

How Portugal's election resembled the UK's general election and what both contests indicate about European politics

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Portugal held parliamentary elections on 4 October, with the ruling centre-right coalition led by Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho winning the election, despite losing its absolute majority in parliament. [James Dennison](#) and [Filipe Brito Bastos](#) write that in many respects the Portuguese elections paralleled the general election held in the UK in May, with an incumbent conservative government managing to regain power against an opposition torn between anti-austerity and centrist policies. They argue that the results of both elections demonstrate a dilemma faced by the left in several European countries in the aftermath of the financial crisis: namely how to unite anti-austerity support while remaining electable.



By presenting himself as the cool, calm, managerial incumbent who should be given a second term in the name of stability, Pedro Passos Coelho's [election victory](#) echoes that of David Cameron's earlier this year. The Prime Minister [fostered the image](#) that he saved his country from the acute, if not chronic, stages of economic crisis. Although support fell below that needed for a second absolute majority, the ruling coalition secured a minority government, despite four years of budgetary cuts and tax increases, [widespread popular contestation](#) peaking in 2012, and the Constitutional Court [striking down](#) three successive state budgets for unconstitutional austerity policies.



The centre-left opposition, on the other hand, was repeatedly accused of 'maxing out the country's credit card' during their previous tenure and the move to the left by António Costa, the [Socialist](#) leader, failed to impress his centrist party while making his own offer to the electorate appear ambiguous. Costa was also haunted by accusations of previously '[stabbing in the back](#)' a leadership contender, all the while fighting both [allegations of incompetence](#) and rival parties further to the left.

Table: Provisional results of the 2015 Portuguese election

<i>Parties</i>	<i>Percentage vote share</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Portugal Ahead (PSD / CDS-PP)	36.8	99
Socialist Party (PS)	32.4	85
Left Bloc (B.E.)	10.2	19
Democratic Unity Coalition (PCP-PEV)	8.3	17
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	1.5	5
People-Animals-Nature (PAN)	1.4	1

Note: The Parliament has 230 seats, but 4 of these seats will only be assigned after the final results from voters outside Portugal are counted. Only parties that have a seat are shown. Portugal Ahead is a coalition of the [Social Democratic Party](#) (PSD) and [CDS – People's Party](#) (CDS-PP). The Social Democratic Party (PSD) shown in the table refers to the electoral list in Madeira and the Azores. The [Democratic Unity Coalition](#) is a coalition between the [Portuguese Communist Party](#) (PCP) and the [Ecologist Party "The Greens"](#) (PEV). For information on the other parties see: [Socialist Party \(PS\)](#); [Left Bloc \(B.E.\)](#); [People-Animals-Nature \(PAN\)](#).

The narrative closely follows that of Britain's general election five months ago and, plot details aside, points to two broader themes in European politics: first, the coalescence of conservative parties around a self-image of moderate, managerial 'safe hands' during economic crises and, second, the debilitating divide on the left between policy-centric, establishment-administered social democrats and anti-elite far-left populists.

Coelho and Cameron as the guardians of the economy

The focus of Coelho and Cameron's respective first terms were austerity, with the result in both cases being a modest and [disputed](#) economic recovery that in the election campaigns were [purposefully contrasted](#) against the [economic catastrophe](#) of Syriza-led Greece. Both parties celebrated the [modest levels of growth that they presided over](#) as well as improving [unemployment figures](#). Indeed, the rising exports and entrepreneurial scene of Lisbon was recently described by *Der Spiegel* as the '[Portuguese miracle](#)' while the UK Conservatives trumpeted their own '[jobs factory of Europe](#)'.

These successes – though disputed by rivals as the [result of emigration](#) in the case of Portugal and [the cost of living standards](#) in the case of Britain – resonated with both publics who, in the face of considerable uncertainty, were willing to give the incumbent the benefit of the doubt. Both [Cameron](#) and the admittedly more technocratic Coelho all the while portrayed their national budgets as household finances, which reckless previous governments had irresponsibly run into the ground by having the country '[live beyond its means](#)'.

Like a responsible housewife from a previous generation, they [portrayed themselves](#) as reluctant but duty-bound to cut spending until the country was back on its knees. In reality, [both governments softened their austerity](#) approaches considerably as their terms in office wore on. Regardless, the campaigns of both were notable for their measured tone, with both maintaining [low-key](#), detached personas – more interested in governing than the fiery rhetoric of their opponents.

A divided left in opposition

The experiences of António Costa, as leader of the Portuguese Socialist Party, and Ed Miliband, the former British Labour leader, display possibly even more parallels. Whereas Miliband could never quite escape the claim that he [betrayed his brother](#) and heir apparent by beating him to the Labour leadership, Costa suffered from the mistrust of some quarters of his party after calling for and then winning an [unprecedented primary](#) against the then leader of the Socialist Party, António José Seguro, who publicly scorned such '[treason and disloyalty](#)'.

Upon taking power, both leaders attempted to move their party further to the left, particularly in terms of rhetoric in their early days, in an attempt to capitalise on anti-austerity sentiment. As this year's Greek crisis developed, Costa in particular was perceived to have performed a U-turn, [stating that](#) events in Athens constituted 'the dramatic illustration of what the situation in Portugal would be if there were no Socialist Party', despite previously stating that Tsipras's election gave him '[strength to follow the same line](#)'. Miliband, similarly, had to drop early hopes of a [pan-European leftist alliance](#) in the now long-forgotten wave of euphoria on the left following François Hollande's election.

Both Costa and Miliband's respective party machines – largely centrist – were willing to go along with such manoeuvres to the left so long as the polls gave them credence. However, as time wore on, Miliband and Costa were caught in the awkward position of promising fiscal responsibility while denouncing austerity programmes, which by that time enough of their publics believed were paying dividends to hurt them on the right.

Meanwhile parties such as the [Bloco de Esquerda](#) (Left Bloc) in Portugal and the [Scottish National Party](#) were nipping at their heels from the left, keen to portray the centre-left's approach as '[austerity lite](#)'. Costa's decision to commission the Socialist Party's economic manifesto to Mário Centeno, an economist whose ideas have been [strongly criticised](#) by the left as damaging to the rights of workers, further added to an overall electoral offer that, [like Miliband's](#), was perceived by too many voters as ambiguous.

Portuguese and British lessons for Europe

Ultimately, Cameron won an unexpected absolute majority for his own party in the House of Commons with less than 37 per cent of the vote, whereas Coelho looks set to form some sort of minority government with the existing [PSD/CDS-PP](#) coalition, having collectively won 38 per cent of the vote. Institutions, both parties and electoral systems, mattered, though, at least in terms of incentives to voters, less so than ever before in both countries.

In 2015, the main establishment parties scored a collectively lower percentage of the vote than at any time since 1985 in Portugal (PS+PSD+CDS) and ever in the UK (Con+Lab+LD). In Portugal, though the ruling coalition won as the party with the most votes, the three largest left-wing parties together make up a [clear majority](#) in parliament.

Notably, the Bloco de Esquerda doubled its vote share to 10 per cent, its best ever result, just as the Green Party and Scottish Nationalist in the UK – both presenting themselves as further left alternatives to the Labour Party – quadrupled and trebled their vote respectively. Portugal, however, produced no populist right party like Britain's UKIP – with Euroscepticism remaining the rallying call of the insurgent left in southern Europe.

What can we conclude from the similarities between these two elections? The success of a centre-right leader presenting themselves as a non-ideological, mature guarantor of stability is neither new to Portugal nor Britain, and some would argue is a return to the hallmark of conservatism prior to the 'neo-liberal' reformism of the 1980s and 90s in both countries. However, promoting conservatism as a moderate, stabilising force has been most consistently and, in terms of length of tenure, successfully pursued in the 21st century by [Angela Merkel](#).

Conservative leaders across Europe, including Coelho and Cameron, are following in Merkel's footsteps by adopting electoral strategies that, above all, portray all alternatives to themselves as unnecessary risks. Despite their initial suspicion that anti-austerity would be enough to win them power, Miliband and Costa both had to deal with electorates that, when confronted by images of collapse in Greece and an increase in Syriza-esque protests at home, turned out in sufficient numbers *either* for the 'safe hands' of a variant of Merkelism or the purist voices of Syriza equivalents.

Indeed, neither leader was able to emerge victorious because they were unable to ride two horses at once – the clear alternative of anti-austerity populism, whose fundamental message is that the elite *in toto* are to blame, and their essentially centrist, establishment parties. In the end, both came across as ambiguous, switching between [redistributive](#), Keynesian and fiscally conservative policy prescriptions, leaving space for other leftist parties.

The victories of the Portuguese and British conservatives – a minority government with a decreased vote share and a wafer-thin majority respectively – were notable, particularly by pre-crisis standards, for just how small they were, rather than as popular vindications of austerity. In post-crisis Europe, however, the unresolved question of how the left can capture and unite anti-austerity support while remaining electable remains unanswered and has cleared the path for another rhetorically-consistent, self-styled 'safe hands' conservative government.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Pedro Passos Coelho (Credit: [European People's Party](#), CC-BY-SA-3.0)

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About the author

James Dennison – *European University Institute / University of Sheffield*

James Dennison is a PhD candidate at the European University Institute, Florence. His research interests include political participation, European politics and longitudinal methods. He is currently a Research Assistant for the UK in a Changing Europe initiative and teaches research methods at the University of Sheffield.



Filipe Brito Bastos – *European University Institute*

Filipe Brito Bastos is a PhD candidate at the European University Institute, Florence, where he also obtained his LLM. His research focuses on Portuguese, comparative and European administrative law and on EU constitutional law.



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