

European
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS

The Social Democratic Party of outgoing Prime Minister Luis Montenegro, favourite in the general election in Portugal on 18 May

On 13 March 2025, the President of the Portuguese Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, announced the dissolution of the Assembly of the Republic, the sole chamber of parliament, and called on his fellow citizens to go to the polls on 18 May. Fourteen months after the last general election, the Portuguese will once again have to elect their 230 members of parliament in a snap election. This election follows the controversy sparked by the publication of an article in the daily newspaper *Correio da Manhã* on 15 February.

THE POLITICAL CRISIS

The newspaper reports allegations of a conflict of interest involving Prime Minister Luis Montenegro (Social Democratic Party, PSD) due to the activities of Spinumviva, a company he owns. Founded in 2021, Spinumviva is a service provider specialising in consulting and real estate sales. The company has several service contracts (worth around €4,500 per month) with, among others, the Solverde casino and hotel group, which benefits from state concessions. These contracts, which expire at the end of 2025, are due to be renegotiated. Many are questioning the lobbying that Luis Montenegro may engage in during these negotiations. In addition, the company could benefit from changes to the land law currently being debated in parliament. On 1 March, the outgoing Prime Minister announced that he had transferred his company Spinumviva to his children, who are now solely responsible for its management. The company's registered office has also been changed.

At the end of March 2024, Luis Montenegro formed a minority government composed solely of members of the Social Democratic Party, one minister from the Democratic and Social Centre/People's Party (CDS/PP) and six independent figures. In February 2025, this coalition survived two motions of no confidence tabled by the far-right Chega ('Enough') party and the Communist Party (PCP) respectively. The outgoing head of government denied any conflict of interest or ethical breach. *'I will not resign because I have committed no crime. I have not obtained any benefit from this company since I became Prime Minister and since I became President of the Social Democratic Party,'* he repeated before announcing on 6 March that he would submit to a vote of confidence in parliament. Acknowledging that early general elections were not appropriate less than a year after the formation of the government, he said: *'This will be a necessary evil to prevent the deterioration of institutions and the loss of political stability due to the will of a few agitators. In short, if the opposition parties do not accept the political legitimacy of the government, two months of political instability is better than a year and a half of deterioration and paralysis.'*

Luis Montenegro's decision to seek a vote of confidence from parliament came as a surprise. The vote, which was lost in advance, was a failure, as MPs voted against the government, the first time this had happened since 1977, with 137 votes against and 87 in favour. Apart from the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Initiative (IL), all parties rejected the motion of confidence. *'The vote will show us whether*

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the Socialist Party will ally itself with the far right to bring down the government,' said Luis Montenegro, who was forced to resign and left office on 11 March.

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa quickly dismissed the idea of appointing a new prime minister. The possibility of finding an absolute majority was very slim in a deeply divided parliament. *'Only democracy has the capacity to overcome and tackle crises,'* he said, adding, *'No one expected or wanted these early general elections.'* Furthermore, no one wants to be seen as the person who caused the crisis.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF A NEW BALLOT?

'The general elections on 18 May are a kind of desperate move by the Prime Minister and his party to avoid an inquiry and enable him to survive politically,' said Antonio Costa Pinto, professor at the Lusophone University of Lisbon, emphasising that *'the PSD's line will be that the opposition brought down the government because it was succeeding, while the outgoing prime minister will be the dominant theme in the opposition parties' rhetoric.'*

However, the results of the 18 May general elections are expected to be relatively similar to those of the previous election on 10 March 2024, when the Democratic Alliance, comprising the PSD, the CDS/PP and the monarchist Popular Party (PPM), came out ahead of the poll with 80 seats, followed by the Socialist Party (PS) with 78. The far-right Chega party came in third with 50 seats. This breakthrough ended Portugal's exceptional status as one of the few countries (along with Ireland and Malta) without a radical right-wing party.

Turnout was high for a country with a history of low voter turnout (59.84%). Chega had clearly convinced many abstainers to return to the polls.

The current crisis, which led to the fall of the government, gives greater resonance to Chega's anti-corruption and anti-elite rhetoric. *'Electoral fatigue, combined with the Portuguese people's negative assessment of how politicians have run the*

country, could contribute to abstention,' said Bruno Ferreira da Costa, professor of political science at Beira Interior University, adding, *'This is a pattern that could favour parties with a more loyal electorate rather than anti-establishment parties.'*

The Portuguese political system remains one of the most stable in Europe. In the last general election on 10 March 2024, six out of ten voters (59.41%) cast their ballots for one of the two 'major' parties – the PSD and the PS. However, no government has managed to remain in power for a full term since October 2019. The President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, is facing his third dissolution in a single term, a record in the country.

The Socialists are counting on this election to bounce back after abstaining from the vote on the last budget. For its part, Chega is struggling due to several scandals that have erupted within the party.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the Consulmark2 polling institute between 14 and 22 April, the Democratic Alliance, which comprises the PSD and CDS/PP, is set to win 34.1% of the vote. The PS, led by Pedro Nuno Santos, is expected to win 27.1%, Chega, led by its founder André Ventura, 15.2% and the Liberal Initiative (IL), led by Rui Rocha, 8.3%. The other parties are expected to win less than 5%.

Once again, the Democratic Alliance looks set to fail in its bid to win an absolute majority. Luis Montenegro still refuses any alliance with Chega. *'Governing with Chega is impossible for three reasons. First, this party is unreliable in its thinking, it behaves politically like a weathervane that changes its mind repeatedly and is not suited to governing,'* the prime minister said. He accused André Ventura of *'having an eminently destructive tendency to speak ill of everything.'* Finally, according to him, Chega has demonstrated that it lacks the maturity or decency necessary to exercise governmental functions. Cooperation between the PSD and IL is possible, but it is unlikely to be sufficient to achieve an absolute majority.

THE PORTUGUESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Portuguese parliament is unicameral. The Assembly of the Republic comprises 230 members, elected for four years by proportional representation in 22 multi-member constituencies. The country has 18 metropolitan constituencies and two autonomous regions – Madeira and the Azores – which each form a constituency. In addition, two constituencies cover votes cast by Portuguese citizens living abroad: one for those living in Europe, who elect two members of parliament, and the other for those living in the rest of the world, who also elect two members.

The lists of candidates for general elections are set, so voters cannot express any preference within the list for which they vote. After the election, seats are allocated proportionally using the d'Hondt method, with no pre-defined electoral threshold.

Eight political parties or coalitions are represented in the Assembly of the Republic:

- the Democratic Alliance, which brings together the PSD, chaired by Luis Montenegro, the CDS/PP of Nuno Melo and the Popular Monarchist Party (PPM) of Gonçalo da Camara Pereira, has 80 seats;
- the PS, founded in 1973 and led by Pedro Nuno Santos, has 78 MPs;

- Chega (Enough) (CH), a far-right party founded in 2019 by André Ventura, has 50 seats;
- The Liberal Initiative (IL), a party created in 2017 and led by Rui Rocha, has eight MPs;
- The Left Bloc (BE), a radical left-wing party founded in 1999 and led by Mariana Motagua, has five seats;
- The Democratic Unity Coalition (CDU), an alliance of the Communist Party (PCP), founded in 1921, the Ecologist Party-The Greens (PEV), founded in 1982, and Democratic Intervention (ID), has four elected representatives;
- LIVRE (Free) (L), a left-wing environmentalist party whose spokesperson is Rui Tavares, has four seats;
- People-Animals-Nature (PAN), a party defending animal and nature rights, founded in 2009 and whose spokesperson is Ines Sousa Real, has one elected representative.

The Portuguese also elect their President of the Republic every five years by direct universal suffrage. The current head of state, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, former leader of the Social Democratic Party (1996-1999), was re-elected with 60.66% of the vote on 24 January 2021 in the first round of voting. He beat Ana Gomes (PS), who ran without her party's backing (12.96%), and André Ventura (CH) (11.93%). Four out of ten Portuguese citizens (39.26%) turned out to vote.

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Results of the previous general election in Portugal on 10 March 2024

Turnout: 59.84%

Political parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of Seats
Democratic Alliance (PSD, CDS/PP, PPM)	1 867 442	28.84	80
Socialist Party (PS)	1 812 443	28	78
Chega (CH - Enough)	1 169 781	18.07	50
Liberal Initiative (IL)	319 877	4.94	8
Left Bloc (BE)	282 314	4.36	5
United Democratic Coalition (CDU)	205 551	3.17	4
Livre (L - Free)	204 875	3.16	4
People-Animals-Nature (PAN)	126 125	1.95	1
Others	488 544	3.32	0

Source : <https://www.eleicoes.mai.gov.pt/legislativas2024/resultados/globais>

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