Voting during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis: the effects of risk perception and government performance. The 2021 Portuguese presidential election took place during a peak of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This unprecedent context led to the expectation of a very low turnout. Furthermore, the incumbent was declared in advance as the undisputed winner, which also contributed to this expectation. If, on the one hand, turnout was not as dramatically low as anticipated, on the other hand, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa was unsurprisingly re-elected by a wide margin. Given this exceptional environment, the question we pose is: to what extent has the pandemic crisis affected turnout and the election result? We argue that it will have negatively affected turnout (due to voters' fear of being infected), and will have positively contributed to the incumbent's re-election (due to voters' positive performance evaluations of the government in the face of the crisis). We support our analysis on a representative survey of the Portuguese voters, fielded right after the election was held.
KEYWORDS: Presidential election; COVID-19; turnout; electoral behavior; risk perception; government performance; Portugal.

Eleições durante o pico da COVID-19: os efeitos da perceção de risco e do desempenho do governo. As eleições presidenciais portuguesas de 2021 decorreram durante o pico da crise pandémica da COVID-19. Previa-se uma reduzida afluência às urnas por causa do contexto epidemiológico inédito e porque o titular do cargo era visto, antecipadamente, como vencedor indiscutível das eleições. Se, por um lado, a afluência às urnas não foi tão dramaticamente baixa como se previa, por outro, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa foi reeleito, sem surpresa, por uma larga margem. Dado o ambiente excecional em que estas eleições decorreram, a questão que colocamos é a seguinte: em que medida é que a crise pandémica afetou a afluência às urnas e o resultado das eleições? Argumentamos que terá afetado negativamente a afluência às urnas (devido ao receio dos eleitores de serem infetados) e que terá contribuído positivamente para a reeleição do titular do cargo (devido às avaliações positivas do seu desempenho face à crise). A nossa análise baseia-se num inquérito representativo dos eleitores portugueses, realizado logo após as eleições.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Eleições presidenciais; COVID-19; participação eleitoral; comportamento eleitoral; perceção de risco; desempenho do governo; Portugal.

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Voting during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis: the effects of risk perception and government performance

At the time of the election (January 24, 2021), Portugal was slowly starting to recover from the most rampant surge in new daily cases of COVID-19 infections. This generated an increased fear of breaking records in electoral abstention in presidential elections, in which electoral mobilization is typically low (Jalali, 2012). In addition, the electoral campaign was marked by high anticipation of who the winner of the election would be. Low competitiveness is also common in these elections, especially when the incumbent runs for a second term (Jalali, 2012), as was the case in 2021. Since the beginning of the campaign, the incumbent, the former leader of the PSD (the center right-wing party) Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, was solidly positioned to renew his mandate first round. Although the electoral campaign was decidedly marked by the pandemic context in which it took place (Luís, 2021; Serra-Silva and Santos, 2022), little is known about its substantive effect in electoral outcomes. The question we want to answer is, therefore: to what extent has the pandemic crisis affected election results, either in terms of turnout or in terms of vote choice?

Prior research suggests that disputing elections during pandemic crisis likely decreases turnout (Fernandez-Navia, Polo-Muro and Tercero-Lucas, 2020; Picchio and Santolini, 2021), also affecting the vote, either by punishing the incumbent (Clarke, Stewart and Ho, 2021; Baccini, Brodeur and Weymouth, 2021), or rewarding him/her (Leininger and Schaub, 2020), depending on how the public perceives the performance of the incumbent during said crisis. This research has mainly focused on measures of crisis intensity (e.g. the number of infections or deaths), and not really on individual's experience with the pandemic. We intend to take a step forward in this literature by examining how

much the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on individuals (measured by the individuals' risk perception and policy performance evaluations) helps explaining voters' choices (in terms of turnout and voting preferences). That is, how turnout was harmfully affected by the pandemic context, and how the incumbent benefited from this context.

The study of the 2021 Portuguese presidential election is pertinent to test our theoretical expectations for two main reasons. First, by studying this election we are able to assess the extent to which risk perceptions in relation to COVID-19 affects electoral participation, given that these elections took place during the peak of the crisis in Portugal. This was a moment when the feeling of threat caused by the disease was certainly amplified, with Portugal being, at the time, the country with the highest rate of new infections and deaths in the world: on January 17, it had the world's highest rate of infections, and on election day (24), it reached a record with more than 1200 cases per million people in a single day.[1] We expect that the increased risk perception underlying this moment has had a negative effect on turnout.

Second, this election also allows to measure the effect of voters' evaluations of the policy response to the crisis in voting preferences. In Portugal, this response was characterized by a strong harmony between the government and the president, which justifies supporting our analysis in the evaluation of the government's performance as a measure of the policy response to the pandemic crisis (the evaluation of the president's performance is not considered by data unavailability). Although the minority status of the government could had led the president to reinforce his role (Frain, 1995), or lead to conflict (Protsyk, 2006), as his term was spent in cohabitation, the president's relationship with the government was guided by close cooperation (Sá, 2017), in particular after the emergence of the pandemic (Henriques, 2021; Barbosa, 2021).[2] Thus, Rebelo de Sousa's first term may be institutionally considered a prime example of fruitful cohabitation since the conflict between the president and the prime minister was practically absent and cooperation visibly prevailed. An additional indicator of the institutional affinity between the two leaders was the decision of the ruling party (PS, the Socialist Party) of not presenting a candidate to this presidential election, tacitly supporting the incumbent (Francisco, 2020). Thus, based on these elections, we can test the

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1   See at: https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus.

2   Despite keeping his promise of providing stability, during his first term Rebelo de Sousa vetoed 23 bills and decrees – just two fewer than his predecessor Cavaco Silva during his 10-year tenure – and sent two other decrees to the Constitutional Court. However, out of his 23 vetoes, 19 targeted assembly-initiated bills, and only four were directed towards government decrees.

expectation that a positive assessment of the policy response to the pandemic crisis – measured as the government's response – has contributed to the re-election of the incumbent president.

Furthermore, as little work has been devoted to the importance of a pandemics on the electoral outcome outside the US (among the few exceptions, see for example: Giommoni and Loumeau, 2020; Gutierrez, Meriläinen and Rubli, 2021), we also intend to contribute to the literature by analyzing a different and not yet studied case, the Portuguese one; in specific, the Portuguese presidential election of 2021.

We start by offering a brief overview of the Portuguese president's powers. After that, we systematize the most relevant literature on the effect of a pandemic crisis on electoral results, as well as on the factors affecting vote choices in the Portuguese presidential elections, and then present our hypotheses. Afterwards, the data and methods in use are enunciated. Finally, our findings are presented and discussed. The article closes with a section on the main conclusions and implications of our research.

THE EXERCISE OF POWER BY THE PORTUGUESE PRESIDENT: AN OVERVIEW

Presidential elections in Portugal are held in a single electoral college, covering continental Portugal, the two islands – Azores and Madeira – as well as, since 1997, the Portuguese emigrants. These are majority elections, relying on a second round if no candidate gets 50 percent or more of the votes in the first round. Despite having important prerogatives (Neto and Lobo, 2009; Jalali, 2011), as the head of the state has no executive power, presidential elections are mainly deemed as second-order (Reif and Schmitt, 1980, p. 8; 1997, p. 117).

Portugal is considered a semi-presidential system; that is, a system in which "both a directly elected fixed-term president and a prime-minister who is responsible to the legislature" coexist (Elgie, 2005, p. 100). Given the narrow powers of the president over the cabinet, it is considered a semi-presidential system of the premier-presidential subtype (Shugart, 2006). There is, however, a dispute around the degree of semi-presidentialism in Portugal. Some argue that, following the 1982 constitutional amendment, the president held no more than the normal powers of a parliamentary president (Pereira, 1984), as political leadership has since then almost unfailingly rested with the prime-minister (Fernandes and Jalali, 2017, p. 122). Others, conversely, maintain that Portugal is a semi-presidential democracy, where the president retains significant powers (Frain, 1995), albeit having seen his formal prerogatives

weakened as a consequence of the 1982 constitution amendment (Neto and Lobo, 2009; Lijphart, 2012, p. 110).

Apart from the constitutionally provisioned powers, such as to dismiss the government (article 133, g), dissolve the parliament (article 133, e), or to veto laws (article 136), different factors influence the reach of presidential prerogatives: the popularity of the head of state, with popular presidents having more leeway to set the agenda (Fernandes and Jalali, 2017), the relation with the government, with cohabitation increasingly weakening the president's role (Protsyk, 2006; Cruz, 1994), and the international context, such as observed during the 2011 economic crisis (Freire and Santana Pereira, 2018). Despite being constitutionally consecrated, presidential functions depend to a large extent on the way in which the elected president chooses to exercise them. In this sense, Portuguese presidents oscillate between being more or less interventionists, allowing more or less protagonism to the parliament (Cruz, 1994).

THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON TURNOUT

The surgency of the pandemic in early 2020 paved way to renewed interest in the impact of external shocks in voters' behavior, with many studies focusing on electoral participation. In general, as for prior pandemics, such as influenza outbursts in regional elections in Finland and the USA (Urbatsch, 2017), or Ebola in US 2014 midterm elections (Campante, Depetris-Chauvin and Durante, 2020), lower level of turnout is generally associated to the spread of the COVID-19 disease (Fernandez-Navia, Polo-Muro and Tercero-Lucas, 2020; Picchio and Santolini, 2021). In particular, turnout tends to decrease when infectious diseases are locally in place (Urbatsch, 2017; Vázquez Carrero et al., 2020). The plausible explanation for this is that, as rational actors, voters only decide to cast a ballot if the costs of voting are affordable (Downs, 1957). Under a pandemic, voters may decide to abstain due to fear of contracting the virus, thus avoiding contact with others, as at the polling place (Vázquez Carrero et al., 2020; Campante, Depetris-Chauvin and Durante, 2020). Consistently, turnout seems to decline more among the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic – that is, the oldest (Joe, 2022). This is a legitimate concern, as COVID-19 infections have been shown to increase after electoral campaigns (Cipullo and Le Moglie, 2022).

However, results are not entirely consistent. Counterintuitively, some researchers found no evidence that COVID-19 cases affect voters' mobilization, but quite the reverse: the incidence of the disease seems to boost turnout (Frank, Stadelmann and Torgler, 2020; Giommoni and Loumeau, 2020; Baccini, Brodeur and Weymouth, 2021, pp. 761-762).

A limitation of this prior research is that it was mainly based on the crisis intensity (measured as the number of infections or of deaths) as an explaining factor of turnout, paying much less attention to how individuals relate to the disease. That is, so far there is little evidence whether perceived health risks of going to the polls affect voter turnout. This seems to be an important explanatory factor since when restrictive or preventive measures are implemented, such as the state of emergency (Giommoni and Loumeau, 2020; Frank, Stadelmann and Torgler 2020), or safer voting methods (Herrnson et al., 2022), turnout tends to increase. The adoption of measures to contain the spread of the virus likely provides a sense of safety for individuals, encouraging them to go to the polling station. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the feeling of threat, and not so much the intensity of the crisis, explains the demobilization of voters to cast their ballot. Our expectation is, therefore, that a greater sense of threat from individuals in relation to COVID-19 explains their lower turnout on election day. Our first hypothesis is thus:

H1 The higher the feeling of threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the lower the probability of turning out

THE EFFECTS OF GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE IN RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC ON VOTE

Although natural disasters and pandemics are mostly beyond human control, elected representatives are accountable for the responses to such events (Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Belchior and Teixeira, 2021). In this vein, evidence shows that there may be either a reward or a punishment of incumbents. On the one hand, less experienced politicians, those lacking material resources, or reluctant to employ them, are more prone to face electoral setbacks after natural disasters (Abney and Hill, 1966). Additionally, the aftermath of a disaster usually negatively affects the economy, which can also punish incumbents, as the economy is an important factor in voting (Acuña-Duarte and Salazar--Espinoza, 2017). On the other hand, natural disasters can as well favor incumbents in elections. This was the case in the 2012 US presidential election with president Obama increasing his vote share by about four percentage points in the affected areas by Hurricane Sandy (Velez and Martin, 2013). Similar evidence exists regarding other catastrophes, such as forest fires in Spain (Ramos and Sanz, 2020).

Concerning pandemics, they have as well been acknowledged as influencing elections as a result of citizens' assessments of the government's response to the crisis. For instance, in Mexico, the crisis of H1N1 in 2009 caused a

small, but persistent negative effect in the incumbent party: where there was an outbreak of the disease, the governing party performed worse electorally (Gutierrez, Meriläinen and Rubli, 2021). In the same vein, the 2014 Ebola crisis gave the governing party in Liberia an advantage in elections, mostly due to the vote in areas where there was a greater allocation of resources to fight the outbreak (Maffioli, 2021).

Although still scarce, there is already some work looking at the impact of the COVID-19 on voting preferences. In such an emergency context, issues related to the pandemic are among the most salient and government accountability is largely supported on them (Singer, 2021). As in prior pandemics, such research suggests that voters tend to punish the incumbents who respond poorly to the crisis, and to reward the ones that perform well. Positive evaluations of the government seem to be related to the implementation of restrictive policy responses in order to contain the spread of the virus, such as the lockdown (Eggers and Harding, 2022). Consonantly, the adoption of these measures has been found to have a positive effect in voting intentions (Giommoni and Loumeau, 2020), and its non-adoption, a likely negative effect, as found for the 2020 US presidential election (Baccini, Brodeur and Weymouth, 2021; Clarke, Stweart and Ho, 2021; Neundorf and Pardos-Prado, 2022). Apparently, more than a tendency to vote for left or right-wing parties (Leininger and Schaub, 2020), voting decision during the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be mainly affected by the political response to the crisis.

In general, this prior research was based on the relationship between the performance of the executive and subsequent voting in first-order elections. Differently, our research does not aim to assess the importance of the executive's performance in an election with a view to forming a government, but rather in a second-order election – the Portuguese presidential election. Voting in such elections might as well be affected by performance evaluations, although this is not without ambiguity. On the one hand, it has been argued that evaluations of government performance play a limited role in voters' decision, with candidates, even when endorsed by a government party, not seen as "political economic incumbents" (van der Brug, van der Eijk and Marsh, 2000; Hellwig and Samuels, 2007; Magalhães, 2007). As less is at stake, since no executive results from this election, accountability over government's policies is not expected to play a role in the presidential election. On the other hand, voters can use second-order elections to signal discontent with the government policies, especially regarding the economy (Marsh, 2003; Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010, p. 12), by either voting for the opposition party candidate or by abstaining (Reif and Schmitt, 1980, pp. 9-10; 1997, p. 118; Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010).

Despite the context of cohabitation that preceded the 2021 Portuguese presidential elections, our main claim is that government performance was of relevance in explaining presidential vote in the context of a pandemic crisis. Contrasting with the idea that government performance plays a limited role in presidential election voting decision (Hellwig and Samuels, 2007; Magalhães, 2007), we argue that the imperative of effectively responding to the challenges posed by the health crisis, likely emphasizes the importance of the government's response to the crisis in voting (as found regarding trust in the prime-minister, by Belchior and Teixeira, 2021; see also Singer, 2021). Our claim is thus that positive evaluations of the government's performance regarding the pandemic favorably reverted to voting for Rebelo de Sousa. We support this expectation in two main reasons. First, because instead of the typical institutional tension and conflict characterizing cohabitation (Frain, 1995; Protsyk, 2006), a close cooperation prevailed between the president and the socialist government in the response to the public health crisis (Henriques, 2021; Barbosa, 2021). According to the information conveyed by the media, the consonance between them was evident at key moments, such as: the lockdown in March 2020 and January 2021, the successive declarations of state of emergency, as well as the plans to gradually reopen the various sectors of activity (Henriques, 2021). The good relations between the prime minister and the president were also perceived by the population (Barbosa, 2021). Consequently, and despite formally constituting a cohabitation, this close articulation regarding the response to the pandemic leads to the expectation that the assessment of the government's performance had consequences with regard to voting for the incumbent president.

Second, as a corollary of this close institutional cooperation, in the 2021 election the Socialist Party decided not to present its own candidate and tacitly supported the incumbent instead (Francisco, 2020). In this way, the scenario in which these elections unfolded distances us from the typical setting of cohabitation. Thus, there are good reasons to expect that a positive assessment of the government's performance has reverted positively in the vote for the incumbent president. Thus, our final hypothesis is as follows:

H2 The more positive the evaluation on the government's policy response to the COVID-19 crisis, the higher the probability of voting for the incumbent

OTHER EXPLANATORY FACTORS FOR VOTING IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN PORTUGAL

Besides performance evaluations, other factors have been recurrently identified as relevant in explaining vote choice in the Portuguese presidential, such as: the existence of an incumbent candidate, or party and ideological identities. The advantage incumbents have when sought re-election has been pointed as a key factor explaining presidential electoral victory (Jalali, 2012). So far, since the Carnation Revolution that led to the transition to democracy in Portugal, presidents have won five out of five times in reelection attempts (1980, 1991, 2001, 2011, 2021). Two main reasons underlie such tendency: the direct benefits of holding office (with incumbent presidents having a lot more visibility than the other candidates), and the worse quality of challengers in elections when incumbents run (in open-seat elections, the quality of candidates tends to be higher) (Jalali, 2012). This is not exclusive to Portugal, as has been observed in other semi-presidential systems across Western Europe and in the United States (Mayhew, 2008). Presenting himself to the 2021 presidential election as the incumbent, Rebelo de Sousa certainly benefited from this status, which likely helps explaining the advantage he showed throughout the campaign, as well as his overwhelming result.

Other important explaining factors regard party identification and ideology. We rely on these as controls for the relationships to be tested in both hypotheses. In particular, the party supporting the candidate has been identified as a good predictor of the vote for that candidate in Portuguese presidential elections. Even for candidates running officially as independents, party identification seems to play an important role (Magalhães, 2007). Party and ideological ties are not always that important, as seen in Irish presidential elections, where voting choices have been shown to be essentially based on assessments of the candidates' personal qualities (van der Brug, van der Eijk and Marsh, 2000). Evaluations of the personal qualities of presidential candidates were also found of importance in Portugal, although influenced by party endorsements and other partisan or ideological cues (Magalhães, 2007).

DATA AND METHODS

Our analysis supports on data from a representative survey of the Portuguese voters conducted between April 9th and May 19th of 2021, carried on within the scope of the *Study on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Portugal* (funded by the Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos). The survey regarded 432 telephone interviews and 729 online surveys, making a total of 1156 respondents.

The period of time on which the study is supported is relevant in the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal, since it follows the end of the second wave, which was the most severe in Portugal as regards to hospitalizations and deaths. This framework allows us to assess the effect of the pandemic on voters' choices.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

The analysis is based on two dependent variables: the probability of casting a ballot on election day and of voting for Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. We focus on explaining abstention and the vote for the incumbent, *vis-à-vis* other voting/ /answer options. Therefore, respondent's vote choices were recorded so that 1 = did not vote, 2 = voted for Rebelo de Sousa, and 3 = voted for another candidate, voted blank/null, or responded do not know/no answer (the reference category). Given the nominal nature of the dependent variable, and as commonly used in electoral studies, we chose to use multinomial logistic regression models.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

A core explaining factor regards the respondents' feeling of threat regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (to test H1). To measure it we use two variables: one directly concerning the threat perceived by respondents in the face of the disease; another related to belonging to a risk group. The variables are, respectively: "In your case, does the coronavirus pandemic make you feel threatened?" coded as 0 = no, and 1 = yes; and "There are people who belong to the so-called risk groups: over 70 years old or chronically ill, with hypertension, heart and respiratory problems, diabetics or immunosuppressed. Do you belong to any of these risk groups?", coded as 0 = does not belong to a risk group, and 1 = belong to a risk group.

Another key independent variable is respondents' evaluation of the performance of the government in responding to the pandemic (to test H2). To measure it, we support on an index of seven policy measures underlying the following question: "Thinking about António Costa's government, how do you evaluate in general the work of that government in the following measures? Would you say it is very bad, bad, good, or very good?" (1 = very bad; 5 = very good). The policy measures were the following: "The re-opening of presential schooling up to Year 12 defined in September 2020"; "The circulation and activity rules defined for the Christmas and New Year period"; "The vaccination plan against COVID-19"; "The request for medical aid from other countries"; "The return to online schooling in February 2021"; "The restrictions on movement and activity imposed in the containment plan"; and "The policy of

scientific advice in the fight against the pandemic" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0,78). The index was calculated so as to oscillate between 1 (very bad measure) and 5 (very good measure).

We also included a set of control variables in the analysis. One is economic performance, which is considered chief in assessing accountability (Marsh, 2003; Freire, 2004; Magalhães, 2007; Gramacho, 2008; Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010, p. 12). We measure economic performance with support on sociotropic and egotropic evaluations. An index consisting of two questions was computed for the first one: "What do you think about the state of the economy in Portugal? I would say that the state of the economy in Portugal is very bad, bad, neither good or bad, good, or very good" (1 = very bad; 5 = very good); and "In your opinion, in the last year, the state of the economy in Portugal was very bad, bad, neither good or bad, good, or very good" (1 = very bad; 5 = very good) (Cronbach's Alpha = 0,82). This index runs between 1 (the worse evaluation) and 5 (the best evaluation). To assess egotropic evaluations, we get support from the following question: "What do you think of your standard of living and that of your household? Would you say that your standard of living and that of your household is very bad, bad, neither bad nor good, good, or very good?" (1 = very bad; 5 = very good).

Other variables usually considered in studies on voting in Portuguese presidential elections were also included as controls (e. g. Freire, 2004; Magalhães, 2007): sympathy for the parties supporting the incumbent (sympathy for PSD or CDS = 1, sympathy for other party = 0), left-right self-placement (0 = left; 10 = right), political interest (1 = not interested at all, 4 = very interested), and socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender and education).

VOTING DURING A PANDEMIC CRISIS: EXPLAINING TURNOUT AND VOTE

In this section, we first present a brief overview and some contextualizing data on the two dependent variables under analysis: turnout and vote in the 2021 Portuguese presidential election. We then proceeded to test the two hypotheses.

At the time of the 2021 presidential election, Portugal was facing the most critical moment since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a scenario probably helps to explain why turnout in this election was the lowest ever in Portuguese presidential elections. Only 39.2 percent attended the polls to vote. That is, more than 60 percent of voters decided not to vote, almost 10 percentage points more than that of the 2016 presidential election and about

7 percentage points more than Cavaco's re-election in 2011 (see Figure A1, in the Online Appendix).

Low turnout in presidential elections may be justified by its second-order nature, which means that voters consider them of less importance and are thus less likely to vote (Marsh, 2003, p. 194). Given the pandemic context in which the elections were held, the general expectation was that abstention would be very high (note that Portugal does not have postal voting, which could have mitigated the effects of the pandemic). Indeed, 57 percent of the population was in favor of delaying the election, and 42 percent said they would not vote.[3] The introduction of automatic voter registration, leading to the inclusion of the voters registered abroad in electoral roll, also contributed to the high values of abstention, given the low turnout of emigrants (Luís, 2021). Despite having grown substantially, abstention fell short of the catastrophist scenario initially predicted, integrating a trend that is not new (see Figure A1, in the Online Appendix). At least partially, some of the electoral measures adopted and the communication from the Portuguese authorities aimed at ensuring the safety of going to vote may have contributed to mitigate a greater increase in abstention rates (Luís, 2021; Serra-Silva and Santos, 2022, pp. 2-3).

In these elections, the incumbent president won the election by a wide margin in the first round (with 60.7 percent of the votes), reinforcing his previous electoral result by almost nine percentage points, and duplicating the percentage of votes of the supporting parties (PSD and CDS) *vis-à-vis* the 2019 legislative election. Only Mário Soares, the president elected in 1991, obtained a higher percentage of votes (70.4 percent).

The incumbent high popularity will have contributed to the results he obtained in the elections. As depicted in Figure 1, the balance between positive and negative evaluations on his performance describes a rising trend over the presidential term, in a clear sign of approval. When compared to the prime minister's evaluations, the president's ones are substantially higher, although both had their best approval ratings during the pandemic.

The consolidation of the catch-all electoral strategy (Fernandes and Jalali, 2017) during the first mandate may have reassured Rebelo de Sousa's electoral victory. He was able to capture votes from all parties' electorate, significantly mobilizing the voters on the left (see Figure A2 in the Online Appendix, which estimates vote switching between the legislative and the presidential election, supporting in a poll fielded just before the presidential election). In short, the re-elected president captured a broad and cross-cutting electoral support and

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3   ICS/ISCTE poll for January 2021, at: https://www.erc.pt/pt/sondagens/publicitacao-de-sond agens.

FIGURE 1

Evaluation of the performance of Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and of António Costa during the president's first term (% balance between positive and negative evaluations)
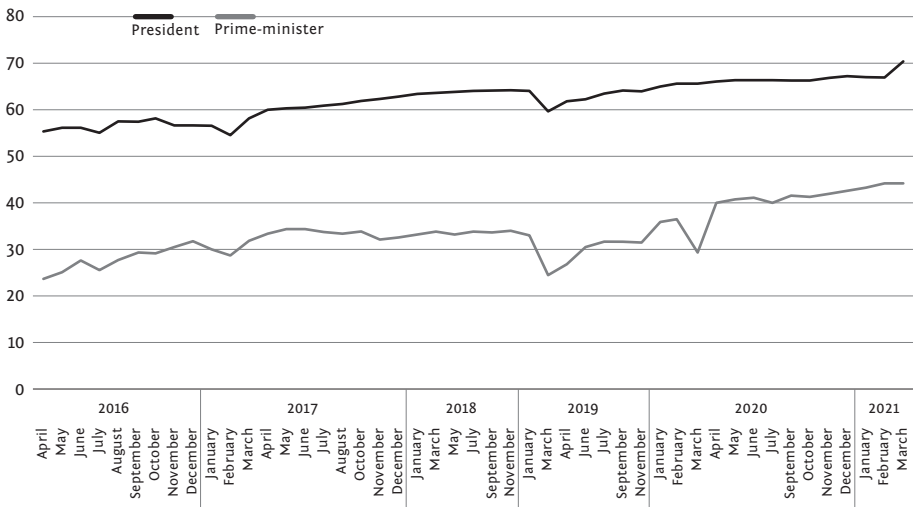
Source: Eurosondagem barometer (Barómetro Eurosondagem). Available at: https://www.erc.pt/pt/sondagens/publicitacao-de-sondagens.

does not seem to have been penalized by the public health crisis generated by the peak of infections and deaths by COVID-19 at the time of elections.

Regarding the test of our hypotheses, we first briefly look at how the dependent and independent variables relate to each other and then move to the explanatory models. Data descriptively shows that, on the one hand, the feeling of threat in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be associated with lower voter turnout in the presidential election (63 percent of those who say they feel threatened admit they did not vote). On the other hand, belonging to a risk group (individuals over 70 years old or chronically ill, with hypertension, heart and respiratory problems, diabetics or that are immunosuppressed) seems to contribute less to the option of not casting a ballot on election day as most respondents belonging to these groups claim to have voted (around 58 percent against 42 percent who say they have not voted).

Concerning vote preferences, the most satisfied with the government's performance voted for Rebelo de Sousa in much higher numbers than for other candidates. In other words, those who rate positively the government's response to the pandemic voted disproportionately for the incumbent – 73 percent – and only residually for the other candidates (with single-digit vote percentages, except for the independent candidate Ana Gomes, whose

vote from those who evaluate the government positively amounted to 13 percent).

In order to test our hypotheses, Table 1 estimates the effects of the pandemic crisis – the respondents' risk perception and their evaluation of the performance of the government *vis-à-vis* the pandemic crisis – respectively, on turning out and on vote for the incumbent. The results generally support both our hypotheses.

As posit by H1, those who feel threatened by the coronavirus pandemic and that belong to a risk group show a lower chance of having cast their ballot,

TABLE 1
Multinomial logistic regression models of voter's choice in the 2021 Portuguese presidential election (reference category: vote for others)

	Abstention		Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa	
	B	sig	B	sig
Intercept	0,64 (0,85)	0,45	-3,44 (0,89)	0,00
Age	-0,01 (0,01)	0,04	0,02 (0,01)	0,00
Gender (1=male)	-0,28 (0,19)	0,14	-0,42 (0,19)	0,02
Education (7=university degree)	-0,10 (0,08)	0,21	-0,07 (0,08)	0,39
Political interest (4=very interested)	-0,50 (0,12)	0,00	-0,37 (0,12)	0,00
Left-right self-positioning (10= right)	0,07 (0,04)	0,07	0,07 (0,04)	0,09
Sympathy for PSD or CDS (=1)	0,08 (0,36)	0,82	1,44 (0,31)	0,00
Sociotropic economic evaluations (5=very good)	0,04 (0,13)	0,73	-0,00 (0,13)	0,98
Egotropic economic evaluations (5=very good)	-0,01 (0,13)	0,95	0,14 (0,13)	0,29
Government performance in responding to the pandemic (5=very good)	0,38 (0,14)	0,01	0,93 (0,15)	0,00
Feel threatened by the pandemic (1=yes)	0,38 (0,19)	0,04	0,29 (0,19)	0,12
Belong to a risk group (1=yes)	0,58 (0,21)	0,01	-0,05 (0,22)	0,81
N			838	
Negelkerke			0,22	

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. *** p<.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

comparing to those who do not feel threatened and that do not belong to a risk group. The control variables show that higher political interest and being older contributes to lower the chances of abstaining, as expectable (see e.g. Magalhães, 2007). Interestingly, more positive evaluations of the government's performance relate to decreasing electoral participation. Note, however, that this is not a strong relationship. When compared with those who evaluate the government negatively, those who give a positive evaluation are only about six percentage points more likely to abstain (see Table 2).

Table 1 also shows a positive effect of the evaluation of the government's response to the crisis in voting for Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, thus supporting H2. The odds of voting for the incumbent increase for those who consider that the government has performed well in fighting the pandemic. As regards the controls, economic performance evaluations do not reveal a significant effect on vote preferences, either sociotropic or egotropic evaluations, which is consistent with prior research evidencing that the economy is not relevant in a scenario of pandemic crisis (Singer, 2021). Moreover, being a sympathizer of the two parties that formally supported the candidacy of Rebelo de Sousa – PSD or the CDS – increases the odds of voting for this candidate. Finally, higher political interest, being a male or younger relate to lower chances of voting for Rebelo de Sousa.

In order to more effectively compare the effects of the main determinants, we calculated predicted probabilities, as shown in Table 2. Belonging to a risk group slightly increases the probability of abstaining – in 3 percentage points – while feeling threatened by the pandemic does not appear to affect the probability of voting. Our results suggest that although the risk perception underlying the pandemic may have significantly impacted the decision of individuals to abstain, the importance of this effect is, however, marginal. Overall,

TABLE 2

Predicted probabilities of voters' choices in the 2021 Portuguese presidential election (%)

	Belong to a risk group		Feel threat-ened by the pandemic		Performance evaluations regarding covid-19		Sympathy with PSD or CDS		Political interest	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	Bad	Good	No	Yes	Low	High
Abstention	48,9	51,9	50,7	49,8	58,2	52,5	49,3	60,1	53,8	51,9
M. Rebelo de Sousa	51,7	55,1	53,2	52,8	41,6	61,5	48,2	69,9	57,3	54,8
Others	50,8	49,3	51,9	49,1	60,5	47,9	49,8	57,7	54,1	54,9

Note: The estimates are from Table 1.

the probability of abstaining remains in the order of 50 percent, whether or not individuals belong to these groups. That is, though the fear caused by the spread of the coronavirus promotes decreasing turnout, factors other than the pandemic should be accounted to explain its record decline.

The probability of voting for Rebelo de Sousa is about 20 percentage points higher for respondents who positively evaluate the government's response to the crisis, compared to those who consider the government performed bad. Conversely, the probability of voting for other candidates or of abstaining among those that consider the government performed well, decreases, respectively, about 13 and six percentage points. Although having had a relevant role in explaining the vote for the incumbent, performance is slightly surpassed by the effect of party sympathy. The probability of a PSD or CDS sympathizer voting for the incumbent increases about 22 percentage points comparing to a non-sympathizer, only increasing the probability of voting for another candidate or of abstaining in 8 and 11 percentage points, respectively. This result is consonant with prior research stating that party identification plays a key role in voting behavior in the Portuguese presidential elections (Magalhães, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The 2021 presidential election took place at an inedited time, that of a global pandemic. It affected not only the physical implementation of the election, with public contacts being minimized or replaced by online alternatives, as well as conditioned the topics under discussion during the campaign (Serra-Silva and Santos, 2022). Based on a survey carried out with the Portuguese electorate shortly after the elections were held, this study offers ample evidence that the pandemic has also impacted the electoral result, especially in terms of support for the incumbent candidate. Two main conclusions can be drawn from our analysis.

First, both the pandemic and the existence of a highly anticipated winner augured an extremely low electoral mobilization, something that ended up not happening. Indeed, there was a record-low voter turnout in presidential elections evidencing the effect of the particular setting in which they occurred. More than 60 percent of the electorate stayed at home. While being of relevance, we were able to show that the electorate's perception of risk regarding the COVID-19 – measured by belonging to a risk group and by the feeling of threat – does not seem to have played a leading role in the low rate of electoral participation. Although risk perception statistically relates to the decision of abstaining, it affects little the probability of individuals not casting a ballot.

Thus, our argument that the feeling of threat would lead individuals not to vote was not fully proven, at least as we operationalized it. This result suggests that other factors may have played a more relevant role in explaining the record abstention that characterized these elections. Despite not being free from criticism, the implementation of some measures by the Portuguese authorities with a view to ensuring that voters voted safely must have had implications for these results (Luís, 2021). Indeed, prior research on the COVID-19 pandemic showed that turnout increases when safer voting methods are implemented (Herrnson et al., 2022). That is, the guarantee of security when voting eventually cancels the fear that people may feel in relation to the pandemic, leading people to vote on election day. In short, our findings do not support the idea that the pandemic has substantially affected electoral participation, as concluded in other works (Fernandez-Navia, Polo-Muro and Tercero-Lucas, 2020; Picchio and Santolini, 2021).

Two, Rebelo de Sousa seems to have been able to derive political dividends from the COVID-19 crisis, by working towards institutional consensus and mutual collaboration with the government. Our findings show that positive assessments of the government's response to the pandemic crisis significantly contributed to voting for the incumbent. Although sympathy for the parties that supported his candidacy most strongly increase the probability of voting for the incumbent (by about 22 percentage points, comparing with those who are not sympathizers of these parties), satisfaction with the government's response to the crisis has as well an important effect on explaining the vote for Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa (increasing the probability of vote for him by about 20 percentage points, comparing with those who consider that the government acted badly). This allows us to conclude that, at least in a context of public health crisis and under a cooperative cohabitation, presidential elections can contribute to hold governments accountable for their performance, as voters may use these second-order elections to express support – or discontent – with national governments. This is consistent with prior research showing that voters keep elected representatives accountable for the responses to external shocks, such as natural disasters and pandemics (Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Belchior and Teixeira, 2021). By studying a case from the little-studied European context, we can also reiterate that this accountability is not necessarily negative, but rather positive among European countries (see for the French case: Giommoni and Loumeau, 2020), contrarily to what has been widely concluded for the US case (Baccini, Brodeur and Weymouth, 2021; Clarke, Stewart and Ho, 2021; Neundorf and Pardos-Prado, 2022). That is, ours and that prior research demonstrate that how the pandemic affects the vote clearly depends on voters' evaluations of executives' performance.

The results show that in a context of expected government vulnerability, due to the threat posed by the pandemic as well as the cohabitation with a minority executive (Protsyk, 2006), the president did not let the pendulum swing towards a more presidential inclination of the system (Frain, 1995). Instead, he managed to electorally benefit from the performance of the socialist government, acting in solidarity with it (Henriques, 2021). At least in this crisis framework, we were able to demonstrate that not only the election of the president will have benefited from the government's (non-economic) performance (despite they were cohabiting), but also that, consistently this election illustrates the use of second-order elections to signal government approval as a result of the evaluation of its performance (Reif and Schmitt, 1980, pp. 9-10; 1997, p. 118).

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