



The Portuguese Election 2026: The Collapse of Centrism

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HIIA Perspective

Regular publication of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

Publisher:

© Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 2026.

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January 29, 2026

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THE PORTUGUESE ELECTION 2026: THE COLLAPSE OF CENTRISM

The 2026 Portuguese presidential election is an important moment for European political development. In Portugal's mixed presidential system, the role of the president is semi-ceremonial—as opposed to that of the prime minister, who leads the constitutional government—as the president has no executive power. However, they can veto laws, dissolve the parliament, and serve as the supreme commander of the nation's armed forces. They also go on state visits and, therefore, represent Portugal to world leaders.

In the first round of the 2026 presidential election, held on January 18, the Socialist Party's (PS) António José Seguro won 31 percent, while the national-conservative party Chega's André Ventura secured 23.5 percent. Since no candidate won the necessary 50 percent majority, a second round will be held on February 8. The current president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, a member of the liberal Social Democratic Party whose term-limit expires in the spring of 2026, has a legacy defined primarily by his declaration of a state of emergency during the COVID-19 pandemic—the first state of emergency in the country's democratic history—and declaration that Portugal was responsible for grave historical crimes during the transatlantic slave trade, and its colonial era as a whole, thus suggesting the country needed to pay reparations.¹ Nonetheless, although de Sousa—as president—has not been responsible for the formulation of policy, from 2020 to 2025, Portugal's GDP (PPP) has grown from \$379 billion to \$535 billion,² unemployment has fallen from over 12 percent in 2016 to 6.2 percent in 2025,³ and inflation currently sits at around 2 percent.⁴

In recent years, however, important political shifts have occurred—due

1 “Portugal Has to ‘Pay Costs’ for Its Colonial Past – President,” *Africa News*, August 13, 2024, <https://www.africanews.com/2024/04/24/portugal-has-to-pay-costs-for-its-colonial-past-president/>.

2 “GDP, PPP (Constant 2021 International \$) – Portugal,” World Bank, accessed January 25, 2026, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.KD?end=2024&locations=PT&start=2016>.

3 “Portugal Unemployment Rate,” Macro Trends, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/prt/portugal/unemployment-rate>.

4 “HICP – Overall Index, Portugal, Monthly,” European Central Bank Data Portal, accessed January 25, 2026, <https://data.ecb.europa.eu/data/datasets/ICP/ICP.M.PT.N.000000.4.ANR>.

to a multitude of mainly social and political problems—that have, among other things, led to the collapse of the “center majority” between the center right and center left. Since 2022, the country has had three parliamentary elections. Evidently, due to the increasingly perceived sclerotic nature of centrism in Portugal—and, quite frankly, throughout Europe—the public is beginning to seek political alternatives to centrist parties to address the many issues confronting them, which the aforementioned centrists have proven incapable of redressing. In many ways, the most staggering aspect about this election, and Portuguese politics writ large in the past few years, has been the meteoric rise of Chega (“Enough!” in English), a party only established in 2019 by Ventura—the Chega candidate in the 2026 presidential election.

In 2019, Chega only had one member in parliament. Since then, it has become the second largest force in Portuguese politics, as witnessed by its performance during the 2025 election and qualification for the 2026 second round runoff.⁵ The questions that must be asked, then, are: What explains this rise of the party? What are the issues Chega focuses on? And what are the implications if either Chega or the PS win the 2026 presidential election?

THE RISE OF CHEGA

Whenever a self-assertively right-wing, patriotic party emerges in Europe—and becomes popular—the academics, the media, and the liberal elite writ large wring their heads wondering how such a thing could have happened. As was the case with the more national conservative parties of Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere gaining electoral momentum, the rise of Chega was similarly due to a multitude of interplaying problems inherent in modern liberal governance.

Although Portugal’s economy has witnessed modestly positive developments since 2020, as mentioned earlier, its foremost problem—as it is everywhere else—has paradoxically also been economic. Since the 2000s, the country has undergone stagnation and, some argue, confronted the 2008 financial crisis from a position of comparative weakness.⁶ At the time, this led to

5 Andrew Bernard, “Why Portugal’s Upcoming Presidential Election Has Echoes of 1986,” Atlantic Council, January 16, 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/why-portugals-upcoming-presidential-election-has-echoes-of-1986/>.

6 Roni Küppers and Maria Stapleton, “What the Rise of Chega Means for Portuguese Democracy,” LSE European Politics, July 8, 2024, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2024/07/08/what-the-rise-of-chega-means-for-portuguese-democracy/>.

a series of strong austerity measures, and although many have since been rolled back, the consequences are still being felt.⁷ Moreover, investment in health, education, and other social services has been stagnant with socioeconomic inequalities still being pronounced.⁸

On top of these economic problems is the elephant in the European political room: mass migration. In June 2025, Minister of the Presidency António Leitão Amaro declared that “the demographic increase resulting from the influx of immigrants into Portugal in recent years constitutes a ‘decade-long challenge’ for Portuguese governments and society.”⁹ Therefore, not only have economic ills contributed to the structural challenge of mass emigration, but mass immigration into Portugal has—as even Western intellectuals have noted—led to the concept of the “nation” being debated for the first time in Portugal’s modern history.¹⁰

Since the transition to democracy after Salazar, Portugal has—in many ways—become a “nation of immigrants” due to the mass of peoples moving there from its former colonies and, most recently, from Asia and Africa. Portugal, a small country of around ten million, was always thought of by its people as a homogenous—and thus harmonious—country. According to data from the Agency for Integration, Migration, and Asylum, the number of foreigners residing in Portugal has quadrupled within seven years, with the number now at around 1.5 million; this means roughly 15 percent of the population now consists of foreign citizens.¹¹ As a consequence of this, as one study put it, “Chega’s rise does reflect a change of opinion in Portuguese society.”¹²

Chega’s manifesto frames the party as a nationalist, conservative, and personalist one centered on a civilizational vision of Portugal rooted in Greek reason, Roman law, Christian morality, and a strong sense of national identity.¹³ Chega is explicitly anti-abortion, hostile to gender ideology, and strongly supportive of traditional family, national culture, and Christian civilizational values. Naturally, then, it emphasizes border control, opposition to illegal

7 Küppers and Stapleton, “What the Rise of Chega Means for Portuguese Democracy.”

8 Küppers and Stapleton, “What the Rise of Chega Means for Portuguese Democracy.”

9 “Mass Immigration a ‘Challenge’ for Portugal,” *The Portugal News*, <https://www.theportugalnews.com/news/2025-06-03/mass-immigration-a-challenge-for-portugal/98228->.

10 “Mass Immigration a ‘Challenge’ for Portugal.”

11 “1.5 million foreign citizens in Portugal,” *The Portugal News*, October 17, 2025, <https://www.theportugalnews.com/news/2025-10-17/15-million-foreign-citizens-in-portugal/903892>

12 “1.5 million foreign citizens in Portugal.”

13 CHEGA, “Manifesto Político Fundador” [Founding Political Manifesto], accessed January 25, 2026, <https://partidocheqa.pt/index.php/manifesto/>.

immigration, and harsher criminal penalties. In sum, they are everything the bureaucrats in Brussels hate.

THE STAKES FOR PORTUGUESE (AND ALSO EUROPEAN) POLITICS

Although it is unclear whether Chega will prove successful in the runoff on February 8, this election represents an inflection point not only for Portugal, but for Europe's political landscape writ large. As with other elections in Europe this year, electorate will choose between candidates that represent competing national visions with the potential to shape Portuguese politics and influence European politics going forward.

On the one hand, there are the currently predominant centrists of the left and right varieties, of which the PS represents the former.¹⁴ While the center left and right may differ on how to manage aspects of Europe's decline, such as on the size of the welfare state or tax brackets, they both believe liberalism is a *sine qua non* for effective and moral governance. They believe that millions of new inhabitants from Africa and Asia entering Europe is a good thing—morally and economically. Or, at least, redressing the problem by removing those who came to Europe illegally is a step too far. They believe that religion should not be part of mainstream political discourse and that morality is relative. They believe that too much of a self-assertive stance with regard to one's own religion, culture, and national group is to wander too far off over there, to the forbidden area. Fundamentally, they are status quo.

On the other hand, there are the more patriotic and conservative forces, which Chega represents. As with other affiliates of the Patriots for Europe, they have a different ideal for their country and Europe—they see it as a civilization to be recalled, protected, and returned to. They understand that without strong families, and with the import of millions of people from around the world, there will be nothing resembling a Portugal, or a Hungary, or a France, at least as we once knew them. Chega has campaigned on enforcing Portugal's borders properly because, as in many European countries, migration is the central issue. Throughout Europe, we are seeing more assertively right-wing parties becoming more and more popular—particularly in European elections and national legislative and local elections—by asserting a stricter agenda vis-à-vis mass migration and other cultural issues.

¹⁴ Alexandra Leitao, "The Socialist Party and the Growth of the Far Right in Portugal," *The Progressive Post*, May 22, 2025, <https://peps-europe.eu/the-socialist-party-and-the-growth-of-the-far-right-in-portugal/>.

In this way, whether or not Ventura wins the runoff on February 8, the 2026 presidential election has already served to further strengthen Chega's position in Portuguese politics, which can, in turn, be used as a springboard for future legislative elections. This will be particularly important for the scheduled 2029 legislative election when all 230 seats of the Portuguese Assembly of the Republic will be at stake. Last year's snap election resulted not only in Chega becoming the country's second-largest political party in parliament, but also in the PS (the other contender in the coming February runoff) suffering a significant defeat and finishing third with two less seats in the legislature than Chega.

In turn, if Ventura wins the presidential election on February 8, Chega could make it harder for the incumbent—Luís Montenegro of the center-right Social Democratic Party—to govern. For example, Ventura—as president—will have the constitutional authority to not only appoint prime ministers, but also other ministers recommended by the prime minister, veto ordinary and constitutional legislation (thus forcing parliament to re-pass laws by absolute majority), and given how highly visible a political actor the Portuguese president is, Ventura will most definitely politically countersignal by giving public speeches criticizing government policy, questioning the government's competency or legitimacy, or framing crises in ways that shift more public blame onto Montenegro.

If Ventura loses, Chega has nonetheless proved itself—again—as a major new political force, and party, in Portuguese politics. Ventura's Chega will remain the second-largest party in the country, ever since it increased its vote share to nearly 23 percent in the snap legislative election of 2025. Gaining a place in the presidential runoff as a party of just over six years old against a long-standing centrist opponent already augments the legitimacy of Chega's national-conservative vision, thereby increasing the likelihood of an even better performance in the next legislative elections.

Since the foundation of the Portuguese republic, the five previous presidents have won two consecutive five-year terms. Historically, the Portuguese electorate chooses a president that balances against the dominant political force of the day.¹⁵ Although, at this stage, it is very close to call, if the next Portuguese president is to balance the dominant political force in a truly meaningful and symbolic way, the choice on February 8 is obvious.

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Bernard, "Why Portugal's Upcoming Presidential Election Has Echoes of 1986."



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