



RECENSÃO

*Crise Económica, Políticas de Austeridade  
e Representação Política,*  
de André Freire, Marco Lisi  
e José Manuel Leite Viegas (eds.),  
por Enrico Borghetto

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EDIÇÃO E PROPRIEDADE

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FREIRE, André, LISI, Marco and VIEGAS, José Manuel Leite (eds.)  
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What has been the impact of one of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression on the quality of democratic representation? Academic circles have recently started to acknowledge that this question should be at the forefront of the public debate (Freire et al. 2014). After the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis, many Eurozone members found themselves increasingly between a rock and a hard place in their day-to-

-day effort to respond to the demands of their citizens. On the one hand, governments' room to maneuver was substantially constrained by their international commitments and by the imperatives of financial markets. On the other hand, citizens did not lower their expectations for responsive governance. In fact economic hardship has made citizens more aware of their social protection rights and how thinly resources are redistributed.

In order to answer this important question and evaluate the state of political representation in Portugal in times of austerity, this volume brings together a diverse but interrelated set of research lines, articulated in 16 chapters and two introductory chapters. The editors of the book, André Freire, Marco Lisi and José Manuel Leite Viegas, are also the coordinators of the national project ‘Elections, Leadership and Accountability’ (<http://er.cies.iscte-iul.pt/>), which was carried out between 2012 and 2015 at the ISCTE-IUL. The survey data from this project is analysed and used throughout the various chapters.

As is the case with most edited volumes, the richness of perspectives included is at the same time a valuable asset of the book, providing a range of lenses to look at these momentous years of Portuguese democratic life, and a challenge for the editors, who cannot but apply a very general theoretical frame to the book. This is not a criticism, of course. Other edited books deliberately favour the diversity of perspectives, guided by the authors’ respective areas of expertise, rather than the overall coherence and connectedness of chapters. This serves rather as a warning to the reader, who may find in this book more than an analysis of the impact of the economic crisis on democratic representation. For clarity, the editors aggregated individual empirical chapters into five thematic sections. I will use this segmentation to concisely present some of the central claims of the book. I will then discuss some of the book’s major contributions.

The first four chapters look at how different social and political actors have contributed to the development of the Eurozone crisis discourse in Portugal. Needless to say, this type of analysis is of the utmost value when dealing with an abstract concept such as “crisis”. Whoever gains the upper hand in the definition of the issues to focus on and their overall framing is in the advantageous position to impose their preferred solutions. Given the relevance and pervasiveness of the crisis over many aspects of Portuguese society, it is no surprise that most chapters agree that austerity created an abundance of ideological frameworks trying to make sense of the crisis. The authors map these debates in the public discourse (through the argumentative analysis of six books dissecting the causes and consequences of the crisis), in the media and in the 2011 electoral campaign. The chapter by Moury and Freire goes one step further and provides evidence that not only did the centre-right coalition in power between 2011 and 2015 enter the framing contest with a specific set of ideologically motivated ideas and concrete goals, but it also managed to exploit the circumstances of an internationally-imposed structural adjustment program as a window of opportunity to push forward its own agenda. More interestingly, these were elite-driven reforms that respected only in part the mandate received by the electorate. This chasm between voters and their representatives also becomes apparent when looking at their respective positions on the memorandum of understanding. The divergence of views

is greater on the right than on the left side of the political spectrum.

The second set of chapters asks whether and how the politics of austerity pushed challengers to the *status quo* to increase their mobilization through either conventional or unconventional channels of political participation. The answer to this question should not be taken for granted in the Portuguese case, given its consistent record of low participation in past cross-national comparisons (Magalhães and Torcal, 2010). Furthermore, if we trust the reconstruction of the average Greek taking to the streets in protest in 2010 (described in the only chapter not explicitly focusing on Portugal), past involvement in such events should matter for the decision on whether to mobilize. Data on Portugal point to a discontinuity with the past, although with two caveats. First, all authors agree that these are mainly unconventional forms of participation, ranging from informal contacts with politicians, to popular parliamentary petitions and outright protests. Second, all are cautious to point out that it is still too early to make conclusions regarding the persistence of this change.

The third part addresses whether the crisis aggravated the level of discontent with democratic performance in Portugal. The term “aggravated” is appropriate, because Portugal was already emerging from a lost decade due to economic stagnation and the overall decline in the quality of governance. Evidence shows that frustration with deteriorating economic conditions mattered for the

levels of specific and diffuse support for democracy. Expectations that the economic crisis might have ignited citizens’ interest in previously marginal forms of democratic engagement such as direct and deliberative democratic practices seem only partially fulfilled.

The fourth part goes to the heart of the question of political representation. First, the analysis of the voter-elite nexus before and after the signing of the memorandum of understanding shows that an increase in the polarization of the socio-economic axis at the elite level is not matched by a realignment at the electorate level, whose positioning remains stable thereafter. A similar pattern emerges when analysing either the opposition to the memorandum (in its first version) or the position on debt restructuring: parties are consistently more divergent than voters. What unites elites and voters is a deterioration of support for the EU, a process already under way before the crisis (Lobo and Magalhães, 2011). Remarkably, the level of Euroscepticism seems to be affected by negative evaluations of the adjustment program negotiated with the Troika, a finding that holds after controlling for other possible explanatory factors.

The fifth and last section brings into focus alterations at the level of parliamentary elites. On the one hand, in terms of recruitment, the level of civic engagement of MPs (a proxy for the level of social capital) in the 2011 elections does not differ greatly from those of the past two elections (2005 and 2009). Relative stability also characterizes the longitudinal evolution in the focus and style of

representation of Portuguese MPs. The most notable deviation after the bailout is that party interests appear to weigh less on MPs' representative functions.

Empirically most of the chapters rely on two waves of surveys addressed to citizens, members of parliament (MP) and MP candidates. The first was conducted between 2007 and 2010 by two of the current editors under the umbrella of another project. The second, the most recent, was conducted, between 2012 and 2013, and intentionally replicated the format of the first, although not using panel data. These data constitute valuable material by which we may inspect the position and perceptions of political actors before the eruption of the full-fledged sovereign debt crisis, which led to the request of the EU-IMF rescue package and the first years of austerity under the Troika program. On the other hand the limited number of data points in the time series restricts its explanatory power. For instance, non-conventional forms of citizens' participation do show signs of greater engagement in 2012 when compared with 2008. But how significant are these findings if read within a longer time perspective? And, secondly, how conjunctural are these changes? Will traditional political disaffection among Portuguese citizens prevail when the dust of economic hardship settles? These are questions that rise time and again throughout the book.

Most of the chapters seek to respond to the first concern by engaging longer-term time-series data, where they exist (e.g. Eurobarometer, European

social survey). Admittedly, only this historical perspective allows us to assess the magnitude of the deviation from the path after the signing of the memorandum. Conversely, the second issue – the permanence of detected changes in the long run – is more difficult to deal with since such an appreciation can only be undertaken in retrospect, after the “fog of crisis” dissipated. The time-point chosen (2012) to measure positions after the arrival of the Troika, is clearly problematic: by then, uncertainty about the developments of the crisis was still very high and the redefinition of interests, above all among elites, was still ongoing. It is no surprise that some of the conclusions, such as the low probability that a party coalition on the left would form in the near future (see chapter 16), were refuted after the last elections. Likewise, one should be wary not to read too much significance into incongruences between voters and elites for the quality of democratic performance. Such a mismatch might prove short-lived, especially in times of greater political volatility.

A final limitation of this type of research is that it does not lend itself to testing theories of dynamic representation: it is difficult to suggest if whether it is voters or MPs leading the other when are inferring the choice from only two time points (see chapter 14). At best, one can put forward informed guesses on whether elites might have moved to track voters' opinion change (responsiveness hypothesis) or the other way around (democratic leadership hypothesis). In the end, only future surveys and, with

regard to methodology, the recourse to a more robust time-series approach will allow to shed better light on these central questions.

To sum up, this book makes an important contribution to the burgeoning literature on the political fallout of the recent Eurozone crisis. It shows evidence of multiple changes in Portuguese politics before and after the start of the external adjustment program. Furthermore, it does so from a variety of angles, which warrants the interest of a wide readership, not limited to the scholarly world. Ultimately, the central point is that, in a short time horizon, the crisis indeed acted as an “external shock”, opening new political fissures in the political system and amplifying existing trends. Only time will tell if it also represents a “turning point”, crystallizing new major political realignments that will survive the end of the state of “emergency”.

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