

Regional elections in Portugal: The Azores 2024

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1. The Regional Political System in Portugal

The Portuguese archipelago of the Azores, consisting of the islands of Corvo, Faial, Flores, Graciosa, Pico, Santa Maria, São Jorge, São Miguel, and Terceira, held early regional elections on February 4, 2024. The need to call for early elections was due to the withdrawal of the external support of the Liberal Initiative party in 2023 when the budget proposal for 2024 was rejected by the regional parliament.

From a historical perspective, the existence of sub-national institutional levels represents a recent development for Portugal, given its long tradition as a strongly centralized unitary state. With the transition to democracy that took place during the 1970s, which initiated the third wave of democratizations (Huntington, 1991; Linz and Stepan, 1996), the Portuguese institutional framework underwent a decentralization process, transforming Portugal into a 'regionalized unitary state' (Antunes and Magone, 2020; Ruel, 2019). The constitution adopted in 1976 indeed provided for the establishment of a regional level, which included the creation of five regions on mainland Portugal and two autonomous regions for the archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira (Art. 235, paragraph 2, Constitution of 1976). While the former remained 'on paper' due to disagreements among political forces on implementation methods - and thus mainland Portugal is still characterized by strong centralization (Antunes and Magone, 2020) - the autonomous regions of Madeira and the Azores have gained their autonomy since 1976 through a provisional statute, which was finally approved in the case of Azores in 1980 (Ruel, 2019). The status of autonomous regions is evident both at the institutional level, as direct elections for regional parliaments and the es-

tablishment of executive bodies¹ are provided for (ibid.), and in terms of competences and decision-making autonomy that encompass a wide range of policy areas. This autonomy has been progressively increased through several subsequent reforms (1986, 1998/1999, 2007/2008). In this regard, the 1998 reform was particularly significant as it greatly enhanced the financial autonomy of the two Portuguese autonomous regions (Ruel, 2021).

In terms of the political and party system, the autonomous region of the Azores presents the same characteristics as mainland Portugal. The reason is very simple. Article 51.4 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic expressly prohibits the formation of regionalist, autonomist, or exclusively local parties. Therefore, the political parties that animate the political life of the Azores are the same as those at the national level. The main parties are as follows: the PSD (Partido Social Democrata – Social Democratic Party), which is center-right; the PS (Partido Socialista – Socialist Party), center-left; CDS/PP (Centro Democrático Social/Partido Popular – Popular Party), right-wing; APU/PCP (or CDU) (Aliança Povo Unido/Partido Comunista Português – United People’s Alliance/Portuguese Communist Party), left-wing; UDP/BE (União Democrática Popular/Bloco de Esquerda – Popular Democratic Union/Left Bloc), also left-wing (Ruel, 2021). Other parties that have emerged more recently are: CH (Chega) a far-right populist party; JPP (Junto pelo Povo – Together for the People), centrist; PAN (Pessoas – Animais – Natureza – People – Animals – Nature), ecologist; and IL (Iniciativa Liberal – Liberal Initiative), liberal. While it is true that the same political parties exist at both the regional and national levels, it is important to highlight a certain ‘regionalization’ of the party structures operating in the Azores. These structures, somewhat mirroring the Portuguese institutional framework, enjoy considerable autonomy from the national party. This autonomy includes, for example, the selection of local leaders or candidates at all levels (local, regional, national, European) (Ruel, 2019; 2021).

Since the founding elections in 1976, the Azores have had a bipartisan system characterized by strong stability: in nearly 50 years, there have only been two alternations in government (1996 and 2020) (Ruel, 2019; 2021; Freire and Ruel, 2023). In the 1976 elections, six political parties participated, three of which entered the regional parliament: the PSD won an absolute majority (55.4%), while the PS (33.8%) became the main opposition force; the other party to gain representation in the regional assembly was the CDS/PP (7.7%) (Ruel, 2021). In the 1980 elections, the PSD further increased its

¹ It is worth noting the figure of the *Representante da Republica*, who represents the national institutions at the regional level and is appointed by the President of the Republic for a term of ten or five years (Art. 230, Constitution, 1976).

electoral strength (57.3%), and in subsequent elections until the early 1990s, the support for the majority party and the opposition parties remained to a good extent stable. The first change in the regional government occurred in the 1996 elections, in which the PS became the largest party, winning 45.8% while the PSD obtained 41%. The 2008 elections confirmed the hegemony of the PS (49.93%), but they were held under a new electoral law that, by increasing the proportionality of the system, allowed two parties to enter the regional parliament on a stable basis: the UDP/BE (União Democrática Popular/Bloco de Esquerda – Popular Democratic Union/Left Bloc) and the PPM (Partido Popular Monárquico – People’s Monarchist Party). The latest alternation in the regional government of the Azores occurred during the 2020 elections, when a return to a center-right government led by the PSD materialized in a peculiar manner (Freire and Ruel, 2023). The PS’s performance was disappointing: despite being the most voted party (39.1%), they lost 7% of the votes and the absolute majority of seats (-5) compared to the 2016 elections. The PSD gained about 3% compared to the previous elections, reaching 33.7% and adding 2 seats to its parliamentary group. Another noteworthy aspect of the 2020 elections was the entry of three new parties into the regional parliament of the Azores: the far-right populists of Chega, who obtained a surprising 5% and elected two deputies, and the liberals of IL and the environmentalists of PAN, who each elected one deputy. In a scenario where no party had an absolute majority of seats to form a government, the need to form a coalition favored the PSD over the socialists. The adopted formula was peculiar. The PSD formed a coalition with the CDS/PP and the PPM, which, however, did not reach the necessary number of seats: it was the external support of Chega and IL that allowed this coalition to form a minority government. The clear reference for this unusual governing formula for the Azores is the so-called *geringonça*, the minority government formed by the Socialists in 2015 with external support from the BE and the UDC (Freire and Ruel, 2023). Given the number and type of parties present in parliament, the party system can be labelled as a moderate multipartyism.

In terms of party and institutional leadership, the Azores exhibit elements of both strong stability, evident when parties are in government, and excessive instability, during phases when parties find themselves in opposition. From 1976 to 1995, João Bosco Soares Mota Amaral was the leader of the PSD and the head of the regional executive: in 1995, he stepped down from his position because he was elected to the national parliament. From 1996 to 2012, Carlos Manuel Martins do Vale César was the head of the regional government and maintained the leadership of the PS. From 2012 to 2020, the head of the executive was the socialist Vasco Alves Cordeiro, who, even after

losing the 2020 elections, retained the leadership of the PS in the subsequent period. Instability in terms of leadership emerges when parties are in opposition: for example, between 1996 and 2020, the PSD changed its leader after each electoral defeat (Ruel, 2021).

2. The Regional Electoral System

The current electoral system adopted in the Azores for regional elections consists of a proportional representation system with closed party lists and a seat allocation system based on the d'Hondt formula, which tends to favor larger parties (Ruel, 2021). The number of regional deputies to be elected is 57. There are nine constituencies, corresponding to the nine islands of the archipelago, plus a compensatory constituency that aggregates the residual votes from each constituency at the regional level. The magnitude of the constituencies varies from 2 to 20, based to a great extent on the size of the population, while the compensatory constituency consists of five seats. Each party is required to present a number of candidates equal to the number of regional deputies to be elected in each constituency, along with a number of substitute candidates, which can vary from a minimum of two to a maximum of eight, who can step in case of death or incapacity of an elected member to assume the office. Party lists are closed, which means that voters are allowed to vote for the list but cannot express preferences for specific candidates. Therefore, the elected members are determined based on their position on the party list (*Lei Eleitoral da Assembleia Legislativa da Região Autónoma Dos Açores (LEALRAA)*, 2024). This gives party leadership, who are responsible for defining the electoral lists, a strong degree of control over the elected members. Traditionally, the leader of the party that wins the elections is appointed as the head of the executive. In 2009, a two-term limit for the head of the regional executive was introduced and came into effect starting with the 2012 elections (Ruel, 2021).

Until 2004, the electoral system of the Azores was considered extremely disproportional. To reduce this disproportionality, a compensatory electoral constituency was introduced in 2006 and was used for the first time in the 2008 elections (Ruel, 2021). Additionally, the number of seats, which had gradually increased from 43 to 52 since 1976, was fixed at 57, including the five seats of the compensatory constituency. This system closely resembled that adopted for the election of the Portuguese national assembly². The aim

² At this level, a proportional system with closed party lists at the constituency level and the d'Hondt method for converting votes into seats are also used. Furthermore, the number of seats for the national parliament can vary between a minimum of 180 and a maximum of

of these changes in the electoral law was to streamline the electoral process and correct some discrepancies arising from the over-representation of some islands compared to others. The main consequence was to increase the proportionality of the system, making it easier for new parties to enter the regional assembly (Ruel, 2019; 2021), which indeed occurred in subsequent elections: for instance, starting from 2008, the UDP/BE and the PPM entered the regional parliament of the Azores, as did Chega and IL (Liberal Initiative) in the 2020 elections.

3. Regional Political Competition and Campaign

Regional elections in Portugal, both in Madeira and the Azores, have always had a predominantly local significance. They cannot be classified as second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) or as midterm elections intended as a test to measure the support or stability of the national government. There are two fundamental reasons that can help explain this fundamentally local significance of regional elections in Portugal. The first element concerns the nature of the Portuguese institutional system. The extensive autonomy enjoyed by regional institutions leads voters to view these elections as significant in themselves (i.e. as *another kind* rather than *lower level*), because the bodies elected at this level of government are responsible for the allocation of the largest share of resources dedicated to the region and the policies that most impact their lives. The second element relates to the nature of the political system. Since 1976, there have been only two alternations in government in the Azores, one in 1996 and one in 2020, making the level of competition in the archipelago extremely low for long periods (Ruel, 2019; 2021).

It is important to highlight a series of recent phenomena that have, in some ways, shown a modest impact of regional dynamics at the national level and vice versa, of national trends on the regional elections in the Azores (Freire and Ruel, 2023). On the one hand, the government formula adopted by the PS at the national level in 2015 (a minority government with external support from far-left parties) was frequently cited by the protagonists of the second alternation in the government of the Azores (2020) as an example that legitimized the formation of a minority government led by the PSD with external support from other parties, which sent the PS into opposition after 24 years despite it had been the most voted party (Freire and Ruel, 2023). On the other hand, the excellent result of the populist party Chega in the 2020 regional elections in the Azores (5.1%) certainly influenced the rise of this party at the

national level in the 2022 parliamentary elections (7.2%) and in the regional elections held in Madeira in 2023 (8.9%) (Castaldo and Camerlo, 2023).

The list of political parties present in the electoral ballot did not differ much from those present at the national level. The 11 parties or coalitions that participated in the 2024 regional elections in the Azores are as follows: Socialist Party (PS); Social Democratic Party/CDS – People’s Party/People’s Monarchist Party coalition (PSD/CDS–PP/PPM); People-Animals-Nature (PAN); Earth Party/Alliance Alternative 21 coalition (MPT/A); LIVRE (L); Together for the People (JPP); Liberal Initiative (IL); CHEGA (CH); Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU); Left Bloc (BE); National Democratic Alternative (ADN)³.

The main novelty regarding the political parties that participated in these elections is the coalition formed by the PSD, the CDS/PP, and the PPM before the elections. The formation of this pre-electoral coalition was part of the agreement signed by these parties for the formation of the government after the 2020 elections⁴. Pre-electoral coalitions are not entirely new in the political landscape of the Azores, and the three parties in question had already been governing together for four years based on a post-electoral coalition agreement. However, the formation of pre-electoral coalitions involving major parties is extremely rare, and the few available examples do not constitute successful stories: for instance, in 2004, the “Azores coalition” formed by the PSD and CDS/PP obtained about 5% fewer votes than the result the two parties had achieved in the 2000 elections.

The official electoral campaign is legally very short: for the regional elections held in the Azores on February 4, 2024, the campaign started on January 21 and ended on February 2. Naturally, the actual electoral campaign began much earlier, and as in previous elections, the culminating events were the debates on RTP Açores⁵. In each electoral district, corresponding to each island of the archipelago, the leading candidates faced off in televised debates starting on January 11; in the concluding debate, held on January 21, the leaders of the parties or coalitions running to lead the regional executive participated⁶. Notably, the televised debate held on January 19 among the leading candidates in the district of São Miguel, the largest island of the archipelago, was attended by almost all the party leaders who would

³ Source: <https://www.cne.pt/content/eleicao-para-assembleia-legislativa-da-regiao-autonoma-dos-acoress-2024>

⁴ Source: <https://tvi.iol.pt/noticias/politica/cds-pp/acordo-politico-entre-psd-cds-e-ppm-nos-acoress-e-para-duas-legislaturas>

⁵ Source : <https://acoress.rtp.pt/programa/regionais-2024-debates/>; <https://acoress.rtp.pt/programa/regionais-2024-o-debate-2/>

⁶ Source: <https://www.rtp.pt/play/p12839/o-debate-eleicoes-regionais-2024>

participate in the final debate on January 21. As happened in the case of the regional elections held in Madeira in 2023 (Castaldo and Camerlo, 2023), the candidates from Chega largely avoided such debates, including the final one among the party leaders.

Although substantive issues concerning specific policies were addressed during the electoral campaign, other ‘politics’ issues played a more prominent role due to the instability problems of the government, which led to the dissolution of the regional parliament about a year before its natural end and to snap elections. The root of this instability lies in the government formula found following the 2020 elections, in which no party or coalition won the absolute majority of seats needed to govern. The adopted formula, inspired by the so-called *geringonça* devised in 2015 by the PS and the left-wing parties at the national level, involved a minority government formed by the PSD, CDS-PP, and PPM, with two external support agreements: the first was signed between the three coalition parties and Chega, while the second was between the PSD alone and IL. During the legislature, one of the two Chega parliamentarians, Carlos Furtado, left the party and made an additional external support agreement with the minority government. In early March 2023, IL decided to withdraw from the external support agreement with the government due to strong disagreements with the parties with which it had not made this agreement, namely the CDS-PP and the PPM⁷. Around the same time, Furtado also withdrew his support for the government, claiming that the government had not fulfilled the promises included in his support agreement⁸. Although the breakdown of these agreements led to the government losing its majority in parliament, a motion of no confidence was not called. However, the failure to pass the budget law for 2024 in November 2023 led the incumbent government to request the President of the Republic to dissolve the regional parliament and call early elections.

Although policy issues such as the increasing level of poverty, inequalities, healthcare system issues, and specific problems related to individual islands were part of the electoral campaign, the most debated policies were those connected to the government crisis, namely the state of public finances and the privatization of the Azorean airline, SATA. On both topics, the most critical positions towards the government came from IL, one of the parties that had provided external support to the government and then withdrew it: this party strongly favored the privatization of SATA and was highly critical of

⁷ Source: <https://www.noticiasaoiminuto.com/politica/2239057/il-rompe-acordo-de-incidencia-parlamentar-com-governo-dos-acoress>

⁸ Source: <https://www.noticiasaoiminuto.com/politica/2239084/acoress-apos-il-deputado-independente-tambem-rompe-acordo-com-governo>

the management of public finances, which had been deteriorating in recent years. The main opposition party, the PS, agreed on the need to privatize SATA but criticized the implementation methods, and especially criticized the government's total loss of control over the public deficit, constantly comparing it to their management before 2020. Most of the smaller parties supported keeping SATA public to ensure the citizens' right of movement between the islands, with mainland Portugal, and for the Azorean diaspora in the United States to easily reach the Azores⁹.

As mentioned, core 'politics' issues played a leading role in the electoral campaign, particularly the topic of alliances and potential post-electoral government agreements, which was central during the final televised debate between the party leaders. In this regard, the governing coalition composed of PSD, CDS-PP, and PPM presented itself united in the elections as a pre-electoral coalition, asking voters for an absolute majority that would allow them to govern without needing to make any external support agreements with other parties. However, the outgoing executive leader and coalition presidential candidate, José Bolieiro, never categorically ruled out the possibility of such agreements being made depending on the election results. Despite its extremely critical position towards the governing coalition, IL refused to take an explicit position on the issue of alliances during the electoral campaign, stating that only after the elections and based on their outcome could the party decide on this crucial aspect. The PS heavily focused its campaign on the issue of government instability, arguing that the center-right coalition would be unable to provide stability and coherent and effective policies due to the realistic possibility of forming a new minority government based on external support agreements with unreliable parties. In terms of alliances, both the PS and the other left-wing parties formally expressed openness to discussing post-electoral alliances if the results provided this bloc with the opportunity to form a majority government. However, both the PS and BE were not optimistic about the possibility of reaching such agreements, given the lack of success on this issue after the 2020 elections. Even Chega, which was expecting a substantial electoral success based on polls¹⁰ (9% compared to the 5.1% obtained in the 2020 elections), did not comment on this issue during the campaign, officially leaving the door open to any type of agreement with the center-right coalition.

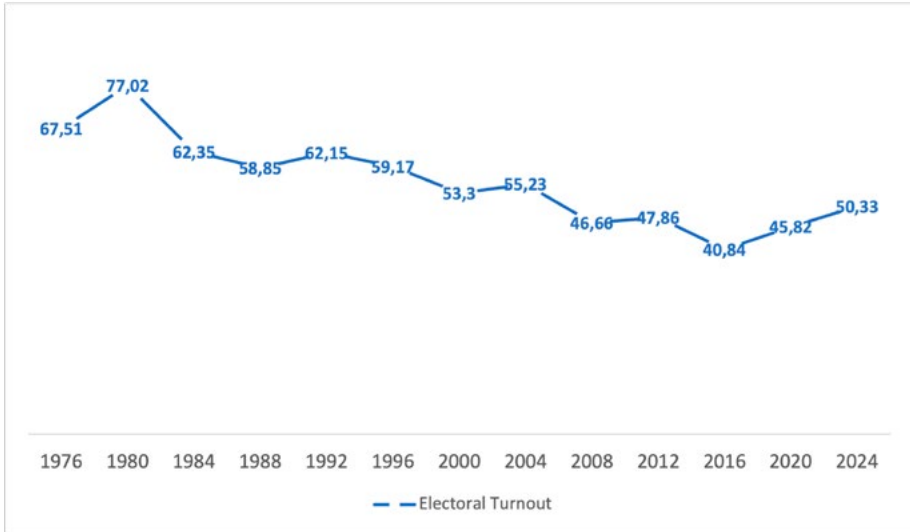
⁹ See the final debate among party leaders (<https://acores.rtp.pt/programa/regionais-2024-o-debate-2/>)

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.publico.pt/2024/01/30/politica/noticia/sondagem-eleicoes-acores-ps-frente-ad-maioria-chega-2078702>

4. Turnout and Electoral Results in the 2024 Elections

As shown in figure 1, voter turnout in the 2024 regional elections in the Azores archipelago appears to have significantly increased compared to previous elections, marking the second consecutive rise after the lowest point reached in the 2016 elections. Viewed from a longitudinal perspective, this represents an interesting short-term countertrend to the overall long-term decline that began after the 1980 elections, which recorded the highest turnout ever at the regional level (Ruel, 2019; 2021). Broadening this perspective to include elections in the other autonomous region of Madeira, as well as national (legislative and presidential) and European elections, some interesting aspects emerge. On one hand, these elections also show the same long-term declining trend in citizen participation in various electoral processes. On the other hand, voter turnout in the Azores has always been lower than that recorded in Madeira (Ruel, 2021; Castaldo and Camerlo, 2023). Additionally, participation in national elections has always been higher than that recorded in the Azores archipelago (Ruel, 2021), while participation in European elections has always been lower. For instance, voter turnout in the regional elections held in Madeira in 2023 was 53,3%, whereas 59.8% of citizens voted in the Portuguese legislative elections on March 10, 2024. It is noteworthy that the increase in participation in the Azores during the last two regional elections corresponds to a similar, and even more significant, upward trend observed in national elections, with an increase of 5.9% in 2022 and an impressive 16.3% in the most recent 2024 elections. One probable cause of this increase, both nationally and in the Azores archipelago, is the remarkable success of Chega, which may have contributed to heightened polarization in the system and, consequently, increased voter turnout. Compared to both the presidential elections (e.g., 36.1 in 2021) and the European elections (36.6% in 2024), participation in the regional elections of the Azores has almost always been higher. Overall, these figures partially contradict the trends of political disaffection present in most contemporary democracies. However, it should be noted that voter turnout in the Azores regional elections of 2024 was higher than that of Azorean citizens in the national elections held just a month later (50.3% versus 46.2%). This underscores that even in polarized national elections, the regional dimension consistently prevails in terms of citizens' interest.

Figure 1. The electoral turnout in the Azores regional elections (1976-2024).



Source: Author's elaboration based on data of the Portuguese Interior Ministry.

Table 1 shows the results, in terms of percentage of votes and number of seats, of the regional elections held in the Azores on February 4, 2024. To provide a more medium-term perspective, the results of the two previous elections held in 2020 and 2016 are also included. Several new developments and confirmations emerge from this electoral round. One significant change is the victory of the governing parties, PSD, CDS-PP, and PPM, united for the first time in a pre-electoral coalition named “Democratic Alliance.” In fact, in the 2020 elections, the most voted party had been the PS. Additionally, this is the first time in the history of the Azores that a pre-electoral coalition involving one of the main parties has achieved a better result than those of the individual parties in previous elections. However, the victory of the Democratic Alliance (AD) cannot be considered complete. Despite AD winning the election by a wide margin over PS, which came in second place (42,8% versus 35,9%), it did not secure an absolute majority of seats in the regional assembly, which is necessary to form a stable government. AD obtained 26 seats, 3 short of the 29 needed for an absolute majority in the regional parliament. The outgoing governor and candidate to resume this role as leader of the winning coalition, José Bolieiro, declared immediately after the elections that he would govern with a minority government in this legislature as well (Eco Sapo, 2024). Chega, one of the parties that provided external support to the government in the previous legislature and a clear winner of the 2024 elections (with nearly double the votes and more than double the seats),

clarified that it would vote for the government program only under two conditions: first, to officially join the government; second, that the minor coalition parties, CDS-PP and PPM, should not be part of the regional government of the Azores (RTP Noticias, 2024). None of these conditions were accepted by Bolieiro, who maintained his post-election commitment to form a minority government composed of PSD, CDS-PP, and PPM. On March 15, the new government's program was approved with the 26 votes from the governing coalition. The 24 parliamentarians from PS and BE voted against it. The approval of the government program was thus achieved thanks to the abstention of the 5 Chega parliamentarians and the 2 parliamentarians from IL and PAN. Essentially, the regional government of the Azores that emerged from the February 2024 elections is, like the one in the previous legislature, a minority government sustained by the external support of Chega, IL, and PAN. Although the governing coalition did not accept Chega's conditions to vote in favor of the government program, PSD made an agreement with Chega, securing its abstention, without which the government would not have had the numbers to govern (Martins and Melo, 2024).

Table 1. Electoral Results in the last three elections in the Azores (%)

	2024	2020	2016
PSD/CDS-PP/PPM	42,8 (26)	-	-
PSD	-	33,7 (21)	30,9 (19)
CDS-PP	-	5,5 (3)	7,2 (4)
PPM	-	2,3 (2)	0,9 (1)
PS	35,9 (23)	39,1 (25)	46,4 (30)
CHEGA	9,2 (5)	5,1 (2)	-
BE	2,5 (1)	3,8 (2)	3,7 (2)
IL	2,2 (1)	1,9 (1)	-
PAN	1,7 (1)	1,9 (1)	1,4 (0)
CDU	1,6 (0)	1,7 (0)	2,6 (1)
Livre	0,6 (0)	0,4 (0)	0,2 (0)
JPP	0,5 (0)	-	-
ADN	0,3 (0)	-	-

Source: Author's elaboration based on official results provided by the National Electoral Commission and available on the website <https://www.cne.pt/>
Note: for each political party it is provided the percentage of votes received and within brackets the number of seats gained.

From a longitudinal perspective, Table 1 clearly shows the increasing trend in votes for center-right parties: in the last three elections, PSD, CDS/PP, and PPM collectively went from 39% in 2016, to 41,6% in 2020, and to 42,8% in the most recent elections. In terms of seats, they increased from 24 in 2016 to 26 in both 2020 and 2024. Within the coalition dynamics, there is a noticeable progressive weakening of CDS-PP in favor of both PSD and PPM. This increase in electoral support for the governing parties is even more significant when considering that the other parties that have considerably increased their votes, Chega and IL, are positioned on the same center-right political spectrum.

On the left side of the political spectrum, the decline of the PS is evident, having lost over 10% of the votes and 7 parliamentary seats in the last decade. In the 2016 elections, the PS was the most voted party for 20 years and held an absolute majority of seats, allowing it to form the government without needing coalitions or external support from other parties. The approximately 7 percentage point drop in the 2020 elections, which continues a trend that began in the 2008 elections, led to the second government alternation in the recent history of the Azores: despite remaining the most voted party, an agreement among the center-right parties resulted in the PS being ousted from government. This decline in support was also clearly evident in the most recent elections, with a further loss of about 4% of votes and two parliamentary seats, confirming the shift of the Azorean electorate towards the right side of the political spectrum.

This shift of votes from left to right is also clearly reflected in the long-term results of parties like BE and CDU, both of which have seen a reduction in their electoral support. Between 2016 and 2024, BE lost over one percentage point, about a third of its votes, resulting in the loss of one of its two seats in 2024, which it had held since 2016. CDU continues its long decline as it failed to secure parliamentary representation in 2024, just as occurred in 2020. PAN has had more fluctuating results but managed to secure a parliamentary seat both in 2020 and 2024. In the latter case, a change in strategy led PAN to reach an agreement with the governing coalition, by abstaining from the vote that approved the legislative program (Martins and Melo, 2024).

In terms of political parties, two clear winners are IL and, especially, Chega. Although extremely different from each other, both participated for the first time in the 2020 elections, and both managed to enter the regional parliament gaining, respectively, one and two seats. In 2024, IL further increased its votes from 1,9% to 2,2%, confirming its parliamentary seat won in 2020. Despite securing only one seat, this allowed IL to enter the parliamentary majority orbit for the second time, providing external support to the governing coalition. The difference from the 2020 situation lies in IL's reduced

bargaining power with the government in 2024. In 2020, IL's abstention was crucial for the government survival, and its withdrawal led to snap elections. The seat distribution in the 2024 elections has removed this leverage from IL, as its parliamentary seat is no longer crucial for the government's survival.

Perhaps, the main winner of these elections is the populist party Chega. Under the leadership of André Ventura, a former PSD activist, Chega is the first populist and far-right party to have gained significant and growing electoral support in a country like Portugal, which until a few years ago seemed immune to the populist wave that has spread almost globally. It first ran in the legislative elections in 2019, obtaining just over 1% and electing a single deputy. In the same year, it also ran in the regional elections in Madeira, achieving a poor result (Freire and Ruel, 2023; Castaldo and Camerlo, 2023). However, the party's rise appears steady and consistent. A successful test was represented by the regional elections held in the Azores in 2020, where Chega achieved an incredible 5% and elected two deputies to the regional assembly (Freire and Ruel, 2023). The unstoppable rise of this party became evident in the 2022 legislative elections, where it obtained just over 7% of the votes and 12 parliamentary seats. The elections held in Madeira in September 2023 only confirmed the rise of this party, which garnered almost 9% of the electoral vote and four deputies in the regional assembly (Castaldo and Camerlo, 2023). The consolidation of Chega as the third party at the national level, behind the two main parties, PS and PSD, came with the early elections of March 2024, when the party achieved an incredible 18% and elected 50 deputies to the National Assembly. Equally extraordinary was, as we have seen, the result obtained in the Azores elections held in February 2024. On this occasion, Chega almost doubled its votes, rising from 5% to 9%, and winning five seats compared to the two obtained in the 2020 elections. Although its request to join the government was not accepted by AD, the numbers give Chega enormous bargaining power, as its five deputies alone are decisive for the government's survival. This situation puts the AD executive in a state of significant precariousness and potential instability. Given Chega's continued exponential growth, further confirmed in the legislative elections of March 2024, it is highly likely that the party will break the agreement with PSD for external support to the regional autonomous government's executive, if conditions arise that make it advantageous for it.

5. Conclusions

The regional elections held in the Azores on February 4, 2024, were characterized by substantial continuity but also significant changes. In terms of

continuity, the outgoing governing coalition formed by PSD, CDS-PP, and PPM won the election and was able to form a new minority government relying on external support from Chega, IL, and PAN. The overall election results confirm the shift of votes from center-left parties to center-right parties, particularly the collapse of PS and the remarkable growth of Chega.

The new developments are much more interesting. Voter turnout shows a noticeable increase for two consecutive elections, which was also confirmed by the recent legislative elections held in March 2024. Another partial new development, as previously mentioned, is the formation of a minority government for the second consecutive time, relying on external support from other parties. If we consider the minority government formed in Madeira following the 2023 elections (Castaldo and Camerlo 2023) and the much more famous cases at the national level, we can argue that this type of government formula is becoming a consolidated reality. These dynamics move the Azorean party system away from bipartitism, present in the archipelago for several decades, and bring it increasingly in line with a multiparty system (Ruel, 2019; 2021), which is currently of moderate nature but could shift towards the mechanics of polarized pluralism with the further growth of Chega.

Connected to this latter aspect is the growing polarization due to the extraordinary electoral success of the populist party Chega. Its impact on the system is not only linked to the size of its electoral support and its exponential growth, or its possible effect on increasing voter turnout, but also to its impact on government dynamics. While in 2020 the external support of this party allowed for a change in government, in 2024 this external support has become crucial for the government's survival, granting Chega immense leverage and potentially fostering instability within the coalition government.

In conclusion, compared to the past when the political system of the Azores appeared "isolated" from the national one due to dynamics completely disconnected from those in mainland Portugal, the most recent events, which become even more evident in the elections held in the Azores in 2020 and 2024, highlight the growing reciprocal influences between the national and regional levels (Freire and Ruel, 2023). Below, I indicate some examples of these mutual influences. The success of Chega in the 2020 regional elections, the first truly significant for this party, likely influenced the party's rise at the national level, which manifested prominently in the 2022 legislative elections. Similarly, the extraordinary success in the regional elections held in the Azores in February 2024 served as a catalyst for Chega's incredible result in the legislative elections held just a month later. Just as the formation of the first minority government in 2020 (Freire and Ruel, 2023), the use of the

same formula in the 2024 elections was somehow legitimized by recent experiences of minority governments formed at the national level.

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