

RESEARCH NOTE

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES
IN PORTUGUESE DEMOCRATIC
CONSOLIDATION*Marina Costa Lobo*

ABSTRACT

In this research note, I analyse the evolution of the Portuguese party system from a position of relative polarization to today's majoritarian system. Using indicators for net volatility and degree of fragmentation in the party system, I discuss three factors in this evolution: the importance of the appearance of a new party, the PRD; the decline of small parties, in part due to their failure to innovate; and the dynamics of presidential elections. I show that political parties were at the centre of the stabilization of the party system, and thus the consolidation of democracy. These developments were also conditioned by the semi-presidential nature of the regime. Successive presidential elections have encouraged parties in the same bloc to join forces, albeit inconsistently. Future research on this topic should take into account the interplay between the Portuguese party system and the dynamics of presidential elections.

KEY WORDS ■ democratic consolidation ■ Portugal ■ semi-presidentialism

A unique phenomenon for Western Europe can be observed in recent Portuguese electoral history: without any favourable institutional change, a relatively polarized party system has evolved into a majoritarian party system (Morlino, 1998; Magone, 1998; Manuel, 1996; Bruneau, 1997; Nataf, 1995). Between 1976 and 1987, the party system was characterized by the existence of four relatively strong parties – one of which was anti-system – and a high degree of government instability. During that first

decade of democracy, governments proved fairly vulnerable: none survived a full term, each government lasting on average 11 months. In contrast, since 1987 the two centre parties have alternated in government. In that year, the centre-right PSD (Partido Social Democrata) won an absolute majority and governed alone for the full mandate. In the following 1991 elections, the PSD was returned to power with a reinforced majority. In 1995, the Socialists (Partido Socialista [PS]) won a comfortable minority. For the first time there was alternation in government, with the PS government lasting for a full term. More recently, in 1999, the PS renewed its mandate for another legislature, maintaining a comfortable minority.¹

Both economic and political causes lie behind electoral change (Heath et al., 1992; Bartolini and Mair, 1990). In Portugal, economic factors, and especially EU membership and the acceleration of economic growth in the mid-1980s, have been related to the shift to a relatively majoritarian party system (Lobo, 1996). In this research note, I summarize the development of the party system and investigate the role of parties and political factors within it. My hypotheses are twofold. First, that changes in the parties and the party system itself may have contributed to a majoritarian logic in the party system. Second, the institutional framework within which the party system developed may have been conducive to bipolarization, i.e. the existence of a semi-presidential system could have provided the incentives for the right- and left-wing parties to form blocs to dispute these elections.

The stabilization of the Portuguese party system is relevant in the analysis of the consolidation of Portuguese democracy. According to Pasquino (1995: 264), developments in the party system may encourage or impede cabinet stability, so influencing the consolidation of democracy seen as a long-term process. The existence of centripetal forces may facilitate political competition and thus the institutionalization of democracy. In this research note, I discuss the changes in the base of electoral support, changes in party system competition and the nature of the semi-presidential system. I also examine the degree of fragmentation in the party system and compare the changes in government stability. I show that parties, although being central actors, were not the only determinants in the stabilization of the party system, being especially constrained by the semi-presidential nature of the regime.

Changes in the Base of Electoral Support

Given the historical factors and the democratic transition, the Left emerged much stronger than the Right in 1976. Within the Left, the PS was confirmed as the largest party in Portugal in the first legislative elections of 1976, with 37.9 percent of the vote, similar to its position in the elections for the Constituent Assembly. The PCP (Communists) held 14.6 percent of the vote, making a total vote of 52.5 percent for the parties of the Left.² Because of

the ideological gulf which existed between the PS and the PCP, no coalition between them was struck; instead, the PS formed a minority government. On the Right, the PSD established itself as hegemon, with 26.4 percent of the vote, against 16.6 percent for the conservative CDS. Since 1976, only the PS had been able to claim diffuse electoral support in the country, although it enjoyed relatively greater success in the centre and the south. The three other parties had regional strongholds, namely the Alentejo and Setubal district for the PCP, the north-east and pockets of the northern coast for the CDS and the north and the islands for the PSD. These territorial cleavages 'defined in 1975 were confirmed in the subsequent elections, until 1985' (André and Gaspar, 1989: 264).

The overall picture up until 1983 was that 'the evolution of the vote reflected the electoral punishment of parties that participated in government'.³ Thus, after three years in government the PS suffered an electoral setback in 1979, losing more than 20 percent of its electorate. Later, the right-wing AD coalition, which governed the country between 1979 and 1983, saw its share of the vote decrease by 7 percent in the 1983 legislative elections.⁴ From 1976 to 1983 there was governmental instability in large part due to economic difficulties in the country and to parliamentary fragmentation, with no party having an absolute majority of votes. Nevertheless, net electoral volatility between 1975 and 1983 was relatively small, with all four major parties maintaining their share of the vote, the smaller parties even managing to increase their share (see Table 1).

Individual party volatility attests to the fact that there was a variant of polarized pluralism during the period 1976–85. The split was between the PCP and the other parties. In fact, the other major parties entered into coalitions with one another in the period: the PS and the CDS in 1977, the PSD and the CDS in 1979–80, and the PS and the PSD formally in 1983 until 1985 besides colluding in 1982 to reform the Constitution.

The meteoric rise of the PRD (Partido Renovador Democrático), a centre-left party launched by President Eanes in the 1985 elections, pointed to a

Table 1. Votes and net volatility (in %) of the major parties since 1974

Party Years	CDS		PSD		AD		PRD		PS		PCP	
	Vote	NV*	Vote	NV*	Vote	NV*	Vote	NV*	Vote	NV*	Vote	NV*
1976	16.6		24.4				–		35.0		14.6	
1979 ⁵					42.2	+0.7	–		28.1	–6.9	19	+4.4
1980					47.1	+4.9	–		28.0	–0.1	16.9	–2.1
1983	12.4		27.0				–		36.3	+8.3	18.2	+1.3
1985	9.8	–2.6	29.8	+2.8			17.9		20.8	–15.5	15.5	–2.7
1987	4.3	–5.5	50.1	+20.3			4.9	–13	22.3	+2.3	12.2	–3.3
1991	4.4	+0.1	50.4	+0.3			0.6	–4.3	29.2	+6.9	8.8	–3.4
1995	9.0	+4.6	34.0	–16.4					43.8	+14.6	8.6	–0.2
1999	8.4	–0.6	32.3	+1.7					44.0	+0.2	9.0	+0.4

Source: STAPE.

* NV = Net volatility.

decrease in the party loyalty of the centrist electorate. Thus, in 1985, the PS lost 24 percent of its electorate to the new party, while the PCP lost 11 percent (André and Gaspar, 1989: 246). A total of more than one million people who voted for PRD in 1985 had voted for a different party in 1983. In the following elections, the PRD vote collapsed, with the party gaining only 4.9 percent of the vote. The Socialists, however, were unable to regain the voters they lost to the PRD in 1985, their vote increasing only marginally. Instead, the PSD, which had led a minority government between 1985 and 1987, was the main beneficiary of the PRD collapse, as well as attracting a substantial share of CDS voters. In 1991, net volatility was comparatively small, although the Socialists did manage to improve their vote, largely by attracting the remaining PRD voters.

The electoral superiority of the Left between 1976 and 1985 can be seen from Table 1. However, incompatibilities between the two major components, the PS and the PCP, prevented them from becoming allies. The major change that occurred in the last decade was not so much the overall vote cast for the left but its *composition*: in 1985, the 54.2 percent of votes for left-wing parties was shared relatively equally by the PCP (15.5 percent), the PS (20.8 percent) and the PRD (17.9 percent). In 1995, the left once more gained a majority of the votes (52.46 percent), only this time the PS had the lion's share: 43.85 percent as opposed to 8.61 percent for the PCP.

An analysis of the degree of party system fragmentation (Table 2) confirms these changes. Between 1976 and 1980, the number of effective parliamentary parties (ENP) decreased from 3.47 to 2.46. This was due essentially to the pre-electoral coalition government formed in mid-1979 between the right-wing parties, the PSD, the conservative CDS and the monarchist PPM, forming the AD – Aliança Democrática. The AD coalition was undone before the 1983 elections, leading the ENP to increase to 3.36. In the following legislative elections the effective number of parliamentary parties reached a peak in the period, 4.23. The entry of a new centre-left party, the PRD, split left-wing votes, and was the main cause of this increased fragmentation of parliamentary votes.

After that, the ENP decreased to relatively low levels as the PSD won an absolute majority in Parliament, a result repeated in 1991. In 1995 there was a *de facto* alternation in government with the PS falling four seats short of an absolute majority in Parliament. Despite being a popular government, the PS did not manage to win an absolute majority in 1999. Winning exactly half of the seats in Parliament (115 seats), its share of the vote improved, but only marginally.

In the first and second decades of democracy in Portugal, support for the ENP reached relatively low levels. However, there were fundamental differences. In the first decade, the period of time in which the ENP was low was comparatively short (1979–83), whereas in the second decade of democracy, this was characteristic of the whole period (1985–99). More importantly, the reduced support for the ENP in the first period was a result of the

Table 2. The effective number of parliamentary parties in Portugal,⁶ 1976–99

<i>Election date</i>	<i>1976</i>	<i>1979</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1983</i>	<i>1985</i>	<i>1987</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1999</i>
Effective no. of parties	3.47	2.60	2.46	3.36	4.23	2.36	2.25	2.57	2.61

coalition of the main right-wing parties, whereas since 1987 the reduced support has been a consequence of the concentration of votes in the two largest centre parties, the PS and the PSD. These developments in the ENP mirrored changes in the composition and durability of Portuguese Cabinets (see Table 3).

Whereas in the first decade of democracy majority governments had always been a result of coalition government, because no party controlled a majority in Parliament, in the second decade the PSD enjoyed a parliamentary majority for eight years, followed by two PS cabinets, which did not enjoy a majority, but governed alone. The party system therefore underwent momentous change, which promoted greater governmental stability. What political factors led to these changes in the Portuguese party system? The factors related to the dynamics of the party system are in effect the strategies followed by Portuguese parties that led to stabilization of the party system. At least two party developments seem relevant: first, the entry in 1985 of a new party, the PRD, into the political arena; second, the inability of smaller parties to maintain or increase their share of the vote. The party system changes were largely determined by the institutional framework in which the parties operated. Most importantly, successive presidential elections were central to the bipolarization of the party system, as explained below.

Electoral Party Competition

The emergence of the PRD in 1985 changed the party system format briefly and, importantly, initiated a period of high volatility that culminated in the emergence of the majoritarian party system. The PRD, strongly supported by the outgoing President Eanes, won 17.9 percent of the vote at its first appearance in the 1985 legislative elections. Constitutionally, President Eanes could not be a candidate in the presidential election of 1986, having already served for two consecutive terms. However, he hoped to capitalize on the popularity accrued during his tenure as President from 1976 until 1985. This was a shrewd political move, especially since at the time the PS/PSD coalition government was unpopular because of the harsh economic circumstances. In 1983, Portugal again applied for a loan from the IMF owing to balance of payments difficulties, with deleterious consequences for the living standards of electors in the short-run. This decrease in government popularity, however, did not have an equal affect on the parties in the coalition. In 1985, soon after being elected the new PSD leader, Cavaco Silva

Table 3. Portuguese Cabinets, 1976–99

<i>Government Prime Minister</i>	<i>PM nomination</i>	<i>Government fall</i>	<i>Durability</i>	<i>Composition</i>	<i>Type of Cabinet</i>
Soares (I)	23.07.76	08.12.77	17 months	PS	Minority
Soares (II)	23.01.78	27.07.78	6 months	PS, CDS	Coalition
Nobre da Costa	29.08.78	14.09.78	1 month	Nonpartisan	Presidential
Mota Pinto	21.11.78	07.06.79	7 months	Nonpartisan	Presidential
Pintasilgo	31.07.79	27.12.79	5 months	Nonpartisan	Presidential
Sá Carneiro	03.01.80	09.12.80	11 months	AD (PSD, CDS, PPM)	Coalition
Pinto Balsemão (I)	09.01.81	14.08.81	8 months	AD (PSD, CDS, PPM)	Coalition
Pinto Balsemão (II)	04.09.81	23.12.82	15 months	AD (PSD, CDS, PPM)	Coalition
Soares (III)	09.06.83	25.06.85	2 years	PS, PSD	Coalition
Cavaco Silva (I)	06.11.85	28.04.87	18 months	PSD	Minority
Cavaco Silva (II)	17.08.87	31.10.91	4 years	PSD	Majority
Cavaco Silva (III)	31.10.91	28.10.95	4 years	PSD	Majority
Guterres (I)	28.10.95	31.10.99	4 years	PS	Minority
Guterres (II)	31.10.99			PS	Minority

Source: STAPE.

withdrew his party from the government coalition. New elections were convened and the brunt of governmental unpopularity was borne mainly by the PS. Indeed, the PSD won the 1985 election and proceeded to form a minority government.

A fairly large proportion of the disappointed Socialist electorate voted for the new party, the PRD. Although the PRD's initial success was not equalled in 1987, when the party's share of the vote decreased to 4.9 percent, the electors who had defected from the Socialists to the PRD in 1985 went largely to the PSD in 1987. The PRD's sudden loss of votes was as extraordinary as its initial success in the 1985 elections. The fact that the PRD submitted the motion of censure against the PSD minority government in 1987, thus forcing new elections at a time when government popularity was high, may have contributed to this fall in support; the transfer of votes seems to confirm this. The decrease in support for the PRD thus helped the PSD obtain its first absolute majority, winning 50.4 percent of the vote. The effect of the PRD was to reduce the electoral advantage of the PS vis-à-vis the PCP, but this proved to be as ephemeral as the PRD's success itself. The collapse of the PRD in 1987 and the decline of the Communists were the first stages in the road towards socialist hegemony on the left of the party spectrum.

The PRD therefore conditioned the strategies of the two main centre parties, the PS and the PSD, signalling the shift of a large part of the electorate to the centre, encouraging centripetal, catch-all strategies in both parties (Aguiar, 1988: 66).

This pull towards the centre also made it increasingly difficult for small parties on the extremes to maintain their respective shares of the vote. On the right, the CDS's best result was in 1976, when it had the support of 16 percent of the electorate. The PSD's government popularity from 1985 onwards led to tactical voting on the part of many CDS voters, especially during the Cavaco Silva governments, reducing the party to an ever smaller percentage of votes and Parliamentary deputies. In 1995, the CDS/PP did manage to capitalize to a certain extent on the PSD *debâcle*, with its share of the vote increasing from 4.4 percent to 9 percent. In 1999, despite rumours of its demise, the party once again managed to maintain its share of electorate support.

On the Left, the PCP's electoral share peaked in the 1980s, when it won 18.2 percent of the vote (in 1983), and from then onwards it has declined (Cunha, 1996: 1021). The PCP's lowest score was in 1995, when it saw its electorate shrink to 8.6 percent as the PS soared to its best electoral score ever. Like the CDS on the Right, however, the small parties on the Left did not disappear. Indeed, in 1999 the Communists held on to their electoral score, even improving it by a small margin, and the Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda), a new grouping of existing extreme-left-wing parties managed to capture 2.5 percent of the vote and elect two deputies. The success of the Left Bloc, capturing a predominantly young urban vote, shows that there is some scope on the Left for smaller parties.

Notwithstanding the recent Left Bloc phenomenon, it seems that whereas small parties have defied predictions of their imminent demise, they have found it increasingly difficult to withstand the centripetal forces that have characterized the system since 1987. This has been due partly to the strategies of the larger parties, but also to the failure of these parties to innovate: the ideological inflexibility of the Communists, and the CDS's inability to prevent tactical voting for the PSD by its electorate, contributed to the long-term decline.

The success (and subsequent failure) of the PRD and the long-term decline of the smaller parties can only be understood in relation to the institutional factors which shaped party system developments. Indeed, analysis of the interaction between parties and presidential elections, and their civilianization since 1986, helps to account for the move towards a majoritarian system.

The Semi-Presidential System

It has been argued that constitutional rules impinge on the democratization process (Sartori, 1994). In Portugal, it seems that the semi-presidential nature of the regime has contributed to an increasing stability of the party system. This is not so much a result of the President's behaviour, especially during the first decade of democracy (Lobo, 2000: 157), and rather a result of successive presidential elections facilitating a bipolar logic in the party system.

In presidential elections all voters belong to a single electoral college, which covers continental Portugal and the islands (Madeira and the Azores).⁷ The winner is the candidate who obtains more than 50 percent of the valid votes. If in the first round no candidate obtains this result, a second round is scheduled three weeks later between the two candidates with the most votes. In this round the winner will be the one who is able to muster a 50 percent majority of valid votes. With this numerical threshold, and especially in the second round, there is a tendency for the party system to split into two blocs, each behind one of the candidates. Therefore, successive presidential elections have encouraged parties to converge within their own bloc, underlining a greater bipolarity in the system, albeit not consistently.

In the first presidential election in 1976, the Communists faced the pluralist parties. The PS, PSD and CDS supported General Eanes, a career officer who had crushed the 25 November 1975 military revolt, thereby pacifying the military and leading to the calling of the first democratic parliamentary elections. The presidential elections of 1980 for the first time saw a confrontation of the Left and Right blocs, imposing bipolar strategies for the individual parties. The two right-wing parties, the PSD and CDS, in government as the AD coalition, refused to back the re-election of General

Eanes, because they wanted to reform the Constitution to decrease the President's powers, a move which Eanes clearly did not support (Lopes and Barroso, 1980).⁸ Instead, Eanes was re-elected with the support of the Socialists and Communists, who joined forces in a national electoral contest for the first time since the 1974 Revolution. This bipolarizing competition was repeated in the next presidential election, held in 1986. In the first round, the Socialists, Communists and PRD presented a candidate of their own, whereas the PSD and the CDS together backed one candidate. In the second round, the Left and Right blocs confronted each other: the Communists and the PRD were forced to back the Socialist candidate, Soares, to prevent a right-wing victory, and were successful in their strategy, winning 51.3 percent of the vote.

The 1991 presidential election constituted an exception: faced with polls indicating that Soares would win by a landslide, the PSD decided to notionally support the socialist candidate. In fact, Soares got 70.4 percent of the vote in the first round (see Aguiar, 1996). Cavaco Silva, the PSD Prime Minister at the time, did not want to be seen supporting a losing candidate, and wanted to give the impression that he and the President had a good working relationship, despite the co-habitation, thus increasing his party's chances of success in the upcoming 1991 legislative elections (Goldey, 1992: 173). The next elections, in 1996, once more saw the confrontation of the Left and Right blocs. This time, the Socialists and Communists agreed on a common socialist candidate, Jorge Sampaio, already in the first round, to defeat ex-PSD leader Cavaco Silva. More recently, in the re-election of Sampaio in 2001, the Communists decided not to support the socialist candidate in the first round in an attempt to fight this bipolarizing strategy. Sampaio nonetheless won on the first round without Communist support, thus reinforcing the idea that the Communists had indeed become marginal to the electoral success of the Socialists. Thus, albeit inconsistently, it seems that the presidential elections have influenced the patterns of competition of parties by forcing them into blocs, which in turn has induced the bipolarization of electorates.

Conclusions

Political parties were obviously at the centre of the stabilization of the party system, and thus the consolidation of democracy. However, it has been shown that the main developments that occurred were also conditioned by the semi-presidential nature of the regime. Indeed, successive presidential elections have forced parties in the same bloc to join forces, especially in the second round of the presidential elections. This has contributed to the demise of both the small parties on either extreme of the political spectrum, namely the PCP and the CDS. The entry of the PRD, launched by President Eanes, signalled the electoral availability of a large part of the electorate

to the centre parties, forcing them to adopt centripetal strategies of competition, which has favoured single party majorities and alternation. Thus, although parties have been fundamental in the stabilization of the party system, the institutional make-up of the political system has to be acknowledged as a crucial factor in the consolidation of democracy. Future research on the Portuguese party system should take into account the interplay between the party system and the dynamics of presidential elections.

Notes

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- 1 The PS was four seats short of an absolute majority in 1995 and obtained exactly half of the seats in Parliament in the 1999 legislative elections.
- 2 Another left-wing party, the UDP, had 0.8 percent of the vote, but it is not included in the analysis of the net volatility because it would not count as a 'relevant' party in Sartori's typology.
- 3 André and Gaspar (1989).
- 4 For the 1983 election, the parties forming the AD (PSD, CDS, PPM) ran on their own. Their combined vote was only 40 percent, however, when the vote for the AD in 1980 had been 47 percent.
- 5 In the 1979 and the 1980 elections the PSD and the CDS together with a minor monarchist party, the PPM, ran as a right-wing coalition, the AD. Therefore individual net volatility cannot be computed for individual parties in these years. +0.7 is derived from the vote for the AD minus the vote for the individual parties in 1976.
- 6 The effective number of parliamentary parties is derived from the following formula: $N = 1/\sum s_i^2$, in which s_i is the proportion of Assembly seats won by the i th party. This formula was developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979).
- 7 Decree-law, 319-A/ 76, 3rd of May, Art. 7-1. The Presidential Election legislation was modified in 1997 to allow for the vote of Portuguese citizens living abroad.
- 8 Two PSD members explain why the AD wanted to reduce the President's power.

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