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## From discontent to disruption – the shifting geography of politics in Portugal

*In March 2024, João Almeida and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose wrote that a transformation in the territorial dynamics of electoral politics in Portugal was underway. Revisiting their argument after the 2025 Portuguese election, they find that this shift is no longer embryonic and has crystallised into a systemic realignment.*

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A little more than a year ago, on this very platform, we warned that **Portugal's political map was on the move**. We argued that the country's politics were tilting on their territorial axis. They have now completed the rotation. What was once a faint tremor has become a full-scale realignment that resists a tidy left-right taxonomy, demanding instead a reading rooted in place, identity and lived reality.

The top-down melodrama of **yet another minority government collapsing** was entertaining enough, but the real drama lay in the ballots. They revealed a Portugal stitched together by uneven patterns of grievance and aspiration, from the post-industrial peripheries of Lisbon to the parched plains of the Alentejo. As **Sébastien Bourdin** has observed of similar ructions in Romania, geography is fast mutating from a backdrop of discontent into a multidimensional electoral landscape where peoples' votes are influenced not only by *where* they live but also by *how* they live, *what* they hope for and *what* they fear.

## The far-right breakthrough and the fragmented left

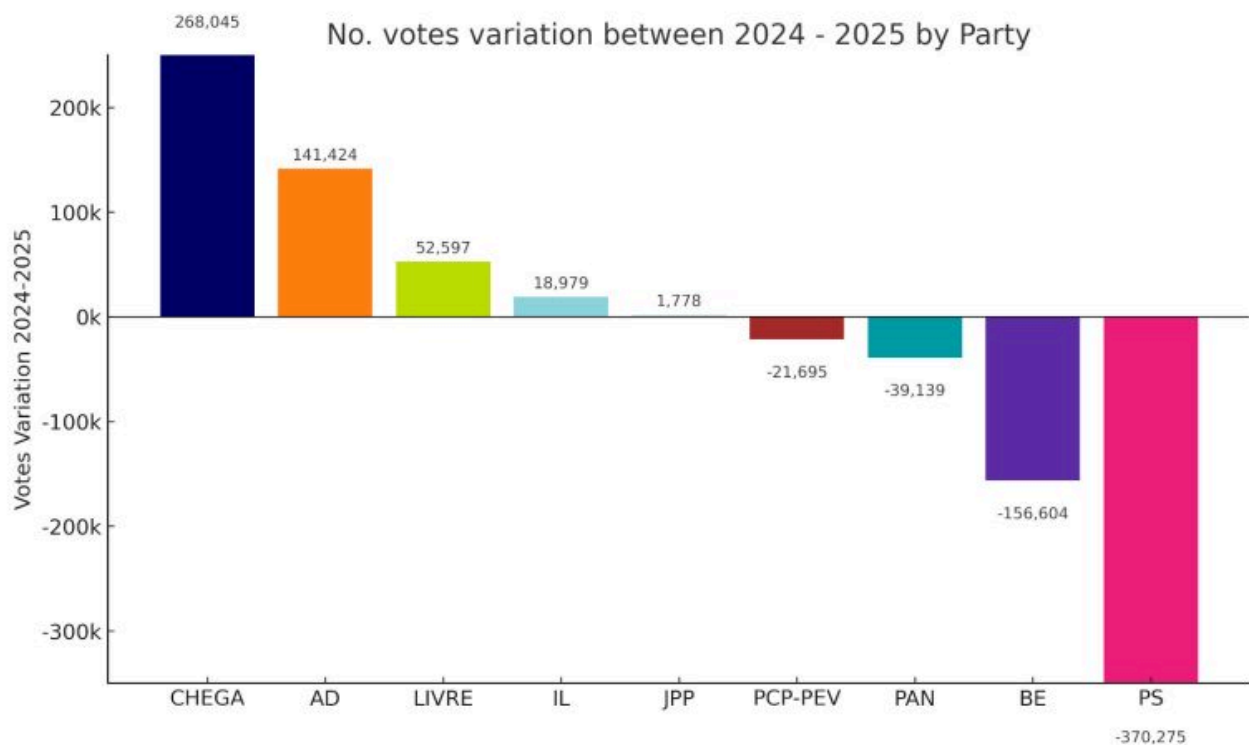
If Portuguese politics were a two-pillar temple, one of those pillars has failed its structural integrity test. The centre-right Democratic Alliance (AD) remains a solid pillar. Fronted by Luís Montenegro, it

topped the poll with 91 seats in the 230-seat parliament. Enough to claim the winner's trophy, but too few to rule with any comfort. Meanwhile, André Ventura's **Chega** swaggered into parliament with 60 seats, elbowing the once venerable Socialists into an ignominious third place and shattering the post-revolutionary duopoly that had endured since the 1970s.

Chega's rise is far more geographic than ideological. The party breached left-wing strongholds in the Alentejo, a region long painted Socialist and Communist red. Talk of threadbare services, fears over crime and fiery rhetoric on immigration resonated more loudly than half-remembered revolutionary hymns and decades of left loyalty. If the Carnation revolution was once carried aloft by Alentejo's agricultural workers, today those same fields echo with something closer to revolt.

On the other flank, the left's rout was brutal. The Socialist Party lost more than 350,000 votes, tumbling from 78 to 58 MPs, while the Left Bloc (BE) took an electoral pummelling of similar scale (Figure 1). In Beja, Portalegre and Setúbal, once bastions of left-wing dominance, the left was overtaken by Chega, a result that would have looked like a misprint even a year ago.

Figure 1: Variation in votes for Portuguese parties at the 2024 and 2025 Portuguese elections



Source: Authors using data from **SGMAI-AE**.

Why? Because the story the left likes to tell about itself no longer matches what voters see outside their windows. Housing is scarce, hospitals distant, pay packets thin. Younger voters, especially men outside Lisbon and Porto, hear progressive sermons on inclusion but feel excluded from growth and prosperity and devoid of opportunities. When disillusion sets in, moderation rarely looks as cathartic as a howl of protest.

Hence, what was once a cohesive base of public-sector workers, card-holding union members, and stalwart state employees has fractured. Voters disillusioned by years of unmet promises did not

stroll politely to centrist moderation. They bolted towards a party that promises to bulldoze the status quo, even when most past economic evidence suggests such bulldozers **usually flatten prosperity rather than inefficiency or red-tape**.

The left's defeat, then, is thus far more than numerical. It goes to the heart of its narrative. For most Portuguese, the left has mislaid the script on migration, housing, progress and territorial inequality, and its audience is leaving the theatre.

## Who votes for whom? Early socio-demographic clues

Scratch the election numbers at municipal levels, using data from the **Eyedata platform**, and familiar patterns start to emerge. The AD flourishes where there are more Catholic marriages, secondary education is widespread, there is stronger performance in basic education and small businesses remain busy.

These are territories mostly comfortable with tomorrow's prospects and partial to sermons on fiscal rectitude. Chega, by contrast, feeds on municipalities grappling with higher crime, educational bottlenecks (higher school retention rates), stretched public services and where there is a greater proportion of foreign residents, particularly in areas where requests for residence status have increased.

Yet the most telling clues are neglect and abandonment. Of the 145 municipalities where Chega exceeded its national vote share, 56 exhibit **the triple burden** of shrinking youth populations, swelling pensioner rolls and wages below the median. Many of these sit in Portugal's rural interior, where depopulation gnaws like dry rot at the democratic foundations of the country (Figure 2). Only one municipality stands out for bucking every risk indicator, proof that even comfortable towns can flirt with populism when the mood takes them or their neighbours.

**Figure 2: Map of winning parties in Portuguese municipalities at the 2024 and 2025 Portuguese elections**

*Source: Authors using data from **SGMAI-AE**.*

These correlations expose far more than a protest vote. They capture a territorial angst about an uncertain future, a long-standing demographic drift and an absent state. Chega's messaging may appal polite company in Lisbon's dinner parties, but it is tailored with algorithmic precision to the anxieties of Alentejo's empty streets, and the cafés in forlorn villages in the interior of the country.

## From a geography of discontent to a multidimensional electoral landscape

In the 2024 election, discontent had a geography. The 2025 numbers reveal it now has a full platform. Economic structure, demographic ageing, local governance and collective memory pile atop the old left-right axis, producing a mosaic of overlapping grievances. Just as in Donald Trump's election in the US, most of the coast votes like a coast, most of the interior like an interior, and neither is inclined to take lectures from the other.

Geography is no longer just a reflection of marginalisation, it is now a blueprint for disruption and realignment. This pattern is hardly Portuguese exceptionalism. Across Europe, "**places that don't matter**" are discovering they have ballots and know how to use them. Deprive a community of doctors, decent trains and a reason for its teenagers to stay, and do not be surprised when it sends

a wrecking ball to parliaments. The danger is that wrecking balls rarely deliver on their promises. They wreck, they don't rebuild.

## What next?

The question tormenting Portuguese political circles is no longer *who* governs but *how*, and crucially *for whom*. Governing without a majority is tricky in the best of times, doing so while the floorboards creak under the weight of fragmentation is trickier still. The AD must corral a minority into passing budgets while avoiding the embrace of Chega. The left needs more than sharper soundbites. It must repitch its tent and find a new voice in the very territories it abandoned, listening first, lecturing, if at all, later.

Although ideology still matters, territory now sets the rhythm. Portugal's political future will not be settled solely in the halls of the parliament. It will be hashed out in its towns, neighbourhoods and peripheries, where democracy is being renegotiated, vote by vote, in real time. Portugal simply cannot get its politics back on track by ignoring the siren notes of this election. It needs a strategy to combat the deepening roots of discontent. Burying its head in the sand would only guarantee that the popular (and populist) chorus after the next election will be even louder.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Nuno M. Maia](#) / [Shutterstock.com](#)*

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João Almeida is a PhD Candidate in Business and Economics, and a Research Fellow of the Research Unit on Governance, Public Policies and Competitiveness at the University of Aveiro (Portugal). He is also the Co-Founder and Coordinator of Rural Move, a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting investment and repopulation in rural areas.

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