

From Belonging to the Ballot Box: How National Identity Shapes Voting Behavior in Portugal in 2024

Abstract

In recent decades, national identity has assumed a central role in how political systems are perceived and in the relationship, populations maintain with them. In the context of the crisis of the liberal international order, Euroscepticism, the homogenization of values, and mass immigration, radical right parties have significantly increased their influence. These parties have demonstrated a capacity to mobilize against these developments by framing them as threats to shared values, sovereignty, and national identity, while contesting the European Union.

In the national context, where party politics has historically been marked by moderation and comparatively low levels of political polarization, there are indications that the affective dimension has gained centrality, particularly within radical right parties, most notably CHEGA, showing that the Portuguese population has not remained an exception. Starting from the premise that national belonging in Portugal influences voting behavior, this study examines how sociological effects related to social cohesion shape electoral choices.

National identity represents a strong form of collective identification that generates feelings of belonging and loyalty while helping to construct a community of destiny. Its construction derives from a dominant nation or ethnic group that defines the boundaries of the nation through shared history, culture, and a delimited territory (Guibernau, 2007, p. 12). National identity is considered fundamental as a form of collective identification that promotes social cohesion, reduces the likelihood of social conflict, and increases willingness for democratic cooperation, thereby making collective action more effective.

The affective dimension focuses on the psychological and sociological effects associated with social cohesion, including feelings such as attachment, pride, and security toward members of the same community, and how these manifest in the current political context.

A second perspective highlights the ethnic dimension. Primordialist theorists such as Barcová and Clifford Geertz conceived the nation as sustained through descent and absolute loyalty, viewing *jus sanguinis* as the sole criterion of belonging. Cultural, linguistic, and religious elements are seen by primordialists as the only way to preserve national identity. In this view, national identity is grounded in a community of destiny

that expresses pride and dignity in the nation of origin. Ethnic conceptions tend to promote cultural isolation, facilitate competition between cultures and ethnic groups, and may lead to the construction of boundaries and social exclusion. Those who do not adhere to a homogeneous culture may be perceived as enemies of that culture (Guibernau, 2007).

The civic or voluntary perspective, theorized by Habermas and Gabrielson, understands national identity as a means of increasing political participation while allowing tolerance toward ethnic minorities. It argues that liberalism neither sectarianizes nor blocks ethnic differences (Habermas, 1991, p. 117). Thus, the defense of equal political participation, respect for multicultural difference, and ethnic plurality define its main characteristics. Studies cited by Gabrielson indicate that levels of democratic quality tend to increase under these principles, particularly among more educated and younger populations and those with international experience, in contrast to populations that have remained in one country for extended periods. Ethnic minorities may belong to the country provided certain criteria are met, rather than belonging being based exclusively on descent.

The European dimension is introduced as a fourth analytical dimension, considering the social and political repercussions of the 2015 refugee crisis and the 2008 financial crisis. The European Union's refugee agenda sought to strengthen solidarity and inclusion. Reactions from European political leaders revealed dissatisfaction, notably from Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, and Nigel Farage, who invoked arguments of cultural incompatibility, unemployment, and cultural decline. Leaders such as António Costa and Mariana Vieira da Silva mobilized in support of the European agenda as a means of countering populist and xenophobic narratives. Radical right parties such as Fratelli d'Italia, Rassemblement National, and Vox mobilize similar narratives for their own political consolidation. This phenomenon helps clarify current party-political transformations and provides empirical grounding for this study (Donà, 2022, p. 784).

Portugal has traditionally been characterized by moderation on the right, represented by the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Democratic and Social Centre (CDS), combining social conservatism and liberalism. Mobilization around these issues by radical right parties occurred later than in other European countries. Closely linked to European institutions, Portugal exhibited a delayed evolution in this regard. In 2019, the party Chega was founded with the aim of countering the liberal international model and promoting cultural homogeneity among people of the same origin. Furthermore, recent

studies suggest that emotional appeals (Silva, 2024, p. 181) and post-colonial narratives have elicited negative responses among the Portuguese population (Peralta, 2025, p. 14).

Methodologically, this study operationalizes national identity through four analytical dimensions: affective-symbolic, ethnic, civic, and supranational. The affective-symbolic dimension will be analyzed through indicators such as national attachment, implicit pride, belonging, satisfaction, happiness, sense of security, loyalty to close others, and feeling part of the same group. The ethnic dimension includes variables such as perceived shared race/ethnicity, attitudes toward immigration from similar or different groups, the perceived need for greater national loyalty, whether immigrants make the country better or worse, and whether national culture is enriched or undermined by immigration. The civic dimension includes trust in institutions and political parties, satisfaction with democracy, the importance of strong government, and the importance of individual freedom. The European dimension includes attitudes toward whether the European Union has gone too far and preferences regarding leaving or remaining in the EU.

A quantitative methodology will be employed using data from the 2024 European Social Survey. The study will examine the social consequences of these indicators for electoral behavior in parliamentary legislative elections, including left-wing parties (PS, Livre, Bloco de Esquerda, and the Portuguese Communist Party) and right-wing parties (PSD, CDS, Iniciativa Liberal, and Chega).

The analysis will proceed in three stages: 1) descriptive statistics to characterize the distribution of dependent and independent variables; 2) bivariate analysis using chi-square tests, correlations, and mean comparisons to explore the relationship between national identity and voter behavior; 3) multivariate models, namely logistic regression, to test the hypotheses and determine whether national identity remains a significant predictor of voting behavior after controlling for sociodemographic variables.

The hypotheses guiding this study are:

H1: Affective and ethnic national identity is concentrated primarily among the radical right electorate in Portugal.

H2: Voters who combine strong national identity with high European identification tend to vote for parties such as the PS and PSD.

H3: The effect of national identity on electoral behavior remains significant after controlling for sociodemographic variables.

H4: More educated voters tend to value civic dimensions of national identity over ethnic ones.

H5: Less educated voters and residents of peripheral areas privilege ethnic forms of national identity.

This study aims to demonstrate how affective, ethnic, European, and civic dimensions of national identity influence voting behavior in Portugal in 2024.