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Presidential Elections in Portugal: From 'Restrictions as Usual' to Unexpected Lockdown

Case Study, 24 September 2021

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This case study is part of a collaborative project between the Electoral Integrity Project, Electoral Management Network and International IDEA, edited by Toby S. James (University of East Anglia), Alistair Clark (Newcastle University) and Erik Asplund (International IDEA).

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Carla Luís

1. Introduction

Elections for the President of the Republic took place in Portugal on 24 January 2021. To accommodate the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, two key changes were made: expanded early voting and a reduction in the number of voters in each polling station. These aimed to reduce crowding on election day and to make the process smoother. However, the need for more polling stations and corresponding polling staff posed additional challenges to electoral administration. In a pandemic situation concerns of contagion among poll workers, especially for high-risk groups (such as those aged 65+), posed an extra challenge to electoral administration. The number of cases spiked in the last weeks of the official campaign, severely affecting the events that candidates could organize. The country went into full lockdown on 15 January, two days before early voting (17 January), adding to uncertainty and public unease.

Under Portugal’s system of early voting for presidential elections, citizens can register to vote at any polling station in the country a week ahead of the election. Considerable use was made of this voting arrangement, resulting in large queues, amplified by the media. Those who gave up waiting retained their right to vote on polling day as provided for in the law and reiterated by the Electoral Commission in a press release (Electoral Commission 2021). However, this prompted concern about system readiness for the election and for conventional voting on election day itself. Early voting for those in special circumstances—voters in prisons and hospitals, and (new for the pandemic) people with Covid-19, self-isolating or resident in care homes for the elderly—took place the week before election day and also suffered some setbacks. There were again several issues, adding uncertainty and expectation to the whole electoral process. In the same week, the incumbent candidate tested positive for Covid-19 just days after a televised debate with all other candidates. This proved to be a false positive, but added to the general climate of uncertainty, leading to further concerns. The final stages of the campaign took place predominately online.

Election day went smoothly, amid great expectations and concerns. Poll workers showed up to polling stations, despite an enormous number of replacements all over the country.

The public was cooperative and patient in the face of queues. Voter turnout was substantial, despite the lockdown. The results were unanimously accepted and there was widespread praise for people working on the election (Portuguese Parliament 2021; Renascença/Lusa 2021; SIC Notícias 2021a).

There remained room for improvement, nonetheless. Electoral legislation to accommodate the needs of the pandemic arriving late on the scene in November 2020 put a considerable burden on the electoral process, undermining long-term planning in such a demanding context. Electoral workers, particularly from municipalities and civil parishes, faced a huge workload, and their commitment was crucial to delivering the election. This case study draws out lessons learned for the future. In order to broaden and enrich the analysis with experience from the ground, it includes findings from a focus group of electoral officials held in February 2021, as well as official data and documents, media reports and other sources.

2. Background and context

Portugal has a semi-presidential system. Elections for the President of the Republic are held every five years and the President must be elected by an absolute majority of the votes cast. If no candidate secures an absolute majority in the first round, there is a second round between the two most successful candidates. This is the only majoritarian election in Portugal. All Portuguese citizens over the age of 18, resident in Portugal or abroad, are eligible to vote.

Electoral administration in Portugal is very decentralized. The Electoral Commission, an independent body, oversees the election and adjudicates complaints, guaranteeing equal opportunities and equality before the law. The Ministry of Internal Affairs ensures the operational side, in close coordination with the 308 municipalities. Municipalities are part of the local administration and have important roles in implementing the election. This includes operationalization of polling stations and all associated logistics, in close cooperation with central bodies as mentioned, in particular the Internal Affairs, and the civil parishes. Over 3,000 civil parishes cooperate closely with municipalities, contributing to determining the location of polling stations and their smooth running on election day.

Polling stations are key within the Portuguese electoral system. Their five-member teams are appointed for election day only, but polling stations are legally considered bodies of the electoral administration, with special powers and duties, and are sovereign and autonomous in their decisions. This model ensures checks and balances within the system, but requires a smooth cooperation between all entities. Overall, there is great familiarity with it.

3. Timing of the presidential election

Holding the election on time was required because of constitutional provisions. The presidential mandate is of five years of duration and was due to end on 9 March 2021. Presidential elections were set to take place by 24 January, to allow time for a possible second round. The elected candidate must secure an absolute majority of valid votes (50 per cent +1). If this is not secured on the first round, there is a second round with the two most voted candidates. The incumbent secured high degrees of approval and popularity (polls suggested at least 60 per cent of the vote) making a second round very unlikely, but the official calendar had to allow for it. Postponing the election date would mean a presidential mandate lasting more than five years, violating the Constitution. Should a postponement be deemed necessary, a constitutional amendment would therefore be needed. However, a state of emergency had been declared on 6 November 2020, to enter into force on 9 November (President of the Republic 2020a); according to the Constitution, no amendment process could take place during a state of emergency, for understandable reasons. In addition, the situation was so uncertain that it was not clear when the election could be re-held. This

would risk spreading uncertainty to the highest sovereign body, especially in a period when its role was key, due to its constitutional powers, particularly regarding the state of emergency.

A postponement was therefore not widely debated. Some candidates supported the idea, but only in the last weeks before the election (Esteves 2021). As the health situation worsened, these candidates feared that conditions for a fully democratic access to the vote could not be assured, given the campaign had already been severely affected (Esteves 2021). In a survey of the public carried out two days before the election, 68 per cent of respondents considered that the election should be postponed (Jornal de Notícias 2021a). At the same time, in another survey carried out that week, 81 per cent of respondents had firm intentions to vote despite the pandemic (Amaral 2020), 65 per cent said they were unafraid to do so, and only 9 per cent had strong concerns.

4. The state of emergency and political rights

Legal provisions for a state of emergency are covered in the Portuguese Constitution. This is the only mechanism that allows for the suspension of fundamental rights, such as freedom of movement. A state of emergency can only be declared by the President, upon hearing the Government, and after the formal approval of Parliament. These three sovereign bodies having been engaged, the Government issues the decree of execution of the state of emergency. The Constitutional Court, too, can be called to intervene, should any questions of constitutionality arise. A state of emergency can only be issued for a maximum period of 15 days, renewable under the same procedure. Each declaration of a state of emergency must specify which fundamental rights can be restricted—duly grounded—and only these can be subsequently affected. Certain fundamental rights such as the right to life, personal integrity and personal identity can never be affected. Further, restrictions to fundamental rights must always be proportional and strictly necessary to respond, and aimed at restoring ‘constitutional normality’.

A state of emergency was declared for the first time in Portugal’s democratic history on 18 March 2020, imposing a lockdown, among other measures (President of the Republic 2020b). This was further renewed, finally ending on 2 May 2020. There was no restriction to political rights in any of these decrees, the only exception being health workers’ right to strike, and this only in the first decree. With no elections during this first period, fundamental rights connected to elections were unaffected. However, the traditional Workers’ Day event on 1 May 2020, organized by a trade union, raised the question of how political rights would be made compatible with the new scenario. Despite some public outcry, it was very clear for all public authorities that, according to the law, political rights could not be curtailed even during the state of emergency and that any other rights necessary to ensure these, such as freedom of movement, would also have to be guaranteed. This meant that even during the lockdown period, protesters could go to the place where the Workers’ Day demonstration would take place. The Workers’ Day event went ahead, though with a significant reduction in numbers. Social distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE) and controls on how participants circulated among themselves were also put in place.

After a peaceful summer, the health situation in Portugal worsened in late 2020. A state of emergency was declared again, coming into effect on 9 November (President of the Republic 2020a). Preparations for presidential elections had already begun. It was always expected that the state of emergency would have no direct impact on political rights, especially those concerning the election and its overall preparation. However, the new situation and the measures adopted would impact life in general and, as a consequence, political activities, which meant that broader electoral activities would be indirectly affected.

5. Electoral campaigning

Political activities started to take place in the summer, when the pandemic situation was smoother. Party rallies and other activities fall under the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression and thought, among others. This must be communicated to municipal bodies, and public venues can also be used for these purposes, hence municipalities have a particular role to play in their management. The question arose whether campaign activities were still allowed under the pandemic situation, on what basis and under which requisites. In fact, health authorities had not issued any particular guidelines regarding political activities or electoral campaigns in general. Earlier in the year, there was a working group of several entities working on elections, such as the Electoral Commission, Internal Affairs and health authorities, expecting to reach concrete guidelines on this. However, no document was produced. This caused uncertainty for political parties and candidates, municipalities and the general public.

In particular, a big three-day event organized by the Communist Party, held annually in September, sparked controversy in the media, with some public opinion calling on the Government to forbid it (Macau Business/Lusa 2020). However, according to the Constitution no political events could be forbidden by public authorities, much less by the Government. This was always very clear to public authorities, despite the outcry. Health authorities worked closely with the Communist Party to ensure that all safeguards were in place (SNS 2020) and the contingency plan was made available by the party (PCP 2020), with the event facing severe restrictions. The event was held outside with its normal capacity greatly reduced, among other safety measures agreed with health authorities (Donn 2020).

The Electoral Commission was subsequently requested to intervene in the first concrete case, issuing a general ruling. The political party Bloco de Esquerda wished to conduct a political event, and the municipality refused to authorize it, requesting a contingency plan. The party reported the issue to the Electoral Commission, who produced a decision to be used in all further cases (Electoral Commission 2020d; 2020a). The decision stressed that political rights were fundamental rights, as recognized in the Constitution. These could only be restricted under the state of emergency—if and only if specified by the decree, and compliant with all other applicable criteria, such as proportionality.

At the time, no state of emergency was in place and no entity could restrict these rights. However, due to the pandemic, the organizers of political events had the duty to respect the recommendations of health authorities and to exercise their political rights with due respect for citizens' rights to life and health. Health authorities' recommendations (e.g. on face masks, social distancing, ventilation, etc.) should be respected and included in event planning. A contingency plan was desirable, to be made available to relevant authorities and to the public, where possible. Overall, the Electoral Commission stressed that political activities were not subject to any restriction, although their proponents should respect the general recommendations of health authorities.

Media climate and contributions

Media and social media reaction to the Communist Party's event, earlier in September, had a strong effect on public perceptions of political activities in the pandemic and blurred the correct understanding of its legal framework. For a time, the topic was brought into nearly all interviews and news pieces (see Ribeiro 2020; Oliveira 2020; Donn 2020). A major television station even broadcast a false *New York Times* cover image in an apparent attempt to suggest that the decision to allow the event had been newsworthy internationally (Martins 2020). Besides this clear case of fake news, more generally media coverage of public gatherings was very uneven, with political events more negatively portrayed than other kinds

(Observador 2020). Somewhat negative public perceptions of political and campaign activities were amplified by social media and the media in general, and even the international press adhered to this perspective (Ames 2020). This then formed part of the context for the presidential elections.

This pattern spread beyond mainland Portugal to campaigning for October’s elections to the Legislative Assembly of the Autonomous Region of Azores, making it harder for political parties there to carry out campaign activities in person. Access to campaign activities in other formats, such as social media, was uneven in this small archipelago. The media became the main vehicle, yet there was no media regulation for this particular election. Public perception of political and campaign activities was somewhat negative, and this context paved the way for the presidential elections of January 2021.

The campaign for presidential elections was in general safe, with candidates generally complying with safety measures, also due to strong social pressure. The exception was the populist far-right candidate, whose non-compliance culminated in a dinner for 170 people a few days before the election, in a closed space, without ventilation or social distancing with scarce use of face masks, and after a negative decision from health authorities. While the country was in full lockdown due to a surge of Covid-19 cases, the dinner was held behind closed doors, without public scrutiny (RTP 2021). With journalists also barred from covering the event, media attention was correspondingly intense. A criminal process for civil disobedience was launched (Jornal de Notícias 2021c); its outcome was unknown at the time of writing.

This was, however, an exception. Most candidates carried out their campaign activities complying with applicable safety rules, being overall very cautious and even willing to serve as an example (Jornal de Notícias 2021b). The final stage of campaigning took place under lockdown, and candidates clearly chose to shift campaign activities online (Notícias ao Minuto 2021). Television debates between all candidates were organized by television broadcasters, gathering far more attention than in previous elections. The debates were generally accessible and perceived as a fair process, sparking great attention to the ongoing electoral campaign (Marcela 2021).

6. Candidate applications: a lengthy process

The presidential election has a unique legal framework in Portugal, as presidential candidates must be legally independent from political parties. They can be formally supported by one or more political parties, or none at all. The candidacy procedure is quite bureaucratic, and the same for all candidates, but in practical terms easier for those supported by the machinery of a political party— and more so amid the disruptions of the pandemic. Candidates must collect the support of 7,500 to 15,000 eligible voters, through the signature of an extensive form, plus a certificate of the right to vote for each supporter, and submit these and other documents before the Constitutional Court. Since voter registration certificates can only be issued locally, at the parish where each voter is registered, this means that candidates need to formalize each individual request with the more than 3,000 parishes throughout the country (Pordata 2020). Parishes are obliged to deliver certificates in three days, although levels of compliance can be uneven. A legal reform could have modernized and eased this process, made especially difficult in the circumstances (and foreseeably so), but had not been made a priority. This posed a great burden on prospective candidates, especially those not able to secure formal support from political parties.

The process usually starts well before the formal setting of the election date, to allow time to comply with all requirements. The final deadline to submit candidacies to the Constitutional Court was 24 December 2020, 30 days before the election date. The state of emergency on 9 November 2020 posed an extra burden. There were no legal restrictions to

political activities, but people in the streets who could be approached for nominations decreased sharply. Signatures could be collected electronically, through certified signatures, but these digital mechanisms were not easily accessible to all citizens.

Ultimately there were seven successful candidacies, and an eighth that was rejected having failed to deliver sufficient signatures (just 11 of the 7,500 required—Público/Lusa 2020). This candidate was in a very particular situation, as he was also in the military. As such, he needed a special licence from the state to run for the election, and the licence terminated with each declaration of the state of emergency (as all military personnel were required to be available). As such, he argued that he was not given adequate conditions to prepare the process (Lai Men and Vasconcelos 2020). In the 2021 election there were therefore 7 candidates, as compared with 10 in 2016 and 6 candidates in 2011 (Electoral Commission n.d.a).

7. Early voting

'Early voting in mobility', categorized as early voting by International IDEA, has become very familiar to citizens in Portugal, since the approval of its generalization in 2018 (International IDEA 2021). Before 2018 early voting was restricted to people displaced from their polling stations on election day for specific reasons (professional, educational, those in custodial situations or hospital) and this was organized by municipalities. Professionals would cast their ballot in the municipality, days ahead of the election; votes from hospital patients, prisoners or students were collected by the municipality. Every ballot would then be expedited to the polling station where each person was registered. The system of 'early voting in mobility', on the other hand, was created in 2018 and made accessible to every citizen (in most elections), without the need for a justification. Having proven popular in the European Parliament elections (May 2019—see SG MAI 2019) this would take place on the Sunday before election day, with people registering the week before on an electronic platform organized by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. While legal requisites were loosened in 2018, geographic access was reduced: votes would have to be cast in the municipality capital of each district (18 in the whole country) or island—11 in total, 9 in the Archipelago of Azores and 2 in Madeira—rather than in any of the 308 municipalities.

Voting always takes place on a Sunday in Portugal, complicating access to public transport in a country with very large rural areas, and the same problem affected early voting (especially for the elderly or those on low income). Early voting for incarcerated people or those in hospitals was maintained. As the number of voters registering was uncertain, the Ministry of Internal Affairs sent daily figures to municipalities to assist them in discharging their responsibilities. This allowed some time to plan for the number of polling stations, locations, staffing and other logistics.

8. Late legal amendments

The pandemic started in March 2020. Electoral reforms to accommodate pandemic conditions in the presidential elections only began at the end of September and were finally approved in November 2020, for elections taking place the following January. Early voting was expanded as a strategy to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, and allow in practice an extra day for ballots to be cast, reducing risks of crowding or infections. A special procedure was also created for people with Covid-19 or under prophylactic isolation, decreed by health authorities. The latter were provided for in a separate law, to be in force for all elections taking place in 2021. Those under isolation measures or testing positive could register for an early vote and a team from the municipality would collect their ballot at their registered

address (the address of confinement had to be located in the municipality where the voter was normally registered, or in a contiguous municipality).

These health measures had to be decreed by relevant health authorities and entered in the Covid-19 database. This database would cross check with the voter registration database and if all data matched, automatically validate the registration. Registration was possible between 14 and 17 January, and the ballot was collected by the municipality between 19 and 20 January, to be securely stored and quarantined, and sent to the original polling station on election day. This was again a great burden on municipalities, and health guidelines for collecting the ballots were just published a month before the voting period (SG MAI n.d.). In total 12,906 people registered and 11,990 voted (SG MAI n.d.). This mechanism left out people to whom these measures were applicable after the 10th day before the election (SIC Notícias 2021b) and no mechanism allowed them to vote. Some voters were also disenfranchised due to issues with databases, and in practice, many of the elderly in care homes.

Early voting turnout—a qualified success

Electoral laws were amended in late 2020 to broaden early voting. For general early voting, voters could register on an online platform and the voter could choose any municipality in the country where they preferred to vote, allowing flexibility in terms of both time and geography. The exception was local elections, where early voting in mobility is not possible, as logistics are more complicated. Early voting was broadened and generalized, with a great response from voters, as further described.

This meant that each of the 308 municipalities had to organize early voting. This would be new to most of them, except for the 18 district capitals and 11 island capitals of Azores and Madeira, as earlier mentioned. According to the 2020 legal reform, early voting would now take place in a proper polling station, composed of five polling officials each, and not before municipality officials collecting the ballot, as previously. This meant the need for more polling staff, in the context of the pandemic. With some members of polling stations belonging to high-risk groups, particularly those over age 65, this created extra pressure on the system. The appointment of members of polling stations was also an important challenge in this election.

Early voting takes longer. Voters may belong to different constituencies, so ballots are expedited back to their polling station of origin, via municipalities. The voter is therefore given the ballot paper, plus two envelopes: once filled, the ballot is folded and inserted in a blank envelope, then into a bigger blue one, with a sticker label with their data, name and polling station of origin. This requires extra time and some physical skills for the voter to handle the materials, especially for those not familiar with the process, making it much longer. In most elections, except for presidential ones, there are multiple constituencies, and the voter needs the corresponding ballot paper, to be properly selected by polling staff.

Early voting turnout was also expected to be high, as voters that previously register to vote early are more likely to show up at the polls. In previous elections in 2019, the lowest turnout for early voting was 78 per cent (SG MAI 2019). In the 2021 presidential election turnout for early voting ‘in mobility’ was 80.2 per cent (almost 198,000 out of just under a quarter of a million registered) (SG MAI 2021a and see Section 12. Turnout below). Despite taking place during a lockdown, long queues formed for early voting, as mentioned. This could have been due to poor organization in some municipalities, due to a slower voting process or the need for social distancing. Images of the queueing in the broadcast media raised some concerns about infection risks. In the circumstances, it may be that density should have been set at even fewer voters per polling station. In the focus group, electoral workers also highlighted the need for clearer guidelines for municipalities regarding facilities and queue management. Some polling stations lacked adequate spacing and multiple queues

formed, producing crowding in covered areas (corridors). More voter information was also mentioned as crucial, as this helps to speed up the process at the polling station; voters were reported as attending without any knowledge of early voting procedure.

Despite these important challenges, early voting in mobility can be considered a success. It was used for the first time in the 2019 election for the European Parliament, where 19,584 voters registered. The 2019 parliamentary election followed, with 56,291 voters registering. In the 2021 presidential election 246,922 voters registered, an increase of 339 per cent. People registering for early voting are very likely to vote, as the registration already shows commitment. Of the 246,922 people who registered for early voting in the 2021 presidential election, 197,903 voted early—80.2 per cent, according to official figures (SG MAI 2021d).

9. Legal reforms and demand for poll workers

The legal reform approved in November 2020 reduced voters per polling station to 1,000 on election day (formerly 1,500) and 500 for early voting in mobility (formerly 750). This reversed the electoral reform that took place in 2018, which had increased the number of voters from 1,000 to 1,500 per polling station. In the 2021 presidential election the appointment of polling staff was a great challenge for both voting channels. Early voting in mobility took place in all municipalities involving a total of 675 polling stations (SG MAI 2021a) and 3,375 polling staff. This was over a three-fold increase on the parliamentary election in 2019 (SG MAI 2019). For presidential election day 2021 there were 12,287 polling stations, with approximately 61,000 polling staff. In the previous election, the parliamentary election of 2019, early voting was carried out with 214 polling stations and 1,066 polling staff (SG MAI 2019). The 2021 data are a consequence of a surge in the demand for early voting, as mentioned, but also a consequence of the reduction of voters per polling station. The figures in Table 1 below provide a sense of the challenge.

Table 1. Polling stations and poll worker numbers, general elections since 2019

Election	Type of voting	Voters/polling station (reference)	Polling stations	Poll workers
European elections 2019	Early voting in mobility	750	43	213
	Election day	1,500	11,363	55,939
Parliamentary elections 2019	Early voting in mobility	750	214	1,066
	Election day	1,500	11,193	55,782
Presidential elections 2021	Early voting in mobility	500	675	3,369
	Election day	1,000	12,287	61,435

Source: SG MAI (2021) ‘Eleição para a Presidência da República - Informações e Números sobre o processo eleitoral’, <https://www.sg.mai.gov.pt/AdministracaoEleitoral/EleicoesReferendos/PresidenciaRepublica/Documents/Relar%C3%B3rio%20de%20N%C3%BAmeros%20e%20Informa%C3%A7%C3%B5es_PR2021.pdf>, accessed: 23 April 2021.

In Portugal members of polling stations are appointed for election day only. Polling staff play a crucial role in the election, being at the forefront and the visible face of electoral administration before the public. It is therefore crucial that they are knowledgeable and impartial on electoral procedures, which include vote counting and tabulation at the polling stations. However, no specific training is provided.

For the presidential election polling staff are appointed by the local mayor, and the law does not contain any further specification. This is a singularity of the Electoral Law for the President of the Republic. In all other elections, positions at polling stations are filled after an agreement between candidacies, with people appointed by the latter. The principle of plural composition of polling staff is a cornerstone in the Portuguese electoral system. It ensures mutual accountability (checks and balances against fraud), as competing candidacies are entitled to appoint members of polling stations, to reduce the possibility of fraud, and abide by common rules and procedures. In 2020 the Electoral Commission reiterated this principle, stating that polling stations should also have a plural composition for the presidential election, as in any other, and as understood by the Constitutional Court (Electoral Commission 2020b). As such, mayors should seek cooperation from candidates and their supporters and political parties, among others, to fill the five posts per polling station with plurality.

In other elections, poll workers being appointed by candidacies might be an incentive. However, in the presidential election this is not the case, and the availability of poll workers decreased. Furthermore, the incumbent candidacy, that of Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, sent a communication to the Electoral Commission, stating that it would not appoint any polling members, as it trusted the electoral system. The Electoral Commission responded, underlining that the electoral system relies also on candidacies and their cooperation, particularly in such a challenging context, and it called on the candidacy to appoint members for polling stations (Electoral Commission 2020e). As this candidate was supported by the second largest political party, the Social Democrats, and others, this resulted also in a general lack of poll workers appointed by these. The Socialist Party did not officially support any candidate, and this resulted in fewer people being appointed for polling stations. This was highlighted by electoral workers in our focus group as adding to other factors, worsening the situation.

Despite the challenging context, no extra financial incentives were offered to poll workers. They are paid a compensation of EUR 51,93, exempt from taxes (Electoral Commission n.d.b), and are exempt from professional duties on election day and the day after. This amount has remained the same since 2013, when it was cut from EUR 76 to EUR 50, due to the financial crisis. This can also take several months to be paid and it is thus decreasing as an incentive to serve in this position.

Numerous replacements of poll workers took place, also due to Covid-19 infections or fears, with an associated burden of paperwork and demand on human resources in already overloaded electoral staff in municipalities (Público/Lusa 2021). To serve as polling staff is technically mandatory, unless exempt for specific reasons such as age or health. However, as the priority is usually to fill vacant positions, municipalities are more likely to seek replacements than to force someone to be present. Replacements of polling staff are common, often at the last minute (or on election day), posing a great challenge to municipalities and consuming great organizational resources. Some have a database of volunteers, but this is not mandatory. Municipalities across the country reported having to replace numerous poll workers, some by the hundreds, while other had difficulties appointing polling staff. Some municipalities reported recruiting poll workers from within the workers of the municipality, in order to fill vacant posts. Overall, other channels for recruitment of polling staff, such as schools, universities or civil society organizations, remained unexplored. Two days before the election, the Secretary of State publicly reported difficulties in 15 municipalities, though ensuring all polling stations would open on Sunday (Público/Lusa 2021). All vacant positions were ultimately filled, both for early voting and on election day, demonstrating a general societal commitment to support the electoral process.

Despite being crucial in the design of the electoral system, there is scarce public recognition of the importance of polling stations and polling staff. In this election, and

probably for the first time, public authorities and political actors recognized the under-valued effort and dedication of electoral workers and poll workers in particular (Renascença/Lusa 2021). However, it remains to be seen whether this will motivate any administrative reforms or publicity drives in the future. Civil society lacks information on the possibility of being a member of a polling station, despite numerous reports from authorities on the lack of people available to fill these positions. There is a mismatch of information, and a wider public information campaign on this would be desirable.

10. Last minute legal reforms: care home residents

Some legal reforms took place only days before the election. In the weeks before the polls, it became obvious that for elderly people in care homes it would be extremely difficult to vote. They were under very strict health measures to protect them from the many surges in care homes and leaving the premises would force them to quarantine for two weeks, according to public health norms issued for care homes. This population was overlooked in the legal framework for the election and there was no legal basis allowing them to vote under a specific procedure. The incumbent President of the Republic proposed in the media to allow them to vote under special procedures, to be determined. To accommodate this, the state of emergency before the election (approved 13 January) mentioned elderly people in care homes (President of the Republic 2021). Under the same special voting procedure as people isolating or infected with Covid-19, they would be allowed to vote from care homes, and the municipality would collect their ballots.

However, this provision was general and did not account for the specificities of the situation. Further, it took place outside the relevant legislative process, not having been adopted by the relevant body or in due time. Implementation would be extremely hard, obviously, with scarce time for due planning. There were many challenges in the registration process and the number of people in care homes able to vote was very uneven. There was an electronic platform where people could register for early voting. This electronic platform for registration was intended to cross check with the database of Social Security, the entity responsible for care facilities. However, lead times did not allow for the database to be fully operational. Some care facilities and voters were entered on the platform, while many were excluded (Cruz and Monteiro 2021) and could not apply for any other form of early voting. There were public accounts of numerous problems and an overall difficulty of access to the registration system (Jornal de Notícias 2021b). Some care homes reported that they were given just hours to enter their residents on the database (TSF Rádio Notícias 2021), and in the autonomous region of Azores problems in the platform meant no voters were registered (RTP Açores 2021). There is no official data for the early voting in care homes, despite municipalities being required to provide these. These figures were included by the Internal Affairs in the figures of people with Covid-19 or in prophylactic isolation, not allowing for a specific analysis.

11. Mitigation measures at polling stations

The list of safety measures concerning elections was expected to be approved at an early stage in 2020, resulting from a working group composed of electoral and health authorities. However, it did not produce this outcome (Electoral Commission 2020c). A local referendum taking place on 13 September 2020 (Electoral Commission 2020f) highlighted this need, and the first relevant material was produced on the initiative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (SG MAI 2020a and 2020b). This consisted of the general measures applicable to all other activities, such as social distancing, disinfection and use of PPE, with these materials being supplied centrally by the Internal Affairs. The National Electoral

Commission produced subsequent information materials for the Azores election, following this model, with the campaign 'Voting is Safe!' (Electoral Commission 2020g). This was further adopted for the presidential elections. However, no specific guidelines were produced for the campaign, as mentioned. In terms of public communication and voter information, coordination between these two electoral authorities was scarce, as well as visibility of the information. This produced contradictory messages at times (e.g., on whether voters were required to take their own pen on election day), generating public confusion.

In the same period, the public campaign carried out by the Electoral Commission generated public controversy. Its slogan used the masculine article for the President of the Republic throughout. This disregarded several recommendations on the use of inclusive language and was accused of using a sexist and non-inclusive language (see Leal 2021) and, perhaps more importantly from the point of view of inadvertent bias, disregarded the fact that there were two female candidates in the race (see Peralta 2020). This generated an outcry shortly before the election, with several formal complaints; yet the Commission did not withdraw these materials (Electoral Commission 2020e). The image of the Commission and its public campaign was weakened as a result. Instead, a stronger dissemination of health electoral information from public authorities, in a coordinated and stronger fashion, would have been desirable. Even for early voting, and after many legal amendments for the 2021 election, there was scarce information for voters in general on the adaptations to the pandemic.

Electoral workers in the focus group referred to lack of coordination from central electoral authorities a number of times, and how this made it harder for municipalities on the ground to implement central decisions and messaging. Above all, there was a lack of clear and consistent public information on aspects such as early voting, health and safety and special procedures. In some cases, poorly resourced municipalities were the first institutions to reach voters with relevant information for the process, such as eligibility to vote and location. The focus group emphasized that wider public information would have eased the process at the local level and reinforced trust in the system.

12. Voter turnout

Turnout in this election needs context and a careful analysis. A 2018 legal reform automatically included in the voters' roll all Portuguese citizens residing abroad. Formerly these had to actively register in order to vote and to show a bond with the country, as foreseen in the Constitution. However, the reduction of Portugal's network of embassies and consulates made this process gradually more challenging. The 2018 legal reform thus expanded the absolute number of possible voters, regardless of their effective bonds with the country or interest in voting. This was expected to produce effects in the 2021 presidential election, where there is a single constituency and voters from abroad are entitled to vote. The abroad abstention rate would likely increase, as well as being affected by the pandemic. As such, percentage comparisons of turnout with previous elections become more difficult to interpret.

The official turnout rate for the 2021 presidential election was 39.3 per cent and in the Portuguese national territory it was 45.45 per cent (SG MAI n.d.). Voting from abroad had a turnout rate of 1.9 per cent (29,153 votes cast out of over 1.5 million eligible voters), as compared with 4.7 per cent in 2016 but, as mentioned, with fewer absolute numbers involved (14,150 votes cast out of just over 300,000 eligible voters) (SG MAI n.d.a). During election day, turnout sample figures in the national territory were promising. Turnout at 12:00 was 17.07 per cent (15.8 per cent in 2016) and at 16:00 35.4 per cent (37.7 per cent in 2016) (SG MAI n.d.). These figures include all forms of early voting: one of the first

electoral operations is to take account of early votes, mark the voters and enter these ballots in the ballot box.

Overall, in 2021 there were 10,847,434 voters, of which 4,258,356 (39.3 per cent) went to the polls. In 2016 there were 9,751,398 voters, of which 4,744,597 (48.7 per cent) went to the polls. The absolute number of voters decreased by nearly half a million, but turnout rates from 2021 and 2016 are difficult to compare. In 2021 there could well have been a pandemic effect on abstention, as at-risk groups such as those over 65 years of age are typically the ones who vote the most. The election was held during a peak of transmission, with the country in full lockdown. Finally, the election result was also foreseeable, and in Portugal turnout tends to be lower for elections for the second term of the presidential mandate. Plus, given the whole pandemic context and general lockdown, there were worse concerns regarding abstention.

13. Conclusions

Presidential elections in Portugal were naturally expected to be challenging in the face of the pandemic. However, late approval of legal amendments posed an extra and unnecessary burden in an already difficult process. Broad legal reforms were approved in November 2020 for the January 2021 election, with some guidelines published only weeks ahead of polling. People in care homes had a special framework approved days before the election, as part of the state of emergency decree. This was truly unexpected, and its implementation fell necessarily short. The foreseeable electoral outcome, in favour of a very popular incumbent, hid the effects of an uneven implementation, but in a more contested election this could have been very problematic.

Covid-19 infections spiked two weeks before the election, with the country going into full lockdown. This was unexpected and extremely severe. Political rights were not curtailed in any way, and were fully respected by all relevant authorities, something that must be highlighted. However, conditions on the ground impacted the campaign, with most activities shifting online. The media played a crucial role and television debates, which gathered large audiences, were seen as fairly organized.

Early voting showed fragilities, with large queues being their visible face, adding to organizational flaws such as the lack of social distancing and adequate space at polling stations in some municipalities. Early voting for people self-isolating or testing positive for Covid-19 went fairly well, although it left many voters out (SIC Notícias 2021b). Early voting for people in care homes was particularly uneven, due to lack of adequate time for implementation, among other reasons (Jornal de Notícias 2021b; RTP Açores 2021). Election day went fairly well considering the severe public health situation in the country. This was largely due to strong commitment and cooperation on the ground, especially from thousands of poll workers and others at municipality and parish levels, as well as voters themselves.

Despite the challenges, some of them very avoidable, the Portuguese electoral system and administration was shown to be resilient, through its multiple entities, and high levels of public trust (Soares 2020). However, more timely preparation is needed, starting with the legal framework. Vulnerable groups should be taken into account, and more public information campaigns are necessary, in a coordinated fashion, particularly addressing special procedures and those with specific needs. Innovation in this field was lacking, and would undoubtedly ease preparation and smooth the process on the ground, in a pandemic or in other difficult contexts.

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The author thanks SG MAI for the provision of official data on polling stations and poll workers.

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