

INNOVATIONS IN THE PORTUGUESE LOCAL GOVERNMENT Contributions for local democracy

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Abstract In Portugal important legal innovations have been introduced in local government, related to the problems of negative images associated with longevity and corruption, and a decrease in voters' turnout. Independent local lists were introduced into the race in the form of citizen groups, mayors' terms were limited to three and there was a parity law. Participative budgets and decentralized local council meetings have also provided new tools for citizen participation. The object was to discuss whether these innovations are real contributions for local democracy. Methodology included the analysis of the legislative process and its enforcement, and practical consequences, namely on new representatives and citizen participation.

Keywords: local government, independent local lists, citizenship, turnout.

Inovações no poder local em Portugal: contribuições para a democracia local

Resumo Em Portugal foram introduzidas inovações legislativas importantes no poder local, relacionadas com o problema da imagem negativa associada à longevidade dos autarcas e à corrupção, assim como ao aumento da abstenção. Foram admitidas listas de independentes, sob a forma de grupos de cidadãos eleitores, os mandatos dos presidentes de câmara foram limitados a três e foi aprovada a Lei da Paridade. Os orçamentos participativos e as assembleias municipais descentralizadas também proporcionaram novos instrumentos para a participação dos cidadãos. O objetivo deste artigo é discutir se estas inovações contribuem de facto para a democracia local. A metodologia incluiu a análise do processo legislativo e da sua aplicação e consequências práticas nos novos representantes eleitos e na participação dos cidadãos.

Palavras-chave: poder local, grupos de cidadãos eleitores, cidadania, abstenção.

Innovations du pouvoir local au Portugal : contributions à la démocratie locale

Résumé Le Portugal a introduit d'importantes innovations législatives dans le pouvoir local, liées au problème de l'image négative associée à la longévité des élus locaux et à la corruption, ainsi qu'à l'augmentation de l'abstention. Les listes d'indépendants, sous forme de groupes de citoyens électeurs, sont désormais admises, le nombre de mandats des maires est limité à trois et la Loi de la parité a été adoptée. Les budgets participatifs et les conseils municipaux décentralisés offrent aussi de nouveaux instruments pour une plus grande participation des citoyens. Cet article cherche à savoir si ces innovations contribuent vraiment à la démocratie locale. La méthodologie suivie comprend l'analyse du processus législatif et de son application, ainsi que les conséquences pratiques sur les nouveaux élus et sur la participation des citoyens

Mots clés: pouvoir local, groupes de citoyens électeurs, citoyenneté, abstention.

Innovaciones en el poder local en Portugal: contribuciones para la democracia social

Resumen En Portugal se introdujeron innovaciones legislativas en el poder local relacionadas con el problema de la imagen negativa asociada a la longevidad de los alcaldes y a la corrupción, así como al aumento de la abstención. Fueron admitidas listas de independientes bajo la forma de grupos de ciudadanos electores, los mandatos de los presidentes municipales fueron limitados a tres y fue aprobada la Ley de Paridad. Los presupuestos participativos y las asambleas municipales descentralizadas también proporcionaron nuevos instrumentos para la participación de los ciudadanos. El objetivo de este artículo es discutir si estas innovaciones contribuyen, de hecho, para la

democracia local. La metodología incluyó el análisis del proceso legislativo y de su aplicación, y de las consecuencias prácticas en los nuevos representantes electos y en la participación de los ciudadanos.

Palabras-clave: poder local, grupos de ciudadanos electores, ciudadanía, abstención.

Introduction

Regardless of several democratic conquests in local government, there is a negative image associated with vices, corruption and low levels of transparency in some aspects of fund management and contract assignments. Longevity of mayors has also been considered a problematic issue: there was a negative association between the numbers of consecutive mandates and the use of participative mechanisms (Tavares and Rodrigues, 2013). Three important legal innovations have thus been introduced, which might improve citizen participation and the quality of local democracy in Portugal: independent local lists could enter the race in the form of citizen groups, mayors' terms were limited to three and a parity law was enforced in candidates lists. Some innovative actions designed to promote and provide new tools for citizen participation in the democratic process are observed, such as participative budgets and decentralized local council meetings.

Taking into consideration that independent candidacies may widen citizens' rights and opportunities, broaden their capacity to influence and participate in the local decision process, and contribute to reinforcing democracy, to reduce corruption and to renew citizen interest in politics, by increasing election turnout (Bracanti, 2008), the objective was to question whether citizen groups could be an alternative to discredited local government institutions and to the party system itself. An inquiry has shown that 47% of Portuguese citizens do not identify with existing political parties (Vieira and Wiesehomeier, 2013; Belchior, 2019). And according to Lago and Martínez (2011), "when there is an electoral market failure and a high number of perfectly elastic voters, there is a high probability of new viable entrants", such as citizen groups. Therefore, new research questions are placed: Who are these new mayors? What are their political paths? Could they contribute to larger turnouts? Are they an improvement for the practice of citizenship and for the quality of democracy? Do they provide a different approach to local government, particularly regarding voters who are unsatisfied with the democratic process?

To discuss innovations in the Portuguese local government, and their contributions for the quality of democracy, the legislative process is analysed, from the 1997 constitutional revision to present, as well as its enforcement and practical consequences, namely on new representatives and citizen participation. Official local and central government websites were consulted to collect this data and to verify the amount of information displayed and its contents. The website of the Ministry of the Interior, as well as the media, were also used as sources in order to access the levels of transparency and the type of messages and contents displayed. An

extensive research was done on transparency in the Portuguese local government. There was a pre-existing database with all 308 municipalities, with mayors from 1936 to 2013,¹ which had been built to study the history of local government in Portugal (Almeida 2013b; Almeida, 2014) and the regime transition from the Estado Novo to Democracy (Almeida, 2017a). It was then improved to gather more data and to analyse attraction strategies for people and companies, as well as central government policies for the interior regions (Almeida, 2017b). And now to analyse the new elected local representatives in 2013 and 2017.

Considering citizen groups as case studies, independent mayors' sociological and political paths are analysed to show their actual independence, as well as turnout results. Participative budgets, decentralized local council meetings and other forms of citizen engagement in local government are also presented as new tools for the improvement of local democracy.

Historical and legal framework

Management of local affairs by volunteer citizens for the common good has a long tradition in Portugal. Local councils have been assembling in the Iberian Peninsula since early twelfth century (Coelho, 1986). The current organisation of the Portuguese territory was inherited from the administrative reform of 1835. Citizens with the largest symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1989), representatives of each region's and each regime's most prestigious groups were available to manage local councils in the municipalities they were born into or where they worked. This was considered an effort of civic participation, since it was volunteer and non-remunerated in most municipalities. Throughout the twentieth century, Portuguese municipalities have suffered profound changes with regime transitions: since the Monarchy and during the First Republic (1910-1926) mayors and local councils were elected by an elite group of citizens; during the Estado Novo regime mayors were appointed by central government.

After the 1974 Carnation Revolution, Portugal's transition to democracy was a revolutionary rupture process (Schmitter, O'Donnell, and Whitehead, 1986, Chilcote *et al.*, 1990), in which local elites were completely replaced, both individually and regarding social backgrounds (Almeida, 2017a). Popular mobilisation and civic participation were the strongest in Portuguese history during the 1974-1976 transition period. People gathered and intervened in social and economic areas such as housing, with neighbour committees, house occupations and building new neighbourhoods (Pinto, 2013). There were street gatherings, mobs and violence (Cerezales, 2003), state initiative agrarian reform, with enthusiastic response from rural workers, who organised collective production units, known as cooperatives (Almeida, 2013a) and state intervention in industry, insurance, banks and transportation, with strong popular and workers participation, influenced by the Communist Party and radical left-wing groups (Schmitter, 1999).

1 Available at <http://er.cies.iscte-iul.pt/pt-pt/node/79>

During those two effervescent years, mayors and local councils were replaced with administrative committees composed of volunteers selected locally and officially appointed by the Ministry of the Interior (Almeida, 2013b; Almeida, 2017a). According to Tiago Fernandes, this capacity for popular groups to self-organise is typical of revolutionary pathways to democracy that lead to more inclusive democracies and to greater opportunities and resources for civic action of common people during the subsequent democratic regime. Therefore, citizen participation, particularly in Portuguese local government, not only originates in a remote past, but mostly in the type of democratic transition observed in Portugal. Social revolution has contributed for the quality of democracy, because it has consolidated and institutionalised mechanisms that stimulate mass civic participation, with positive impact on the self-organizing abilities of working and middle-class groups. Democracies born of a revolutionary process tend to provide more opportunities and mechanisms for participation and civic inclusion of the masses in the nation's political life (Fernandes, 2015). The existence of a pluralistic opposition to the dictatorship has generated future revolutionary leaderships prone to empowering emerging popular civil society organizations and a strengthened civil society in the long run (Fernandes and Branco, 2017). Fishman (2019) described Portugal's transition from dictatorship to democracy as a social revolution that inverted hierarchies and reconfigured cultural patterns while also generating thorough political democratization, which had deep consequences for political inclusion and conduct. However, has popular mobilisation from the revolutionary period remained four decades later?

Universal suffrage was introduced and popular commitment was expressed in massive turnout in the first free elections for the Portuguese Parliament one year after the 1974 Revolution: on April 25th, 1975, 91.7% of voters expressed their right to vote. One year later, on April 26th, 1976 first legislative elections, turnout was still a high 83.5% (see figure 1). Presidential elections were on June 27th, 1976 with a turnout of 75.45%. And the first local elections, on December 12th, 1976, had a turnout of 64.7%.

An elected parliament approved a new Constitution in 1976, according to which the Portuguese Republic is a democratic state, based on law and popular sovereignty, on plural speech and democratic political organization, on respect for fundamental rights and freedom, on separation of powers, in view of the fulfilment of economic, social and cultural democracy and deepening of participative democracy (article 2). It established fundamental tasks of the state: to ensure national independence, to defend political democracy and to encourage citizen participation in the resolution of national problems, whether by direct means or through freely elected representatives (articles 9 and 48). It was explicit, since the beginning of the democratic regime, the intention of establishing a participative democracy, which makes the Portuguese Constitution one of the most advanced in Europe regarding this subject (Allegretti and Dias, 2015). Therefore, only with citizen participation, whether directly or indirectly, may democracy fulfil its purpose. Elections substantiate a mechanism of delegation of power from citizens towards their representatives, whereby the latter are committed to their electoral manifestos (Freire, 2015). In sum, reduced civic participation and low turnouts contribute to democratic

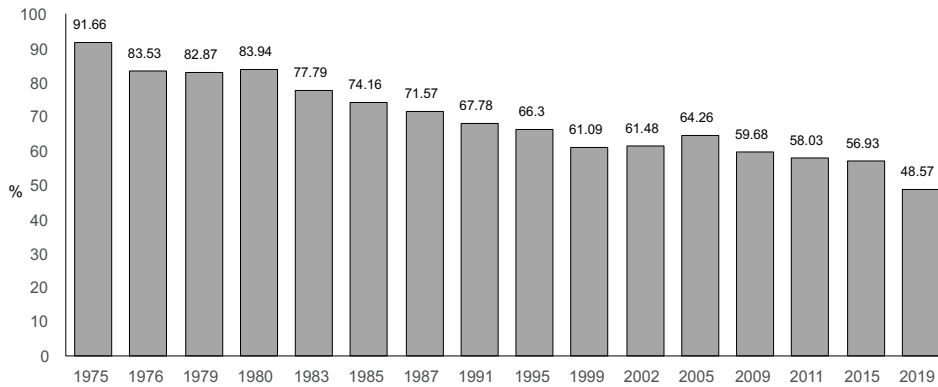


Figure 1 Turnout percentages in elections for Portuguese Parliament, 1975-2019

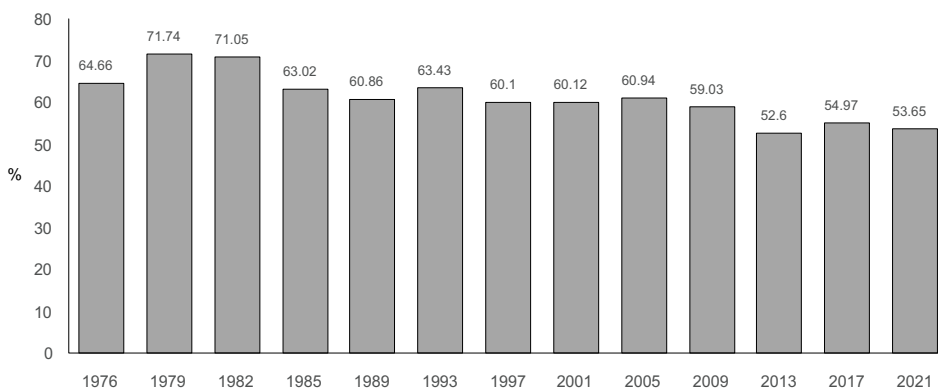


Figure 2 Turnout percentages in Portuguese local elections, 1976-2021

Source: <https://www.eleicoes.mai.gov.pt/>. See also Freire, Martins and Meirinho (2012).

deficit. Concerning local government, the Portuguese democratic regime established administrative decentralization and municipal reinforcement.

Portuguese transition was followed by stabilisation: “from the fiery rapture of a revolutionary transition to the satisfactory (although prosaic) routine of a consolidated democracy” (Schmitter, 1999: 19). In sum, among Southern Europe transitions, Portugal was a “third wave success story” (Schmitter, O’Donnell and Whitehead, 1986; Diamandouros, 1997).

In local government there is now a system of closed party lists and councillors are elected in proportion to electoral results in each of the 308 Portuguese municipalities. There are no intermediate bodies with local and central governments. Elected representatives consist of a mayor and a group of councillors with executive powers,

who administer their own revenues and are submitted to control by a municipal assembly. Local autonomy has become a reality, particularly concerning budgetary, management and construction issues. However, Portugal is still one of the most centralised countries in Europe, with a centralized and bureaucratic state (Magone, 2010; Allegretti and Dias, 2015; Seixas *et al.*, 2016).

After half a century with the Estado Novo regime, a single party dictatorship with non-democratic elections, the introduction of parties in local government was a learning experience for democratic practices, both for voters and for parties (Almeida, 2008). Independent candidacies in transition periods tend to be harmful for the democratization process (Bracanti, 2008). Therefore, the type of transition in Portugal has helped strengthen the party system, which created barriers to independent movements.

Candidates for the Portuguese and European Parliaments must be placed in party lists. In order to be a candidate for President of the Portuguese Republic there is no need for party filiation. Independent candidates, both for parliament and for local government, had been permitted in the 1976 Constitution, but only when they were included in party lists. Citizen groups had only been allowed to contest parish council elections since 1976. However, lists of citizen groups were only permitted for town councils after the 1997 constitutional revision and the 2001 elections were the first to accept them (Law n.º 1/2001, August 14th, 2001).

Another innovation was Law n.º 46/2005, August 29th, 2005: mayors' terms were limited to three (twelve years maximum in office, applied since the 2013 elections). From 1976 to 2013 the average term of office was 8.4 year, or 2.3 mandates. 63 Mayors (5%) completed more than five mandates: they were called "dinosaurs" and two of them reached 37 years in office, or 10 mandates. The 2013 election resulted in the replacement of 63% of mayors (Almeida, 2015). There was a rejuvenation of mayors in Portuguese municipalities: from an average 63.5 years old for mayors who ended their terms in 2013 to 49 years old in newly elected mayors in the same year. Nevertheless, the new group revealed the same sociological characteristics as the one before. Also 64% of them were already councillors for several mandates. There was no total replacement of local political elites in 2013 as there had been after the 1974 Revolution (Almeida, 2017a). Instead, there is a reproduction of local elites caused by demographic and sociological criteria and by party interests, whose access is restricted.

Regarding the gender issue, local government has still a long way to go. On the first 1976 elections 15 women were elected members of Parliament (5.7%) and only 5 women were elected mayors (1.6%). These figures have been growing, particularly since the introduction of a parity law in 2006, first applied in the 2009 general and local elections (Law n.º 3/2006, August 21st, 2006, by a socialist government), which enforced a 33% minimum for each gender in candidates' lists. It was widely discussed at the time and it is still controversial, particularly regarding the merit criteria (Santos, Amâncio and Alves, 2013), even though it did produce immediate effects in women's election to MP positions.

As may be observed in figure 3, women in local government are increasing at a much slower pace than in Parliament: on the 2013 local elections only 22 women

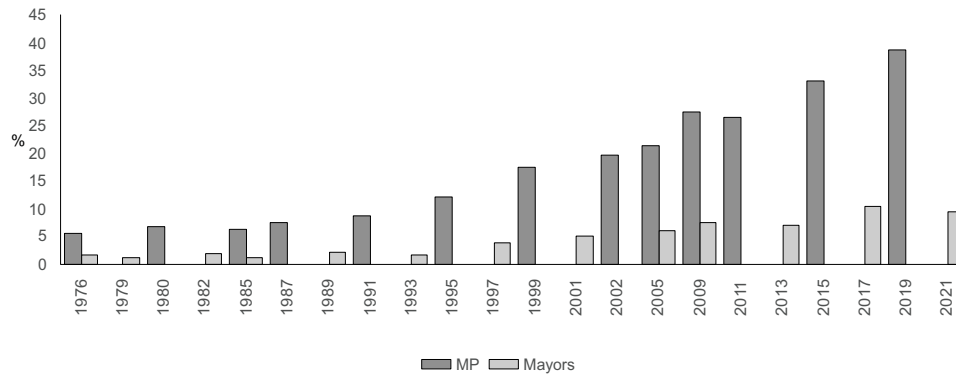


Figure 3 Percentage of women elected Members of Parliament and Mayors

Source: <https://www.eleicoes.mai.gov.pt/> and Almeida (2018a).

mayors were elected (7.1%), whereas on Parliament 33% of elected MPs in 2015 were women. In 2017 the number of elected women mayors has grown to 32, rising the percentage to 10.4, 18 of them with the Socialist Party (56.3%). 75 women were appointed vice-president within the local council (24.4%). In a sum of 2,072 elected councillors, 610 were women (29.4%). However, these figures are still far from the required third, because women are indeed placed in candidates' lists, abiding by the law, but not in mayor eligible positions (Almeida, 2018a). Definitely the gender composition of parliaments and local councils is slowly changing in order to include more women and it was demonstrated that issues surrounding concerns with women's interests and with the quality of democracy are strongly related to a desire for a gender equilibrated political environment (Espírito-Santo, 2016).

The issue of centralization versus decentralization is also on the political agenda. There was a centralization trend as a result of a European funds intervention in Portugal. The right-wing coalition government (2011-2015), with a huge debt to deal with, went beyond troika induced austerity measures and largely surpassed European impositions. The goal was to concentrate power in their hands and debt was a strong argument presented to counter opponents of their proposed reforms (Moury and Standring, 2017). Crisis, strong government intervention and "austerity measures deeply disrupted social, economic, and territorial fabrics as well as the fundamentals of inclusive and sustainably driven societies". Within this context, citizen reactions and new forms of protest arose. "The growing disaffection with politics seems to parallel an emergence of civic participation and protests": protests against austerity measures have been organised since 2011 by non-party organisations, such as "Que se Lixe a Troika" (Seixas, *et al.*, 2016), in which some traditional actors such as unions and left wing parties assumed leadership roles and managed to attract new supporters (Accornero and Pinto, 2014).

Regarding local government, there was an administrative reform which reduced the number of parishes from 4,260 to 3,092 in 2013 (Laws n.º 22/2012, May 30th, 2012, and n.º 11-A/2013, January 28th, 2013). In Lisbon there were 53 parishes. Now there are only 24, after Law n.º 56/2012, November 8th, 2012. Some of them were quite depopulated, but this reform has left many territories unprotected, particularly in rural and remote areas, because the parish is the lowest level of government and in their case the only form of state intervention. Together with parishes, many post-offices, state healthcare facilities, schools, courts of law and bank agencies were closed in the smallest Portuguese villages, all in the name of austerity measures. Crisis and government actions have had negative impacts in cities and rural areas (Baumgarten, 2017): marginal regions have become even more remote and their populations are increasingly more vulnerable. Problems of territorial structure and huge differences between dynamic cities and depressed rural areas also reveal a crisis of the social security regime (Rosanvallon, 2011). And they offend constitutional principles of economic, social and territorial cohesion, territorial planning and sustainable development, defined by the Portuguese Constitution as fundamental state duties. This centralization trend was not a consensual process which is now being reevaluated and, in some cases, reversed.

The crisis and its management had an impact on political participation. Regardless of a populist trend which has created conditions for extreme-right electoral victories in some European countries, the United States of America and Brazil, in Portugal economic crisis and right-wing policies have resulted in a centre-left turn in politics: the Socialist Party formed a new government in 2015 (for a discussion on this period, see Lisi, Freire and Tsatsanis, 2020), with the support of left-wing parties, and some mistrust there might have been on traditional parties promoted the rise of independent local lists in the 2017 elections.

The new socialist government has a decentralization policy. Other than reevaluating the administrative reform and considering dividing some of the parishes which were united, there were several government functions reassigned to municipalities. Municipal autonomy regarding territorial and service management was reinforced. Particularly in areas such as education and health and public heritage buildings out of use, whose responsibility and possession were assigned to the municipalities, as well as many roads and public infrastructures. Beaches were managed by the Navy (the Ministry of Defence) and they are now under municipal responsibility.

This decentralization has been performed in a context of general cost reductions, decreasing public investment and lowering structural expenses. Under these circumstances, many municipalities are refusing to assume these new responsibilities for lack of funds. The main argument is: in a crisis context, which level of municipal autonomy is possible beyond emergency responses and reactive policies? How is it possible to combine an ambitious strategic vision with the decrease of structural funds and investments? This is an ambiguous question which prevails and shall be an important theme in the next election campaigns and political manifestos.

In the last four decades of regular elections and party competition, many positive goals were achieved, such as social diversification of local elites and formation

of new ones (Almeida, 2017a), as well as internationalization of local government, with partnerships with municipalities from other countries. From the early years of Portugal's integration in the European Union, in 1986, European funds were distributed for infrastructure development and huge construction works in every municipality. Recently, focus on local government policies has switched to other values: considering changes in rural areas and huge crisis related to industrial disinvestment and relocation to unregulated markets, which have created unemployment and depopulation, all over the country there are massive investments in services and tourism related activities, both in big cities and rural areas. Heritage and patrimony have become commodities which are being advertised and sold as attraction strategies, together with landscape, arts and crafts and our unpolluted environment (Almeida, 2017b).

Transparency and the use of ICT

There are new levels of transparency in most town halls' websites. Considering trust is one of the pillars of the democratic system, both national and local (Fitzgerald and Wolak, 2016), transparency plays a vital role "to promote accountability and prevent maladministration" (Cruz, *et al.*, 2016), as well as it increases trust and citizen satisfaction with public services, thereby contributing to developing policies aimed at curtailing corruption (Park and Blenkinsopp, 2011). There is evidence that ICT and social media are seen by many as a cost-effective and convenient means to promote openness and transparency, to reduce corruption and to enhance citizen satisfaction with public services (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010; Park and Blenkinsopp, 2011). With growing distrust in government, transparency is now proposed as the solution (Grimmelikhuijsen *et al.*, 2013) and e-government is now seen as a way to increase citizen trust in government and improve citizen evaluations of government generally. Since there is a statistically significant relationship between trust and use of local government websites (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006), a content analysis of these e-government tools has provided an important tool for this study. Trust between citizens is developed and maintained by the e-government platforms to enhance the perception of citizens about transparency (Nulhusna *et al.*, 2017). Open data and e-government platforms like social media may have an important role in getting the public involved with government bodies to have easy access to relevant and timely information resulting in a higher level of trust among citizens (Al-Aufi *et al.*, 2017; Tavares and Cruz, 2017; Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín and Caba-Pérez, 2018; Parker and Bradley, 2000; Beshi and Kaur, 2020; Arshad and Khurram, 2020).

Nowadays, every Portuguese municipality has a website. Regrettably, they are not all customised, nor standardised, and they offer very few possibilities for citizen participation (Dias, 2015). How the municipalities use their official websites varies randomly. In Portugal, there is a non-governmental organization which has been analysing local government transparency, with tools such as the Municipal Transparency Index (ITM, <https://transparencia.pt/itm/>). It has provided statistics

for 76 items on municipal websites, since 2010 (Sousa *et al.*, 2013; Cruz *et al.*, 2016). This index has already proven to be effective regarding each municipality's position in its ranking: in response, some local representatives have improved their websites' information and their data displaying strategies. In 2017, two municipalities reached 90.7% in the ITM ranking: Alfândega da Fé and Vila do Bispo. Only fourteen municipalities reached 80% and 150 do not comply with at least 50% of the ITM items. This data proves that the use of ICT does not improve the quality of democracy by itself, but it may contribute to empower citizens regarding monitoring and participation in local government. As far as transparency is concerned, our research has revealed that only 55.2% of municipal websites display their mayors' biographies and 96% publish council meetings official records. There is still some work to be done regarding councillors' income declarations (only 8.4% display them) and financial transparency (for more statistics see Tavares and Sousa, 2018; Rodríguez-Navas and Breijo, 2019). Definitely a high percentage of municipal representatives don't believe in the concept of open data. Since democracy implies visibility and access to information, and government and municipal websites play a major role in improving communication, citizen participation and mutual trust (Hivon and Titah, 2017), this behaviour constitutes an obstacle to citizen participation.

Mayors elected within citizen groups in Portugal

In a political party strong environment, citizen groups have been a negligible factor: their first result in 2001 was the election a mere two mayors (0.6%). Low results by independent candidates in local elections are proof of the consolidation of the Portuguese party system (Bracanti, 2008; Almeida, 2008). Or they may be interpreted as a sign that there is neither legitimacy crisis in the Portuguese political system, nor vitality (Norris, 2011). But these results also express the problems and barriers that citizen groups face when presenting their lists for elections. Starting with the habits of participation acquired during the revolutionary period: "any newcomer group to politics has a hard time breaking in [...] it is significant at all levels" (Thomas and Wilcox, 2014: 1-26). To make matters worse, there is a culture of invitations for lists, practiced within parties and political organizations in general. And younger generations, who should be more susceptible to change, are less mobilised towards institutional forms of political participation, resulting in lower turnouts of this age group (Freire and Magalhães, 2002; Magalhães, 2005). Parties present clear and pre-established manifestos: newcomers have a harder time explaining ideology or new programs. In a more practical approach, citizen groups have lower campaign budgets and funding than party candidates and less media coverage (Bracanti, 2008).

The result is that most elected representatives in citizen groups were not independent: they were party dissidents, in small rural municipalities. Regarding education, professional paths and social background, they were the same as all other mayors. This was their general description until the 2013 elections brought about significant innovations, when 13 mayors were elected within citizen groups (4.2% of the municipalities) (see table 1 and figure 4).

Table 1 Mayors elected within citizen groups, 2001-2021

Election year	Numbers	Percentages
2001	2	0,6
2005	7	2,3
2009	7	2,3
2013	13	4,2
2017	17	5,5
2021	19	6,2

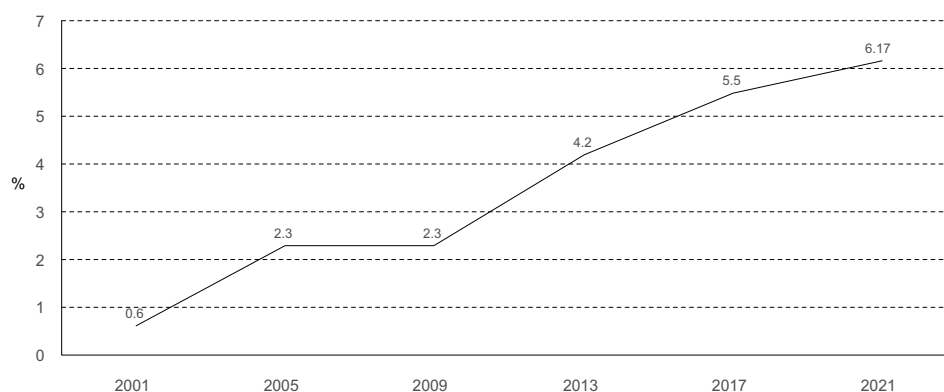


Figure 4 Percentage of mayors elected within citizen groups in Portuguese municipalities

Source: <https://www.eleicoes.mai.gov.pt/> and Almeida (2016).

Mayors elected within citizen groups have had political paths within the party system, including, in many cases, mayor in the same municipality. They possessed a pre-established social and political capital which granted them access to the election, beyond the usual barriers that independent candidates face: “considerable organizational and financial support, as well as strong name recognition [...] Many independents are political insiders who previously participated in the government as members of particular political parties or the government bureaucracy” (Bracanti, 2008: 650).

In 2005 citizen groups have won elections in large urban municipalities in Porto and Lisbon suburbs: Gondomar and Oeiras. And then in 2013 another three mayors within citizen groups were elected in large municipalities: Porto, Portalegre and Matosinhos. Independent candidacies have been increasing in municipalities with higher levels of education and income (Sousa and Maia, 2017), and are in effect challenging the local party system (Jalali, 2014). Winning in large urban centres, where there is a large concentration of voters, means conquering a part of the country’s social and territorial vanguard (Freire, 2014).

The mayor of the second Portuguese city, Porto, elected in 2013, is Rui Moreira, a businessman, a sportsman and the manager of his family's shipping company. He was one of the first citizen group elected mayors with neither previous party affiliation, nor a career in local government. This candidacy had a huge media coverage and its victory benefited from a clear transfer of votes from the two right-wing parties. In 2013 there were other five mayors elected within citizen groups who had previously been elected with the centre-right party PSD. This was the result of a right-wing split or just a way for these mayor candidates to detach themselves from the right-wing coalition government, whose image was in very poor shape at the time (Freire, 2014).

Only two women were elected mayor within these groups: an engineer in Anadia and a teacher in Portalegre, both in cities located in rural areas. From a universe of 13 mayors there were two engineers, three teachers (one of them also a lawyer), one sociologist, three managers, two municipal clerks, one shop owner and one factory worker. This list doesn't differ from the average mayors' professions in the democratic period in Portugal, particularly in rural areas (Almeida, 2017a).

Since then citizen groups have been a growing political force, which now occupies a honourable fourth place in the political spectrum, with 6.8% of the votes nationwide on the 2017 local elections, and mayors in 5.5% of the municipalities. The main features of the 17 mayors elected in 2017 within citizen groups are as follows. Most of them present political manifestos based on anti-party messages and decentralization, against central government interference in local government. Rural municipalities still prevail, but a sixth urban municipality has joined the group: Vila do Conde. Twelve mayors were re-elected and four were newly elected, three of them are women. And then there is one who had previously been a dinosaur: in Oeiras, Isaltino de Morais, a lawyer and magistrate, was a mayor for 18 years with the centre-right party PSD. Then he was a minister in a PSD government. When he was charged with corruption, in 2005, he was expelled from his party. With a citizen group he was once again mayor in Oeiras for another eight years (2005-2013). He was then arrested. When he left prison, he won again in 2017 within another citizen group. This political path is not the rule. Unfortunately, the public image of Isaltino de Morais has become a sort of paradigm of the independent mayors: corrupt, party dissident, and many other negative associations which create the worst possible portrait of local government in Portugal. To make matters worse, Oeiras is an urban municipality with high incomes and high levels of professional and educated voters. Many have tried and failed to explain this phenomenon.

We may only conclude that the problems associated with corruption and lack of transparency in Portuguese municipalities are equal throughout the political spectrum. According to Sousa (2011) and Piattoni (2001), there is a History of institutional failure and unfair governance practices. Corruption and patronage have been persistent features in local government, both in Southern European and Latin American countries (Carvalho, 1997), which were inherited from earlier regimes (Sobral and Almeida, 1982). There have been several corruption cases in court which have led to the conviction of mayors and councillors. These cases, which do not account for most local government representatives, have press coverage and

promote a general image which undermines democratic institutions and results in disinterest and low turnouts. On the one hand, corruption is generally accepted: in a 2006 pool, 53% of the Portuguese population accepted corruption as long as it was practiced for a fair cause (Sousa and Triães, 2008); there is also the general idea that in local government people shall vote for a corrupt candidate as long as he or she does the job and produce results (Sousa *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, negative and unwanted behaviour by some mayors has clearly compromised local government and the party system. The lack of trust in politicians caused a crisis in representative democracy: all over Europe low turnouts are a problem, as well as low levels of involvement in traditional institutions, such as parties, unions and churches (Freire and Baum, 2001; Baumgarten, 2015). Anyway, “democracy will definitely survive, but only by changing. What these changes will be, however, is by no means clear” (Schmitter, 2015: 33).

Turnout in municipalities where citizen groups won the elections

Turnout in Portuguese local elections is quite low (figure 2). Current Prime Minister António Costa described this as “low turnout disbeliefs” (Freire, 2017). However, it is higher in small rural municipalities (Freire, Martins and Meirinho, 2012) with older demographics, lower education levels and lower incomes. This may be explained with the fact that local government in those municipalities has a larger influence in people’s lives, in terms of employment and services (Sousa and Maia, 2017). And it is related to elderly people’s voting habits, acquired as a revolutionary conquest after the dictatorship, which younger people in Portugal don’t value as much as their grandparents.

There is a “global dissatisfaction with politics” and a cycle of “disengagement and disenchantment” with democracy going on. Probably because citizens just don’t care: people lack faith in the system and “without some faith, some system loyalty, politics cannot function” (Stoker, 2006: 32-33). According to the European Social Survey data for 2012, Portugal is placed last in citizens’ interest in politics (Belchior, 2015). There is a crisis in representative democracy because of the loss of confidence in politicians and the financial crisis made this disengagement worse (Baumgarten, 2015).

After huge turnouts at the beginning of the democratic regime, in the 2013 local elections only 52.6% of voters used their right to vote: this was an all-time low, and a 6.4 points reduction from 59% in the latest 2009 elections. And in the 2015 general elections there was only a 56.9% turnout. However, turnouts have increased in municipalities where new candidates applied for office. Those were the ones with old mayors who had to leave because of the law that limited terms to three. Turnouts were also higher in municipalities with citizen group candidacies (Veiga and Veiga, 2017), where “owing to increased choice for the voters, the presence of nonpartisan lists increases voter turnout” (Tavares, Raudla and Silva, 2020: 955). The average turnout in municipalities where citizen groups won in 2013 was 59.3%, almost 7 percentage points higher than the national average. Average

turnout in the 2017 local elections rose to 55% nationwide and in municipalities where citizen groups won this average was 61%: 6 points higher. These numbers prove that legislative innovation, both regarding limitation of mandates and the introduction of new independent lists, may improve voters' turnouts and political participation (Freire, Martins and Meirinho, 2012).

Urban municipalities had lower turnouts, even where citizen groups won: in 2017 Porto's turnout was 53.7% and Oeiras' was 55.8%. Apparently, the largest the city, the least civic participation (Tavares and Carr, 2013).

New forms of citizen engagement at the local level

The most elementary form of citizen participation in a democratic state and in the political process is to vote. It is the most legitimate and direct, the most democratic and equalitarian of all political participation. It's important for voters to be aware of political manifestos and electoral programs, which elected representative should abide by and are committed to fulfil. The voters' duty is to observe their representatives' job and reward or punish them in the following elections. In a democratic state, the rule of law and corruption prevention are influenced by citizen capacity to scrutinise local executives and by the consequences of their evaluations in electoral choices (Tavares and Sousa, 2018).

The second most important form is being a candidate to representative office. As a complement, citizen participation also includes control of the political process and of the actions of elected representatives, beyond institutional organs of control and defence of democratic legality, such as courts of law and police forces (defined as sovereign organs by the Constitution). Citizens have the right and moral obligation to denounce incorrect or illegal situations. In order to do that, they should be well informed and aware of every process, both by direct observation and through the media. They also need to understand the procedures for contestation.

Other forms of popular involvement in local government, which play an important role in the consolidation of democratic values and practices, are calls for referendums (Freire and Baum, 2001), popular legislative initiatives, volunteer citizen participation in municipal assembly meetings, direct interpellation of the local council and neighbourhood associations with consultation and execution capacities (Sousa, 2015). Unfortunately, most citizens are unaware of these practices and they are not widely used. Particularly the participation in municipal assembly meetings (Tavares and Sousa, 2018), because people are aware that these assemblies have limited competences and there is little trust in its effective decisions and inspection capacities (Sousa and Grilo, 2018). Other practices may be defined as direct democracy and they include participative budgets, decentralized local council meetings, message boxes in town halls' websites for direct communication between councillors and citizens and some cases of youth encouragement. Alternative forms of collaboration and partnership building may reflect on citizen engagement and maximize citizen participation in public administration, increasing "sound governance" (Farazmand, 2012).

Participative budgets are an example of how government may delegate the design and the choice of public policies, since citizens are their authors and prime targets. They were a success in citizen participation since they were first introduced in the municipality of Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, after a leftist coalition won local elections the year before. The model was applied successfully in the state of Santa Catarina and in other municipalities in Brazil, before it was exported to other Latin American countries, to Europe and North America (Lüchmann, Falanga and Nicolleti, 2018). In Portugal participative budgets were first applied in the municipality of Palmela, South of Lisbon, in 2002, followed by Sesimbra, in 2006. And then Lisboa was the first European capital to try this model, in 2008. Other municipalities of Lisbon's metropolitan area have also applied participative budgets, such as Odivelas, in 2008, Cascais and Amadora, in 2011, and Oeiras, in 2012. In 2009 and 2013 the model was applied mostly by socialist municipalities, followed by the Social Democrat Party and the Communist Party (Lüchmann, Falanga and Nicolleti, 2018). Three municipalities with citizen groups' majorities have also applied it, which represents almost half of them in 2009 and almost a quarter in 2013. The practice has grown to 86 municipalities in 2013 (29.7%), with an average 3.7% of the municipalities' budget allocated to it (Tavares and Sousa, 2018), and in 2017 it reached 180: 58.4% of all municipalities.

In Lisbon, from 2008 to 2017, there were 6,204 participative budget proposals; 1,957 projects were subject to vote and 120 of them won; 268,536 votes were counted, and 33,805,668 euros were spent on them. And in Cascais, a Lisbon seashore suburb, two participative budgets were applied: a normal one for voters and a special one for the youth. The goal is to create roots for citizenship practices. 2.8 million euros have already been spent on approved projects and a special department was created to manage new forms of citizen participation. A digital platform was also created in 2018 in order to reward good practices in areas such as the environment, citizenship, social responsibility and sustainable mobility. Other municipalities have followed this practice of participative budgets for the youth (Vieira, Ferreira and Pinho, 2017).

Participative budgets have been considered a reference in participative innovation in Portugal, because of high levels of participation and their effective results, which have produced satisfaction, at least within the groups of citizens who were an active part of the process. Some mayors and councillors have realised their advantages regarding local policy design and voter satisfaction. This device has been a re-election factor, because it has encouraged civil society towards political participation.

Decentralized local council meetings are a regular practice in several municipalities, particularly in Lisbon, where councillors assemble in different parishes, with a previous notice for citizens to apply for interventions. Some municipalities are integrating citizen initiatives into their political programs. For example, a citizen platform achieved a certification for waves to be considered public interest in the Figueira da Foz beach (<http://soscabedelo.blogspot.com/p/about.html>). It was a surf area and this group fought against the silting of a bay, which would destroy the waves for surf. They presented a project and those waves were considered public interest not only for the surf community, but for citizens and tourists.

Afterword, the certification was extended to nearby beaches with similar waves: Nazaré and Ericeira. Nowadays, those and other municipalities have incorporated waves into their political programs and public discourses. For example the municipality of Peniche calls itself the “Capital of the Wave” and the mayor is a recognised surfer (<http://www.cm-peniche.pt/>).

All these forms of citizen participation require social and educational resources. Therefore they are exclusive to a certain elite, and they are not available to a large part of the population who doesn't have the social skills or the required time to engage in them. That is one of the most challenging problems of participative democracy, because it reproduces pre-existing social inequalities. Particularly because it aims (and most participants are) upper social classes and more educated groups of society. Other than time and financial and job-related problems, a fundamental barrier to the participation of people with lower levels of education is language: the technic terms used in public speech are difficult. As a result, for example, in a citizen participation page on the Lisbon municipality site, three quarters of the participants have a college education. There is profound scepticism regarding the opportunities for citizen participation in the democratic process (Lisi, Marchi and Evans, 2013).

Regarding incentives for youth political participation, schools have already been contributing to youth education regarding political issues for decades, by promoting elections for students' representatives. There is also the Parliament of the Youth, a special program of the Portuguese Parliament approved in 2006, aimed at school children from 10 to 18 years old, which encourages students from the 5th to the 12th grade to learn the political and legislative process and to participate in political debates first in their own schools and finally in the House of Parliament itself. This program focuses on education for citizenship and political participation, as well as teaching how the Parliament functions and the rules of political debate. It promotes sessions in the Parliament for schoolchildren who win school elections promoted within this program (<http://www.jovens.parlamento.pt/>). This is a major step in political practice and sometimes it is also a ground for party recruitment.

One Portuguese municipality has applied the principle of stimulating youth civic participation not only as voters, but also as political representatives. In Santa Maria da Feira, near Porto, the municipality has promoted a “Young Councillor” project, inspired by Lewisham, London's “Young Mayor” model. The goal was to provide experience of municipality management to young people. In sum, several high school candidates campaigned for their electoral programs. There was propaganda and school debates. As a result, one 17 year old girl was elected in 2015 and another 15 year old girl in 2016. Both were given a one year mandate, a 10,000 euro budget and an 18 member team to manage. According to the mayor of Santa Maria da Feira, Emídio Sousa, this policy was quite successful: “Its major accomplishment is to get young people to think about politics where they live, in their homeland, their neighbourhood [...] who knows, maybe future election turnouts shall grow” (Almeida, 2016: 65).

Not only turnout may grow, but female representation, particularly at the local level. There is a strong probability that experiences such as these shall transform

local societies and preferably local party representatives, whose party committees should start to pay attention to the most skilled members of their municipalities. Candidates' profile has to change in order to insert women into eligible places in electoral lists.

Discussion

Recent innovations in the Portuguese local government have definitely produced results, both regarding incentives to vote and citizen participation. This is true for central government initiatives in changing laws — limitation of mandates, citizen groups and parity law — and for local government practices to encourage direct democracy. Considering the data and turnout results in municipalities where citizen groups have won elections, there are some improvements in turnout and democratic practices, but these independent mayors haven't yet proven themselves to be an alternative to discredited local government institutions. Most of them are not new to the party system and their political paths, programs, messages and actions do not differ from the rest of the Portuguese local government universe. However, the introduction of independent candidacies has been a boost for rotation in local government and some local elites' renewal, as well as heightening competition levels (Sousa and Maia, 2017).

Citizen participation in the political process is a reality in the Portuguese local government and several tools are in place to make it effective. However, their use is still incipient and reserved for a small portion of the society. Some actions could be put in place to encourage more civic responsibility and political participation, such as incentives to vote and to report, to denounce and to express approval regarding situations that affect the quality of life of the people. This is a job for schools, the media and civil society organizations.

The gender issue is still a problem at the local level, even with a parity law. Considering the constraints that political parties put on women candidates, they could consider moving forward and away from traditional party structures and run as independent citizen groups' leaders.

Other factors could contribute to improve traditional practices, such as active and engaged local media and enlightened civil society. Also, the formation of groups and associations outside the party system devoted to attracting voters back to the electoral process. And the formation and education of new local elites committed to the improvement of their territories and to the defence of local interests, of their citizens' quality of life and their material and immaterial heritage. Only engaged citizens may contribute to fight the present trend towards disinvestment and depopulation, particularly in rural areas. And citizen participation in local government is a strong warranty for the enforcement of democratic practices.

There was indeed an impact of institutional innovations in local representative democracy, as well as new forms of citizen participation in traditional institutions of representative democracy and in arenas where citizens and politicians

engage with each other. Independent local lists were a specific innovative measure to improve representative democracy.

Regarding the existing literature, this analysis of practical results and case studies may contribute to encouraging new research on local government and other contributions to the subject of transparency and the quality of local democracy.

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