



**European Parties Elections
And Referendums Network**

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 39 THE PORTUGUESE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS JUNE 2009

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Key Points

- The incumbent Socialist Party (PS) suffered a very heavy electoral loss (down 18%) compared to the last national Parliament (2005) and the last European Elections (2004). This is especially significant because of the upcoming national parliamentary elections to be held in October this year.
- The vote for the extreme left parties amounted to 21%. "Protest vote" benefited the left rather than the right-wing parties.
- The abstention reached a record high (63%). Among the EU-15, Portugal figures as one of the countries with the lowest participation rates.
- European issues were prominent in the pre-campaign stage, with the incumbent Socialist Party taking the lead in portraying itself as an European party and raising European issues for debate. Over time, the Socialist Party and its performance in fighting the economic crisis occluded the importance of the European themes.
- The opposition of the Left Block and the Communists to the re-election of José Manuel Barroso as Commission President provoked a lively debate on the issue.

National Context

Thirteen political parties competed for the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections. These were held in a very difficult context for the incumbent party, the centre-left Socialist Party. The country was dealing with the worst economic and financial crisis since the 1930s, with a strong decrease in purchasing power, consumers' confidence, and the rise in unemployment resulting from the bankruptcy of several traditional industries. In the financial sector the government nationalized several companies. Adding to this was, Prime Minister, José Sócrates' alleged involvement in a

corruption scandal, the “Freeport affair”. Sócrates was accused of having received bribes when holding the post of Minister of Environment for authorizing the construction of a shopping mall partially of a nature reserve. Other factors were the unpopular reforms in the secondary teachers’ careers, which mobilized huge protest (the most expressive and largest ever demonstrations by teachers) and to criticism from all the opposition parties. This was of particular relevance since teachers are a strong constituency of the Socialist Party.

The approval of new rules and regulations on party financing also dominated the public debate, as top opinion makers argued that this amendment would give too much leeway for parties to increase their funds without proper supervision. This law was eventually vetoed by the President Cavaco Silva, and this deepened the tensions between the Socialist government and the centre-right President. Cavaco Silva had already made use of his power several times, vetoing key pieces of legislation such as the divorce bill, the bill on state secret and the administrative-political statutes of the Azores, *inter alia*. In this context, the EP elections and its results were taken very seriously by the Socialist Party. The party held an absolute majority government since 2005. The heavy loss of the Socialist Party thus means that the party faces a very critical electoral calendar ahead, with national and local elections being held this autumn. For opposition parties the government’s poor economic performance, as well as the misuse of European funds in precarious sectors like fisheries and agriculture, gave them political advantage.

Electoral Campaign

The EP election campaign between 25 May and 5 June received a lot of attention in the media (TV, internet, radio), making it possible for citizens to follow the electoral campaign. The European issues were discussed in the campaign and in particular the incumbent socialist, the Socialist Party, based its campaign on the European profile of the party. On the first day of the campaign the top candidate of the party, Vital Moreira, gave support to the creation of an European tax, a position that was immediately attacked by the opposition centre-right Social Democratic Party. The debate on the European tax was, however, silenced by Moreira’s accusation of the Social Democratic Party’s association with a fraudulent bank’s ruin. The polemics silenced the debate on European issues and from that point onwards the opposition Social Democratic Party succeeded at nationalising the campaign. The head of the Social Democratic Party’s list, Paulo Rangel, used the campaign to criticize the government and turned the EP elections into a kind of primaries for the local and national elections that will take place later this year. The right-wing party Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party also focused its campaign on national issues, with internal security, agriculture and the economy as its main themes, leaving aside European debates. In contrast, the communists’ top candidate, Ilda Figueiredo, presented concrete proposals for European policies and promoted the work carried out by the Communist and Green coalition in the EP, claiming repeatedly that the Communist and Green coalition is the only political force to defend always workers rights. The left-libertarian Left Block, based on the good prospects for the party in opinion polls, presented this election as the turning point for the prospects of the party, from protest and fringe party to governmental party. After 10 years of existence the party was “ready” to take office and these European elections were announced as the pivotal moment for the party to head a new model of government “left-wing, socialist, popular and alternative”.

Discursive analysis

In its 2009 European manifesto the Socialist Party clearly stood out as a pro-European party. The important moments of Portuguese membership in the EU – from the accession in 1986 to the Lisbon Treaty - are mentioned as socialist achievements. Furthermore, the Socialist Party claims to be “the only party who since day one has fought for EU integration, without hesitation or doubts” (p. 4). The party argues that conservative right-wing parties - the Social Democratic Party of Commission’s president José Manuel Barroso and the Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party - are responsible for the current economic and financial crises. Equally, the party states that extreme left parties, who cannot hide their hostility to the EU, are bad options for representing Portugal in the European Parliament, where a pro-European consensus prevails.

With their 2009 Euromanifesto the Social Democratic Party reminded voters of its European commitment with the Portuguese citizens. The party’s message was very clear and positive and invited voters to embrace their European citizenship. The left libertarian Left Block’s manifesto (which was based to an internet platform that allowed citizens to express their opinion and or point to areas that could be included in its the 2009 election manifesto) is much more critical of Europe, with the party portraying the EU as being “ruled by the strongest member states, which support market liberalisation measures”, and considers that “this EU does not serve the interests of the weakest and peripheral countries, and clearly opposes the struggle for social rights in Europe.” Therefore fragile countries – like Portugal – would be better off with an EU that is empowered with new social policies. The Left Block states that “We are Europeanists, but not Eurocrats. Our Europe believes in hearing attentively to the people and refuses the opposition between representative democracy and instruments of participatory democracy. We want more and a better Europe, but we refuse its uniformisation [...]”

The Communist and Green coalition clearly considered the EU as the main culprit for the current economic crisis, and appeals for a “rupture with the European policies that have caused it”. Both manifestoes mention the other major parties competing in these elections: the Social Democratic Party, Socialist Party and the Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party.

The conservative Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party euromanifesto states that Portuguese citizens should vote against the government party (Socialist Party) and thus punishing it for the disastrous economic policies they have implemented, and especially for not using the all the available European funds in such critical sectors like agriculture.

Policies

All parties’ Euromanifestos mentioned the necessity to resolve the economic and financial crises. As we stated early in this report this issue dominated the public agenda as well as the media coverage and therefore parties needed to address it. All parties seemed to agree on the need for a wider economic and social cohesion and to reform the structure and operational rules of the existing structural funds. More specifically the Socialist Party, the Left Block and the Communist Party argued for the regulation of markets, the promotion of employment and the reform of the

Common Agricultural Policy, including the fisheries policy in order to overcome the crisis. In terms of European agenda, both the Left Block and the Communist Party were against the Lisbon Treaty and opposed the re-election of José Manuel Barroso as president of the European Commission, while both the Social Democratic Party and the Socialist Party supported his reinstatement and the Treaty. The Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party was silent on European policy issues and seemed much more interested in addressing votes of no confidence to the government.

Candidate selection and the campaign

While the Left Block and the Communist Party kept their former MEPs as top candidates, the Social Democratic Party and the Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party selected the leaders of their parliament caucuses as their top candidates. The Socialist Party sustained its strategy of fighting the campaign on European themes by choosing Vital Moreira, a professor of Constitutional and European law, who despite being a less experienced politician and less visible candidate, was known for his expertise in European issues.

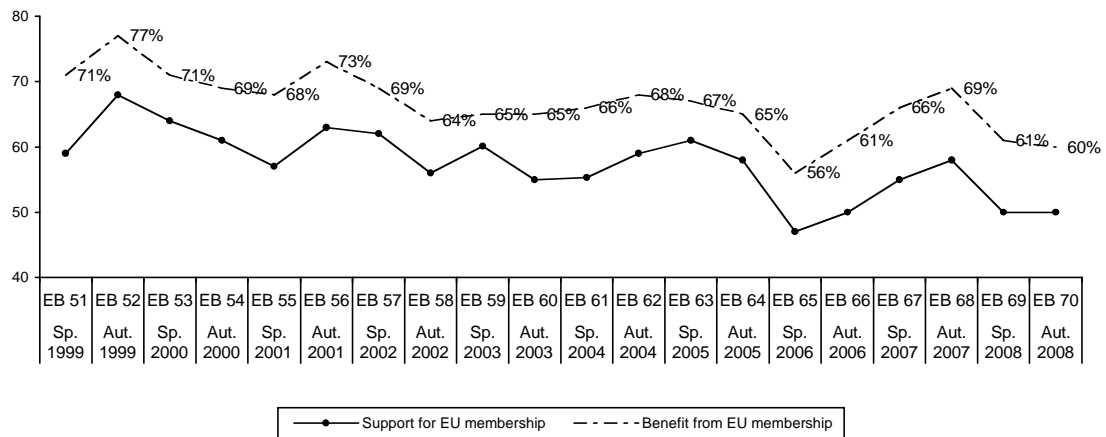
The Socialist Party billboards' slogan – We, European - claimed an European identity for the party (and the Portuguese citizens) and called for a stronger EU as a solution to the crisis. The liberal conservative Social Democratic Party's billboards stressed a message centred on the party's defence of the national interest in Europe, and offered to solve the economic crisis through a more efficient use of the European funds.

One of the Left Block's billboards shows the Commission President José Manuel Barroso embracing prime minister Sócrates at the time of the signature of the Lisbon Treaty, with a slogan accusing both the government and the EU for the economic crisis and stating that neither the government nor the EU would solve it. Accordingly, the Left Block's Euromanifesto proposed an alternative social model for Europe with much stronger state involvement in the economy. The Communist and Green coalition billboards advertised the party's national and European politics as one crucial for fighting for jobs, social justice, national production and sovereignty. Its European manifesto set a political agenda for both Portugal and Europe. The Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party's campaign billboards focused on national subjects like social security, taxes and security policy, and promoted the image of the party as a serious and able authoritative party.

Public Opinion

The impact of European integration in Portuguese political dynamics is a relevant issue, as it seems to be assessed by the mainstream/incumbent political elites as a promoter of democratic consolidation and economic development. This is also true at the level of citizens, as the Portuguese figure as one of the most pro-European countries. However, in the last decade, levels of consensus about the benefits of European membership and the perception of European Union (EU) as positive have been decreasing, especially since the introduction of the Euro (see figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Perceptions about the EU membership (% positive responses)



Source: Eurobarometer Surveys

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm

Results

The results of the 2009 Portuguese EP elections partially confirm “second order elections” expectations: lower turnout levels and lower share of votes for mainstream parties in favour of a better performance for small parties. Additionally, these elections reflected voters’ responses to the political situation of the first order arena with national issues dominating the electoral campaigns, especially the evaluation of the government performance in the economic field. However, the results were to a certain extent a surprise: although a majority of the polls portrayed the Socialist Party as the expected winner, the results turned out very differently. With 26.6% of votes the incumbent party was the only one losing votes, compared with the opposition liberal conservative Social Democratic Party (PSD) 31.7%. Small parties performed well, especially the extreme left. The vote for the left libertarian Left Block (BE) and the Communist and Green coalition amounted to 21%, while on the right the Democratic and Social Centre won 8.4%.

The strong results for the two extreme left parties, the left libertarian Left Block and the Communist and Green coalition, was one of the important outcomes of these elections, as both were critical of European integration (Lobo and Magalhães: 2001, Lobo: 2003, Freire 2005). Since the eighties the mainstream Portuguese parties, the Socialist Party and the liberal conservative Social Democratic Party, but also the right party Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party, have been supportive of European integration, seeing integration as a factor for democratic consolidation and economic development. In contrast, the Communist Party - the major party in the Communist and Green coalition - has since the transition to democracy opposed Portuguese membership of the EC. In the 1999 national parliamentary elections a new party emerged, the Left Block, and it also assumed a very critical voice regarding the EU liberal economic policies. However, none of the two parties - the Left Block and Communist and Green coalition – made their Euroscepticism very salient or explicit.

Table 1: 2009 European Parliament election results

Parties	Votes (%)	Seats	European Political Groups		
			EPP	PES	GUE/ NGL
PSD	31,7	8	8		
PS	26,6	7		7	
BE	10,7	3			3
CDU (PCP-PEV)	10,7	2			2
CDS-PP	8,4	2	2		
Others	12,0	0			
Total	100	22	10	7	5

Source: European Parliament

Available: http://www.elections2009-results.eu/pt/portugal_pt.html#ancre3

PSD: Social Democratic Party;

CDU: Unitarian Democratic Coalition is a formed by the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the Green Party (PEV)

CDS-PP: Democratic and Social Centre – Popular Party,

BE: Left block.

EPP - European People's Party,

PSE - The Socialist Group in the European Parliament,

GUE/NGL - Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left

In table 2 below we present the electoral results for the five parties with national and European representation.

Table 2: National parliamentary elections (NAT) and European parliament elections (EP).

Political Party	NAT 1985	EP 1987	Dif.*	NAT 1987	EP 1989	Dif.	NAT 1991	EP 1994	Dif	NAT 1995	EP 1999	Dif	NAT 2002	EP 2004	Dif.	NAT 2005	EP 2009	Dif.
PS	20.8	22.5	1.7	22.2	28.5	6.3	29.1	34.9	5.7	43.8	43.1	-0.7	37.8	44.5	6.7	45.0	26.6	-18.4
PSD	29.9	37.5	7.6	50.2	32.8	-17.5	50.6	34.4	-16.2	34.1	31.1	-3				28.8	31.7	2.9
CDS-PP	10.0	15.4	5.4	4.4	14.2	9.7	4.4	12.5	8	9.1	8.2	-0.9	48.9	33.3	-15.7	7.2	8.4	1.2
CDU	15.5	11.5	-4	12.1	14.4	2.3	8.8	11.2	2.4	8.57	10.3	1.8	6.9	9.1	2.2	7.5	10.7	3.2
BE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.8	1.8	2.74	4.9	2.2	6.4	10.7	4.3

Source: National Commission of Elections (CNE): <http://www.cne.pt>

* Values in percentage points

Note: Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party and the Social Democratic Party ran on a coalition for the 2004 European Elections

Three long-term features were confirmed in these elections:

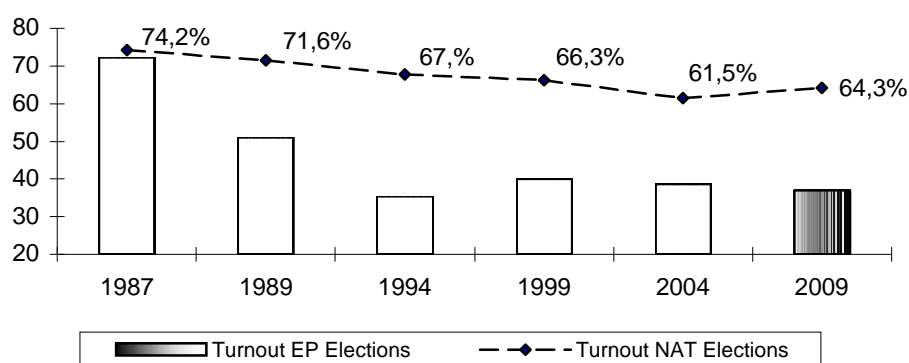
First, there is a clear-cut difference in performance between incumbent and non-incumbent parties. From 1987 onwards the incumbent party systematically lost at the EP elections, while the parties in the opposition tend to win in percentage of votes. The 1999 EP election results were the exception in this regard, as the small extreme left parties (Communist and Green coalition and Left Block) were the only ones gaining votes.

Second, the extreme-left and right parties tend to gain votes. This is true for the Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party (except in the 1999 EP elections) and for the Communist and Green coalition (except in the 1987 EP elections).

Finally, the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party have been able to gain the majority of votes (two thirds) in the group of elections observed, in what can be interpreted as the growing consolidation of a balanced two-party system.

The turnout trend in national versus European parliament elections is laid out in the figure below:

Figure 1: Turnout in National and European Parliament Elections



Source: National Elections Commission (CNE)

Available: www.cne.pt

Note: Turnout in NAT trend line correspond to elections held immediately before the EU Elections (see table 2).

The figure shows that: 1) there is a decreasing in turnout in both elections since Portugal's accession; 2) turnout is substantially lower in European elections than in national elections, therefore confirming the second order hypothesis. In 2009 the turnout reached a record low, with only 36.9% of the Portuguese voters casting ballots.

Although positive perceptions of the EU predominate, participation in the EP elections were one of the lowest in Europe. A special Eurobarometer (70.1) reveals that the 2009 European parliament elections were ignored by a vast majority of voters. While 54% of the European citizens declared that they were not interested in the 2009 EP elections; in Portugal the proportion was 62%, with only 35% of the citizens showing interest (the percentages came out very close to the actual turnout/abstention rates). In terms of voting probability only 14% of the Portuguese citizens stated that they would definitely cast their vote (this was the lowest share at the EU27). This can also be related (at least theoretically) with citizens' perceptions about the European parliament, in that 56% of the Portuguese citizens consider not to know well the EP, with only 21% thinking the opposite.

Conclusions and Future Prospects

The EP elections opened a very charged electoral year in the country, with local and legislative elections to follow in the autumn of 2009. In the context of the current economic and financial crisis, and with several episodes of serious contestation against the government's education and health policies during this government's incumbency, the EP elections results, in particular the heavy loss inflicted on the incumbent Socialist Party, had important implications for the expectations and strategies of the parties. In particular, the results changed the prospects for the incumbent party, the Socialist Party, to win a second absolute majority. In the medium-term, if repeated, the electoral gains of the Left Block could change the two-party nature of the party system.

Opinion makers and political scientists now raise the possibility that the Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party and the Social Democratic Party could run together in the next parliamentary elections in order to countervail the rise of the extreme left and its possible coalition with the Socialist Party. On the left of the political spectrum no pre-electoral coalition is envisaged, as all the party leaders stated their intention to run separately.

This analysis of the EP elections also confirms another characteristic of the competition on the European issue in Portugal: at the level of party elites, accession has offered political parties and their leaders new political opportunities and new issues to compete for, but at the level of voters, the European issue remains secondary or ignored and indifference at our representation at the EP is mirrored in one of the highest (and rising) abstention rates in the EU-15.

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This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>.