have written elsewhere “regarding a given state’s constitutional design, mandatory voting is not undemocratic. Nevertheless, I do not advocate it, preferring the option (...) of full voter self-determination. In my opinion, compulsory voting leads to a certain infantilization of the society, to a lack of political spontaneity and to the ostentation of an (apparent) democratic health. Participation by force can certainly disguise the most visible symptom of political alienation – *absenteeism* – but it does not cure the disease, which is the *disenchantment with politics as a process*, and it does not stir up the political conscience of voters. (...) A mature exercise of citizenship presupposes, then, a more committed civil society”.[18]

Instead of last-minute appeals to vote, what voters need to break free of their *handcuffs* (of political disenchantment) is just a perfectly *valid reason to vote*.

Catarina Santos Botelho is Assistant Professor and Department Chair of Constitutional Law at the Porto Faculty of Law, Universidade Católica Portuguesa; email: cbotelho@porto.ucp.pt

[1] Miguel Poiares Maduro, “Onde as eleições europeias foram europeias a EU ganhou”, *Jornal de Notícias*, 01/06/2019, available at: <https://www.jn.pt/opiniao/miguel-poiares-maduro/interior/onde-as-eleicoes-europeias-foram-europeias-a-ue-ganhou-10965790.html>

[2] <https://www.politico.eu/article/portugals-eu-election-ups-and-downs/>

[3] <https://econews.pt/2019/05/27/winners-and-losers-understanding-the-results-of-2019-european-elections-in-portugal/>

[4] <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190516BKG51011/european-elections-2019-country-sheets/21/portugal>

[5] <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20190523STO52402/elections-2019-highest-turnout-in-20-years>

[6] Dalibor Rohac, “5 lessons learned from the European election”, *Político*, 28/05/2019, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-lessons-from-the-european-parliament-election-2019/>

[7] See <https://election-results.eu/>

[8] See João Cancela and Marta Vicente, *Portugal Talks – Abstenção e participação eleitoral em Portugal: diagnóstico e hipóteses de reforma* (scientific board: Nuno Garoupa – President – Catarina Santos Botelho, Marina Costa Lobo na Pedro Magalhães), 2019, forthcoming.

[9] Miguel Poiares Maduro, “Onde as eleições europeias foram europeias a EU ganhou”, *cit.*

[10] See Catarina Santos Botelho, “Portugal: The State of Liberal Democracy”, in Richard Albert, David Landau, Pietro Faraguna & Simon Drugda (Ed.), *2017 Global Review of Constitutional Law*, I.CONnect and the Clough Center for the Study of Constitutional Democracy at Boston College, 2018, pp. 230-234.

[11] <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu2019-loss-of-eu-funds-overshadows-portugals-campaign-for-eu-elections/>

[12] Jorge Almeida Fernandes, “O que querem realmente os europeus?”, *Público*, 27/05/2019, available at <https://www.publico.pt/2019/05/27/mundo/comentario/querem-realmente-europeus-1874218> and Pedro Magalhães, “What Ever Happened to Portuguese Euroscepticism? The Depoliticization of Europe and its Consequences”,

Working Paper PRI-3, 2002, p. 9, available at: http://www.pedro-magalhaes.org/PDFs/PRI-3-Portuguese_Euroscepticism.pdf

[13] An imminent crisis of the right was even announced by the Portuguese President of the Republic (himself a *former leader* of the Portuguese Social Democrat Party). See https://expresso.pt/politica/2019-05-31-Marcelo-Ha-uma-forte-possibilidade-de-haver-uma-crise-na-direita-portuguesa-nos-proximos-anos?fbclid=IwAR1hpP090UQax-s11EEk_ujPsGQ_dVxM_WCL0dLiEERwg324hE6BBjWkKeA#gs.g2z80a

[14] Addressing some of these problems, see Nuno Garoupa, *A Direita Portuguesa – Da Frustração à Decomposição*, Ego Editora, 2018.

[15] See André Azevedo Alves, “Aliança, Iniciativa Liberal e Basta: análise dos resultados e perspectivas”, 30/05/2019, *Observador*, available at: https://observador.pt/opiniao/alianca-iniciativa-liberal-e-basta-analise-dos-resultados-e-perspectivas/?fbclid=IwAR3hSgpsuctfRVXbZaTtrbT7GuOXeD7NKF1m_usfd9nL1LMR7LA0eMAXNY

[16] Again, See João Cancela and Marta Vicente, *Portugal Talks – Abstenção e participação eleitoral em Portugal: diagnóstico e hipóteses de reforma* (scientific board: Nuno Garoupa – President – Catarina Santos Botelho, Marina Costa Lobo na Pedro Magalhães), 2019, forthcoming. For more information: <https://www.pttalks.pt/>

[17] See Luís Aguiar Conraria, “Derrotas, extrapolações e abstenções”, *Público*, 29/05/2019, available at: <https://www.publico.pt/2019/05/29/politica/opiniao/derrotas-extrapolacoes-abstencoes-1874469> e Susana Peralta, “Abstenção: apelar à reflexão para que fique tudo na mesma”, *Público*, 31/05/2019, available at: <https://www.publico.pt/2019/05/31/politica/opiniao/abstencao-apelar-reflexao-fique-1874789?fbclid=IwAR3dcLiyTHTk4bwvoBTHkDAOwLjvhUNaBjiN7RbVXUHC6Azg3m9ex8NiA9o>

[18] Catarina Santos Botelho, “O voto é um direito ou um dever?”, *Observador*, 16/09/2017, available at: <https://observador.pt/opiniao/o-voto-e-um-direito-ou-um-dever/>