



*Dear Cláudia,*

*Will the forthcoming elections be different in any way from the previous ones or will it be 'business as usual'?*



According to the recent surveys and trends, it is reasonable to believe that the current government will win again. One may conclude that the parties of the 'centre' are finally quite resilient and that the impact upon the Portuguese party system will not be as strong as in other EU countries. What is it in Portugal that makes people 'vote as usual'?

The Portuguese party system has been quite stable, among other reasons, because it consolidated as a result of a democratic revolution and carried, from the beginning, a strong 'catch-all' imprint at the centre. The strong continuity in voting behaviour may also be explained by the fact that political socialisation in Portugal still depends strongly on the family environment rather than on school or the public space.

Citizens are accustomed to situate themselves on a left-right axis. But there is hardly anything on the far right. Extreme right-wing tendencies were strongly rejected in 1974 and the whole system shifted slightly to the left. This enlarged the centre, where elections are won. Furthermore, immigration, the big topic for many European far right parties, is not strong in Portugal, nor have the Portuguese attitudes towards immigrants, generally speaking, been hostile.

Nationalism tends to clash with European integration; and the EU is still supported, although less than before the crisis. Besides, the moderate right-wing parties have always remained very cautious on issues of national sovereignty. Therefore, someone who will self-portray as 'conservative', or perhaps 'right wing' or 'liberal', even if dissatisfied with the current government, may have a difficulty in finding an alternative, and will not easily jump over the 'barrier' to the left.

The PS campaigned with a new leader (although a former minister and Lisbon city council president), António Costa, who is rather popular as compared to the Prime Minister. But he is known for his 'leftist' profile, which pushes the party away from the centre. Besides, the PS still carries the burden of having been in government when the crisis exploded. Not to mention that the previous socialist prime minister, José Sócrates, has been under arrest for a judicial enquiry on alleged corruption and money laundering since November 2014...

On the left wing, the Communists maintain the integrity of their political discourse and may gain some anti-Euro protest vote, while the 'Block of the Left' (BE) comes up with a major innovation in Portuguese politics: female leadership! Otherwise, new parties and other small parties remain scarcely visible. They lack money, organisational resources and do not get much coverage from the media.

The campaign has been dominated by socio-economic issues and has highlighted the 'new' cleavages emerging from the years of crisis: unemployed vs. employed; public vs. private sector; young vs. elderly people; labour vs. capital. The middle class went through hard times and the number of young qualified emigrants is growing. Yet, rather than addressing fundamental economic and ideological choices, the public debate seems to focus on redistributive policies, which is the most visible face of the policies for the average citizen. This means that the elections will not answer the most important questions. The 'day after' is therefore still a strong reason for concern.

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