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**A Question of Perspective:
How Portuguese Voters See and Act in European Elections**

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Abstract:

Thirty four years ago (before the end of the Portuguese dictatorship regime), the Portuguese people barely knew its European neighbours, had a pragmatic attitude concerning economic aspects, and a distant one regarding a more close political understanding. After 1974 this position changed and, twelve years later, in 1986, when Portugal became the European Union 11th member-State, Europe started to be regarded in a different way. In this paper, is it our intention to see how Portuguese people have expressed its feelings about the European Union in a very specific moment: the European elections. In this sense, in a political-sociological frame, we are going to analyse the five European elections (1987, 1989, 1994, 1999 and 2004) in which the Portuguese participated. Using theoretical tools of the Political Sociology, we seek to understand the *whys* and the *who's* for a very poor participation in this type of elections. This paper will be based not only in published articles and books about European elections, and in the results itselfs, but also in the opinions expressed in several *Eurostat* questionnaires.

Key-words: Portugal; European Elections; Political Sociology

I. Introduction

There's little academic work concerning Portuguese perceptions about the European Union (EU) *lato sensu*. The subject suffers a wide range deficit if we consider Political Science and European Studies research in Portugal.

This was the main reason to set off this work. There are, of course, some approaches to this matters in some Portuguese and non-Portuguese Universities, but, analysed by the angle of European Studies mixed with a Sociological perspective, in reality, there are few ones. In fact, when, at the beginning of our research, we read Marina Costa Lobo (2003), we knew from the start that '(...) very few studies sought to analyze the elections to the European Parliament in Portugal'. In order to suppress that lack, we sought to understand why there is a deficiency of Portuguese participation in European Parliament elections.

These 'second-tier elections', as Filipe Nunes (2005) calls it, can be a barometer that measures how the European and the Portuguese in particular, evaluate the EU and how they feel towards it and their institutions.

Nevertheless, contrasting with the scarcity of studies in this particular point, the European representation of the Portuguese citizens is central in what concerns to the political decision system that they have to face up. So, the importance of participation (or not participation) in these elections is vital, as well as the perceptions that citizens have of this reality.

When we started our research we knew that one of the main difficulties would not be finding statistical numbers, but to interpret and go deeper on those numbers. It's difficult to use *perception* conceptualizations in the sense of understanding social phenomena, but that is inevitable.

During our research we found some main difficulties. First, the existence of a poor academic contribute in this matter; second, the idea of *perception* is always a *swampy* concept which brings an inherent difficulty.

These difficulties, however, opened some new lines of research that could be explored in a future paper, such as: **i)** the study of other aspects (Economic and Monetary Union, European Constitution, Enlargements) related with the EU and the Portuguese perceptions and real knowledge about them; **ii)** the comparison between Portuguese and other member-States regarding perceptions *vs.* real knowledge of EU; **iii)** what are the results and the effects of EU information campaigns on citizens; **iv)** at what measure is the Portuguese citizens vote in

European elections conditioned by its sense of citizenship – the main idea of political/social capital vs. participation in the EU elections.

Going back to our *atrium*, i.e. what started our research, we choose as main question the following: *Why is there a lack of Portuguese participation in European Parliament elections?*

It seems a common question, very easy to formulate and to answer, however, that interrogation has never been made for the Portuguese case. So, from a simple, but not simplistic question, we introduced two hypothesis of research: hypothesis 1) *There is a confessed unaware by the Portuguese about the EU in general and about their institutions in particular*; and hypothesis 2) *There's an insufficient interest towards the EU by Portuguese citizens*.

The methodology used was deductive and inductive, questioning the affirmations of our sources, trying to find the best explanations. Most of the bibliography consulted to conceptualize this reality was books and scientific articles related with these scientific areas. We also tried to engage direct sources, the ones that are presented in *Eurobarometer's* numbers, the ones that are more likely to be truthful.

II. Insights

1. Portugal and the EU

The *European idea*, in the sense of an approach to the continent, is a reality for our country. In fact, the simple geographic circumstance that places Portugal in Europe, 'has conditioned the Portuguese political arrangement, and opened the country to others non European worlds' (Cunha, 2007).

After the end of the fascist regime (1974), Portuguese History counts with two main moments that takes us to nowadays, and both are products of real movements in course during the salazarist period. One was the decolonization process and the other *European Integration*.¹

The Marshall's Plan (1949-50) was a first step that Portugal took towards European institutions. Another important step was when Portugal joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in the early sixties.

¹ For a more detailed view on this historical loom see Alice Cunha (ob. cit.).

After the Carnage Revolution (25th of April of 1974), with political, economical and social misunderstandings, the approach to the European Communities was only possible in 1976. In fact, it was after the beginning of the constitutional period that was given a clear expression of closer ties with the actual EU, that can be expressed by the signature of important agreements concerning the European integration of Portugal (Cunha, 2007).

On the 28th May 1977, Portugal asks to join formally the EU. This process will just end nine years later when, at the first of January 1986, Portugal becomes officially a full-right member of the European Communities.

It's from general notice that the European frame is of first legal force when we talk about the law hierarchy, except when compared with national Constitutional laws. This is one of the most important aspects of the integration of the Portuguese Political System in the *EU Political System*.

Another question appears now and it is related to the knowledge that Portuguese have about their own political system and if they believe that there is a good combination between national law and the European one.

In order to answer to this question, we use Pedro Magalhães (2002) words, which tell us that 'since the eighties, the social sciences studies reflected, concerning these subjects, a very pessimistic picture'. At the same reflexion the author advocates that '(...) we are one of the European Union countries where the satisfaction decline was more remarkable after the eighties and until nowadays' (Magalhães, 2002). The author also considers that 'these 'more recent evolutions (...) must be viewed with some concern' (Magalhães, 2002).

2. The Portuguese Political System

After the Carnage Revolution, Portugal started a democratic adjustment of its political institutions. The 1976 Constitution imposes a semi-presidential government system, 'a system whose main particularities are the double legitimacy using the Parliament's universal suffrage and the one that belongs to the Republic's Presidency, and also the double government responsibility towards these two main institutions'. (Da Cruz, 1999)²

² From the most important features of this government system we stress out seven: **1.** A clear distinction between the Head of State and the Prime-Minister; **2.** The government is formed having in consideration the Parliament's composition; **3.** The government has to have his political program approved; **4.** The Head of State can dissolve the Parliament; **5.** Some of the legal actions of the Head of State need the government's approval; **6.** The Head of State is elected by direct vote; **7.** The Head of State has the right to use *political veto*.

To what concerns the Portuguese electoral system, we have a proportional representation system, with the use of the Hondt method, chosen, mostly, because of the diversity of political forces post-25th April 1974.³

The Portuguese electoral system is represented by the Parliament, which presents a unicameral structure, with 230 deputies. Portugal has 20 electoral circles, plus 4 for Portuguese emigrants.

3. The *European Political System*

The EU isn't a federation, so the parts aren't absorbed by the *all*. On other hand, the European Union is an association of States that are considered and viewed as equals. In spite of this equality, however, there are concrete differences between States. So, there isn't a mixture of the political national systems with the so called *European Political System*. There are institutional frameworks but just one of the European institutions is directly elected - the European Parliament.

There are developments concerning the institutional structure that since, more or less, 1986, have reinforced the European Parliament. 'The Parliament has gradually gained increased influence on Community legislation. The Treaty of Amsterdam gives the right of co-decision in most legislative areas' (Ersbøll, 1996). It seems consensual to say that there is an evident modification between the games of strength that happens in the European Parliament: 'the original balance between institutions has, however, been altered. It is worth nothing that when the institutional questions came up for debate before and during the negotiations of the Treaty of Amsterdam all member-States stated that the institutional balance should be maintained' (Ersbøll, 1996).

The vision of some researchers is well synthesized in the words of the Portuguese author Sobrinho (2004), when he writes that '(...) the consecutive elections to the European Parliament that toke place until now correspond, above all, to a succession of national elections

³ The principal features of the Portuguese electoral system are: **1.** The right to an active electoral capacity (the right to vote) after completing 18 years old and register in the *electoral census*; **2.** The passive electoral capacity (the right of be elected) also happens at the age of 18, with the exception of the election for Head of State – this is just possible at the age of 35; **3.** The vote is secret, direct, personal and periodic; **4.** The scrutiny varies according with the election (proportional representation system with the conversion of votes into mandates and according to the Hondt method for legislative, municipal, autonomous regions and European Parliament elections; majority system with two steps applies only to the Head of State elections).

that pursue to choose, in a determined and limited period of time, the representatives of each member-State that will have a seat in a Parliamentary Assembly with European character’.

It’s curious to go deeper on his words and see that the formal aspect of the elections, something absolutely crucial, is suffering real modifications. The author reflects about the visible preoccupation of the European Parliament to adapt a uniform electoral system. This seems to us of particular importance because, today, it still coexists, for instance, the majority uninominal scrutiny system and the proportional one (Sobrinho, 2004).

4. Institutional Developments of the European Parliament – A First Glance

We already said that the election for the European Parliament, with time, have been changing its *character*. In this sense, we tried to understand, firstly the importance of the European Elections, secondly conclude that these elections serve as an important motor to other interesting modifications.

So, first, we really have to think the European elections as something to *take place against the background of the political culture of European integration*. “*Political culture*” in this context means the attitudes, preferences, perceptions, knowledge, and behavioural propensities of the mass of European citizens’ vis-à-vis the European institutions in particular an *European integration in general* (Cautrès and Sinnott, 2002). And we have chosen these particular words because they reflect the thoughts and the perceptions of European citizen’s in a wide range feature.

It’s important to think about this in the *perception* perspective. In fact, Cautrès and Sinnott had identical preoccupations and methodologies as the ones that we are using. They measured the support for European integration, using mostly *Eurobarometer* indicators 'of attitudes to integration' that 'are customarily labelled “unification”, “membership”, “benefits”, and “dissolution”. The levels of support for integration elicited by these questions depend both on the stimulus presented in the question and on the response categories, in particular on whether the response categories offer an explicit middle position' (Cautrès and Sinnott, 2002).

These authors conclude, in a trans-national analysis, that the public opinion on this matter varies according with the latitude and they also show that 'the measurement of public opinion is sensitive to the level of measurement (general support or more precise opinions) and to the type of indicators used (support, knowledge, aspirations)' (Cautrès and Sinnott, 2002).

However, at this stage it seems to be certain that the widespread of abstention at European elections and the political culture within which that abstention took place poses significant challenges to the pursuit of a closer involvement of citizens in the process of political representation at the level of European Union.

Secondly, we can conclude that there are evolutionary aspects concerning the European Parliament, above all in the sense of becoming this institution a face of an inexistent total and direct democratic system in EU. It seems that this empowerment of this political body has a direct relation with the elections for the European Parliament. Nevertheless, this important point can be completed with some questions that we share and that say 'what are the social and political determinants of European attitudes? Are they the same in all European countries? Rather than analyzing these questions country by country, one can focus on a few countries representing the two main groups: the more pro and the more anti-integration' (Cautrès and Sinnott, 2002), as we will do next.

III. The Portuguese and the European Union – Close Friends?

When Portugal joined the EU most of the Portuguese (between 43% and 57%) did not know if belonging to the EU would be a good or a bad thing. (Bacalhau, 1986) Today that is an old issue. Portugal has successfully joined a community, in which participates fully and helps to build.

In these already twenty two years of membership, the Portuguese have learned how to deal with Europe. They have learned their rights as Europeans citizens, but also their obligations.

One of those rights, which should be simultaneously an obligation, is the right to vote. The right to vote in the elections for the European Parliament, commonly known as *European Elections*.

This brings us to the involvement of Europeans with the EU. When it comes to the interest in European affairs, only a minority (47%) says that those matters interest them, while national matters interest a majority of 63%. (EUROBAROMETER, 2006). The same happens with discussing these issues, since only 59% of Europeans does it on a regular basis. On this point, the Portuguese are among those which are less motivated to discuss European affairs. (EUROBAROMETER, 2006).

Questions like the harmonisation of social welfare systems and the European Constitution, are at the top rank of concerns. But the level of mobilisation of European citizens when it comes to European matters, when compared with national affairs, is relatively low, as we will see further in this paper.

The European elections are not the only mean available to participate and to be heard in Europe. However for the majority (56%) of European citizens that is still the most appropriate way to do it. (EUROBAROMETER, 2006).⁴

Although there is a general sense that elections are really the best way for European to be heard, there is a voters decline in European elections, which can result in a political representation crisis, since the European Parliament is the only European institution elected by citizens of all the member-States, *ergo* European citizens.

What are then, we ask, generally the motives for a lesser participation in elections? The top three are: voter apathy, too much elections and the increase weakness of political parties.

This is a reality in national elections and also in the European ones. On the next point we are going to analyse the participation or lack of it in these kind of election. Do Portuguese use these elections to participate in the EU and to give it some sort of democratic legitimation? Or do they rather not to vote? And what are the reasons that support both ways?

IV. Portuguese and the Pools – The Elections for the European Parliament

The only body in the EU that is directly elected is the European Parliament, which had its first election in 1979.

European Parliament electoral system is proportional representation and Portugal is a constituency of it. Elections take place every five years by universal adult suffrage in all twenty seven member-States, and are usually in June/July.

Actually the European Parliament has 785 MPs and the number of MP's is proportional to the population of each member-State. Each member-State has a fixed number of seats, from a minimum of five and a maximum of ninety nine.

Portugal started with twenty four seats (1987, 1989, 2004), then had an upgrade of one seat (1994, 1999), but in the next elections (2009) the number of seats will be reduced to twenty two (see Table 1).

⁴ Other options appointed are signing a petition (15%), joining a political party (13%) or a demonstration (10%). (EUROBAROMETER, 2006)

Table 1 – Nr. of Seats

1987	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009
24	24	25	25	24	22

These actual twenty four MP's are elected by Portuguese voters and represent them in the European Parliament. All 785 MP's are representatives of the 492 millions European citizens.

As we saw before, the citizens of the EU have the faculty to vote in the European elections, as to choose their representatives. In that sense, we think that it is interesting to analyse how Portuguese behave in this kind of elections. So, based on the results of those elections, from 1987 to 2004, we are going to see the Portuguese behaviour.

In comparative standards, in this paper we only compare the first fifteen member-States, although the ten states who joined the EU in 2004 already participated in the elections that year.

In Portugal, the first European elections took place in 1987, a year after Portugal became a member-State of the actual European Union. These first elections, however, had a particularity, since they were simultaneous with the legislative elections.

This first European election in Portugal was a by-election, since the rest of the EU had voted three years before, in 1984. The 1989 elections were the third ones to the European Parliament, but the first time that our country voted with the rest of the EU.

In 1987, year of the first European elections in Portugal, 72.42% of Portuguese voters did vote and almost all votes were valid (69.89%). Perhaps because those were the first ones, *a new thing*, the participation rate was positively expressive.

However, in the years to come, the initial enthusiasm became lesser and lesser, as we can see on Table 2. Only two years after the first European election took place in Portugal, we were to elect, for the first time with all the member-States, the representatives for the European Parliament again. And with only two years apart, the percentage of voters dropped to 51.10. Still most of the voters participated, but the *water line* between participation and abstention was getting closer.

The turnout occurred in the 1994 elections, where only a little bit more than one third of voters (35.54) showed interest in these elections. That was an alarming signal and clearly showed the scenario for the next elections. For the first time abstention won the elections in Portugal.

The warning given in 1994, became a confirmation in 1999, when only 39.93 of voters went to vote. There is a slight change, a positive one, in the percentage of voters, but still half of the Portuguese people didn't vote. Abstention won again, we can say.

No news in the 2004 elections. The numbers are basically the same: 38.60% participation *versus* 61.40% abstention.

Table 2 – European Elections Results in Portugal (Values in %)

Election Year	f	V Abstention	Valid Votes	Blank Votes	Invalid Votes
1987	72.42	27.58	69.89	1.21	1.32
1989	51.10	48.90	48.02	1.59	1.49
1994	35.54	64.46	32.44	1.61	1.49
1999	39.93	60.07	36.66	1.83	1.44
2004	38.60	61.40	34.64	2.57	1.39
Average	47.52	52.48	---	---	---

Source: INE (Results in www.ine.pt, 20/03/08)

If we calculate the average voters/abstention in all the European elections that Portugal participated, we will apprehend that abstention wins, not by a large scale, but wins with more than a half of voters who choose not to participate in this kind of elections.

The results show us that there is an increase tendency for the participation rate to diminish. In 1987, 63% of Portuguese voters participated in the elections, but in 2004 only 45.6% did it.

In every revision of the European Treaties, the European Parliament powers did not stop to increase. At the time, the European Parliament is a co-legislator, exercises democratic controls over all the European institutions and also has budgetary powers. But in spite of this, 'abstention has increased in an almost generalized way'. (Freire & Magalhães, 2002)

The obligation to vote is, in this matter, of great importance. If we compare the evolution of abstention in member-States with compulsory vote and those who have not, the difference is outstanding, as we can see on Table 3.

Table 3 – Compulsory/No Compulsory Vote and Abstention

	Abstention			Average 70's
	Average 70's	Average 80's		
Member-States without compulsory vote	45.3	46.8	Member-States without compulsory vote	45.3
Member-States with compulsory vote⁵	11.4	14.8	Member-States with compulsory vote⁶	11.4

Source: Freire, A., P. Magalhães (2002). *A Abstenção Eleitoral em Portugal*. Lisboa: ICS

The data on Table 3 show us that in countries without compulsory vote the average of abstention is around 45%, while in countries that have compulsory vote that same average drops to 15%.

So we can conclude that, except in countries with compulsory vote, almost half of the voters don't vote in the European elections, which shows that the obligation to vote makes the difference.

United Kingdom has always been on the top of abstention. In the past decade the *abstention top 3* is composed by United Kingdom, Netherlands and Portugal. In all these countries 2/3 voters do not go to polls.

If we look at the general results of the European elections from their beginning up to our days, we can take some curious notes. The first one is that the first elections have been, with few exceptions, the most participated, with a record of 91.4% participation in Belgium in 1979.

A second note is about the participation rate that suffers, in most cases, little variations. For example, Deutschland participation rate has been from the start around 60% and, in a different corner, United Kingdom is around 30%.

⁵ Belgium, Greece, Italy and Luxembourg.

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Portugal is in this matter an exception, since there is a 20% participation difference between the first three elections: 72.4% in 1987; 51.2% in 1989; and 35.5% in 1994, as shown next on Table 4.

Table 4 – Participation Rate by Date and Member-State

Member-State	1979	1984	1987	1989	1994	1995	1996	1999	2004
DE	65.7	56.8	-	62.3	60	-	-	45.2	43
FR	60.7	56.7	-	48.7	52.7	-	-	46.8	42.75
BE	91.4	92.2	-	90.7	90.7	-	-	91	90.81
IT	84.9	83.4	-	81.5	74.8	-	-	70.8	73.1
LU	88.9	88.8	-	87.4	88.5	-	-	87.3	90
NL	57.8	50.6	-	47.2	35.6	-	-	30	39.3
UK	32.2	32.6	-	36.2	36.4	-	-	24	38.9
IE	63.6	47.6	-	68.3	44	-	-	50.2	59.7
DK	47.8	52.4	-	46.2	52.9	-	-	50.5	47.9
EL	-	77.2	-	79.9	71.2	-	-	75.3	63.4
ES	-	-	68.9	54.6	59.1	-	-	63	45.1
PT	-	-	72.4	51.2	35.5	-	-	40	38.79
SE	-	-	-	-	-	41.6	-	38.8	37.8
AT	-	-	-	-	-	-	67.7	49.4	42.43
FI	-	-	-	-	-	-	60.3	31.4	41.1
Average EU	63	61	-	58.5	56.8	-	-	49.8	52.94

Adapted from:

http://www.futureofeuropa.parliament.gv.at/elections2004/ep-election/sites/pt/results1306/turnout_ep/turnout_table.html
[17/04/08]

The State crisis, globalization, the reform of the political system, an increased corporate power, all lead to a 'new citizens model' (Viegas e Faria, 2007), a new citizen that has the need to be motivated in order to participate. In this sense, the ever enlarged but still reduced European Parliament powers, the weak participation in European questions and the nationalization of the campaigns, all sort to not help the voters to go to polls and vote in these elections.

V. Main Conclusions

Is this, in fact, a paper about participation or about abstention in European elections?

The main objective of this paper was to investigate why is there a lack of Portuguese participation in European elections, at what level do Portuguese know EU and its institutions and if they are sufficiently interested in knowing it.

Our results clearly reveal that there is an ever descendent participation rate in European elections in Portugal. If in 1987, year of the first European elections in our country, 72.42% voted, in 2004 the percentage of voters dropped to 38.60. This means than in less than two decades the enthusiasm in these elections became an almost apathy. And abstention started to win over participation.

Regarding that point, our analysis shows that, with the exception of member-States with compulsory vote, in almost all the others member-States, Portugal included, more than a half of voters choose not to vote.

This brings us to another question: if European citizens do not vote, what democratic legitimacy has the European Parliament? Little, we say.

Our paper provides additional light to the participation of Portuguese in European elections. But there are still points to be cleared and analysed, points that can help us, Europeans, to know more about EU and so, maybe, EU will become more interesting to us and lead to a greater participation. A wishful thinking.

We believe that is important to debate these particular matters concerning the participation directly related with perception of some realities. These are questions that directly influence the European citizen's lives, in spite of the *real* essence of participation on European Elections and its *democratic representation*.

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