

Peter Gentle * - 19 May 2026

“A Europa Connosco”: Forty Years of Portugal in Europe

Introduction: How have 40 years of EU Membership solidified Portuguese democracy?

“A Europa Connosco” – or “Europe With Us” was the slogan used by Portugal’s first democratically elected Prime Minister Mario Soares, fifty years ago on the 25th April 1976, laying out a vision for a liberal, democratic and prosperous nation hinged on an embrace of Europe after the wilderness of dictatorship. Within a decade, the first brick to build Soares’ ambitious vision was laid, and this year Portugal celebrates forty years since its EU accession, alongside Spain, in 1986. Sharing a similar post-dictatorship trajectory to its Iberian neighbour, Soares insisted that the only route to a free and democratic Portugal lay within Europe¹ – a route that Soares successfully sold to the Portuguese electorate in 1976, and, despite its rocky patches, one that still sells today, with domestic support for Portuguese membership of the European Union [recently reaching record highs](#)².

However, perhaps a greater success lay in selling Portugal’s role in building the European project – then the European Communities. Not only did Soares draw on Portugal’s economic importance, as a gateway to Africa, Brazil and other Lusophone markets, but was also vocal about Europe’s role in opposing dictatorship and even critical of its complacency towards autocratic regimes until his death in 2017. Yet with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps *Portugal’s* future role in EU democracy was in fact understated at the time – in forty years of membership, a country representing just over 2% of the population of the European Union can boast a former two-term President of the European Commission, the present European Council President and the birthplace of the current Treaty provision – add to this the outgoing Secretary General of the United Nations, and perhaps the question should be how Portuguese democracy has solidified Europe!

It would be fair to say that Portuguese democracy owes as much to EU membership itself as it does to a myth of Portuguese ‘exceptionalism’ in response to autocracy - and thereby - populist and anti-EU senti-

ment. As recently as 2024, prior to his appointment as European Council President, Prime Minister António Costa sought to reassure his European counterparts by pointing out the exceptionalism of Portugal’s right-wing populists, *Chega!*, after their rapid surge in legislative elections – effectively claiming that ‘populists they may well be’, but, in contrast to other far-right movements across the continent, ‘Eurosceptic they are not’. Even Cas Mudde singles out Portugal among a handful of countries not to have experienced a successful far-right movement in his seminal work *The Far Right Today*, though knowingly acknowledging that no country is immune to far-right politics and that these countries are in fact fertile breeding grounds for populism³. Writing in 2019, Mudde’s work itself outdates what must be one of the youngest members of the European populist family, with *Chega!* (literally meaning ‘Enough!’) only forming that year to contest the European Parliament election as the coalition *Basta!* (also meaning ‘Enough!’). In response to Costa’s claim vis-à-vis Euroscepticism, [I argue that the reality is far more nuanced](#)⁴.

The populist-Eurosceptic paradox: From Troika to trusted institution?

While Portugal’s forty-year relationship with the European institutions has been, for the most part, a relatively smooth journey, it has not come without some degree of turbulence, most notably during the period following the Eurozone crisis, with Portugal (alongside Greece) being amongst the hardest hit member states. While zest for the European Union obviously soured in both countries, and trust in all institutions (national government, parliament and the EU institutions) plummeted, with voters unavoidably associating the Troika-imposed austerity measures with the EU institutions (two of which – the Commission and ECB – indeed made up the three-pronged ‘attack’ on public finances), Portuguese politics appeared to survive a Eurosceptic surge relatively unscathed.

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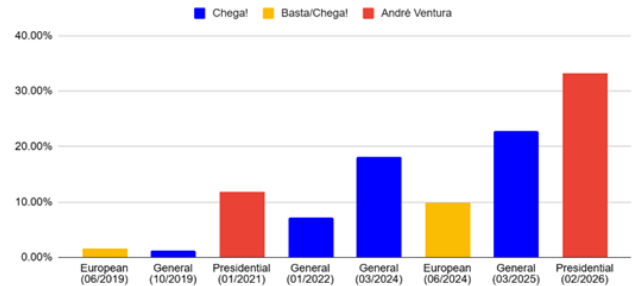
Although the conditions imposed on the two countries differed, with Greece’s current political landscape littered with no fewer than five openly Eurosceptic populist parties, for Portugal to have emerged with one populist party whose relationship with the EU is at times ambivalent (and I would argue, deliberately ambiguous) is somewhat paradoxical. According to a report from the 89 Initiative published in 2021⁵, this was simply a question of timing – and one of supply and demand – at the peak of popular anti-EU settlement, the lack of ‘charismatic leadership’ on the supply-side meant that the crisis was not exploited by populists for political gain at the expense of the country’s European ties.

While trust in the EU soared in Portugal following the next crisis⁶ – the Covid19 pandemic – the domestic political scene has since been mired in a series of corruption scandals which have severely weakened the hand of the PS and PSD, the mainstream centre parties, which had previously enjoyed a duopoly of power. The response from the populist fringe has, this time, not been marred by lack of charisma – far from it. The Portuguese presidential race – one of the first European elections of 2026 – resulted in a run-off between António Seguro, the ‘safe’ mainstream option (literally: ‘Seguro’ would translate as ‘safe’) – and the outspoken leader of *Chega!* André Ventura. While Seguro eventually emerged as the victor with a record 66% of votes, for a right-wing populist to have come that close to the Belém palace, gathering a still impressive third of the vote share, would have been unthinkable even a decade ago.

It is tempting to see the Belém result as a repudiation of populism, a 2026 revenge of the ‘plorables’⁷, as it were, or a bellwether of pro-European sentiment across the EU, especially in the light of Peter Magyar’s recent dethroning of Viktor Orbán in Hungary in a similar landslide. Indeed, it is hard not to hear the echoes of ‘Europe with us’ in the streets of Budapest; but while both saw a significant increase in voter participation and a self-affirming exercise in democracy, the comparisons probably end there. Portuguese populism in its current manifestation would undoubtedly be included in Mudde’s so-called ‘fourth wave’⁸, characterised by slick political messaging and a fast-tracked social learning process, with a roadmap already provided by populists in power – most notoriously, Orbán and Fidesz. Orbán’s defeat has shown what happens when the roadmap eventu-

ally runs out of road, but Portugal’s populists are not nearly as far along that road.

Chega! Vote share of in last eight elections: 2019-2026



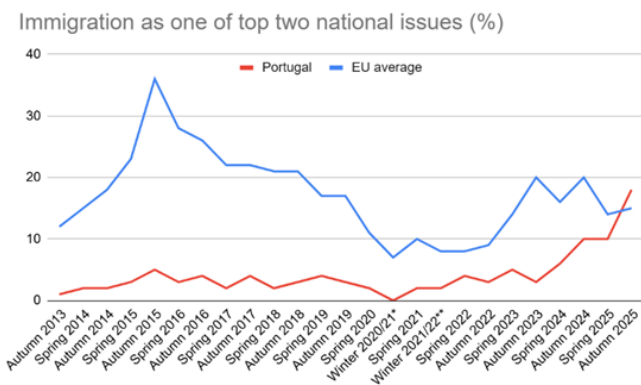
Mainstreaming the far-right: corruption, constitution, immigration

It should have been no surprise when Portugal’s youngest populists aligned themselves behind the new grouping spearheaded by Eurosceptic veterans Fidesz following the 2024 EP elections – their domestic policy manifesto has mirrored the Hungarian party’s early political manoeuvres albeit with more limited success – so far. Positioning the far-right party as a ‘cleansing’ force against a corrupt system, Ventura has called for a drastic reduction in the number of *deputados* elected to Parliament⁹, a tactic used by Orbán to rig the democratic architecture prior to the 2014 Hungarian elections. Blocked on the grounds that such measures would be unconstitutional, *Chega!* have repeated calls for the rewriting of the constitution by the right-wing majority, calls which if successful would make Portugal one of the few EU members to ratify a new constitution in the 21st century – and, crucially, post-accession – alongside Orbán’s Hungary in 2011¹⁰.

On this front, the populists may have succeeded in bringing a relatively fringe issue into the political mainstream: a recent report shows that (only) half (44% + 6%) of Portuguese respondents identified with the principles enshrined in the constitution – although this was the largest camp by far, followed by those who neither agreed nor disagreed (24%), or neither knew nor cared to respond (16%)¹¹. While the report elaborates on the number of complex factors and attitudes which reflect the current ennui with the status quo – the fact that only 10% of respondents explicitly disagreed with the principles of the Portuguese constitution make the [government plans for constitutional reform](#) all the more controversial¹² and hint

at the potential divisions and crises the population might be sleepwalking into.

Perhaps the most surprising example of Portugal’s ‘exceptionalism’ during the crises of the 2010s was the extent to which migration remained a relatively fringe issue¹³. Incredibly, as anti-immigration rhetoric rocketed across Europe in 2015, Portugal’s response to the crisis was muted, with never more than 5% of Eurobarometer respondents listing it as a top issue facing the country for a whole decade. In fact, as recently as Winter 2020, when asked the question ‘What are the top two issues facing your country at the moment?’ 0% of respondents – perhaps understandably for the time – listed immigration as such an issue. However, the political climate has changed markedly in just five years. While immigration remains a key issue across the European bloc it is accompanied by a cocktail of other crises, each with its own national flavour. Yet in Portugal, in the most recent Eurobarometer survey, immigration rose above the European Union average for the first time¹⁴.



It is worth adding that [net immigration numbers have been rising](#) in a country whose previous experiences with migration crises had stemmed from emigration brain drain¹⁵, understandably bringing a shock to the system ripe for exploitation by populist actors. The three issues that register higher than immigration for Portuguese respondents¹⁶ – health (37%), cost of living (34%) and housing (32%) – have been triangulated by the populists as [linked to immigration](#)¹⁷ – bringing in a cross-section of older voters, families struggling to make ends meet, and young people, each with their own legitimate grievances. Yet each of these grievances has long been an issue¹⁸, predating the rise in net migration and that of the far-right, and owing to a diverse array of contributing factors.

Conclusion: Europe Matters

Portugal’s experiences of EU membership, rather than proving the trend of being ‘exceptional’ (Europe without us) appear in fact to show Europe is with us – if perhaps a few steps ahead. Delayed responses to the immigration crisis, the late arrival of the populist radical right – and, indeed, the latter’s unexpected setback in the EP 2024 elections paint a national image slightly out-of-sync with the European big picture but coloured by the same issues. In fact, the most recent European Parliament elections are a case in point.

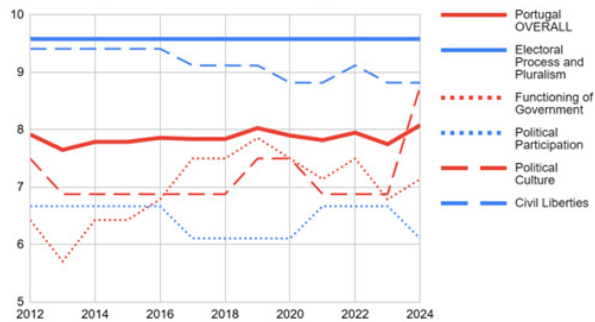
One unlikely result of populism and polarisation has been the effect it has had on voter participation, galvanising record numbers of voters to the polls, as seen from Belém to Budapest in 2026. Once written off as second-order elections, a phenomenon exacerbated by disaffection with a perceived democratic deficit over the early course of the 21st century, EP elections saw a reversal in fortunes in 2019 – with the emergence of populist parties in all corners of the continent, over half of eligible voters turned out with something to fight for, or fight against. Portuguese turnout, on the other hand, hit an all-time-low of 30.75% – very much reinforcing the idea that ‘Europe doesn’t matter’ to the Portuguese¹⁹.

The vastly altered political landscape in 2024 has once again helped to dispel this myth. Not only did turnout among the Portuguese electorate improve to 36.54%, but the vote share for all the main pro-European centrist parties increased in comparison to the national election result a few months before, while the *Chega!* vote almost halved between elections. Europe is with us, and Europe matters.

This effect hasn’t just been felt in European elections, as eye-watering levels of abstinence in voting patterns over the last twenty years have finally seen a turnaround, from local to legislative to presidential races. Against the backdrop of declining global democratic standards heralded year-on-year by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index²⁰, Portugal has actually seen a modest improvement in its democratic rating since 2012, seeing its overall score increase from 7.92 (classed by the EIU as a ‘flawed’ democracy) to 8.08 (denoting a ‘full’ democracy). Based on a number of contributing criteria, relative government stability in the 2017-2022 period may have characterised the country’s steady improvement whereas temporary increases in political

participation and political culture accompany the present period. While it should be wary of a decline in civil liberties, Portugal now sits among an **ev-shrinking elite** of ‘full’ democracies globally²¹.

Democracy Index 2012-2024 Portugal



What is evident is that Soares vision, for a democratic Portugal within a free and fair Europe remains mostly intact. As it did for the Portuguese half a century ago, for an increasing number of member state populations, a queue of candidate countries, and – who knows, maybe even former member states²² – the European Union may be finally coming to represent an unlikely bastion of the liberal democracy that a majority of Europeans would fight to keep alive. Portugal has been aware of this for forty years.

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