

Campaigning on a blank slate: persuasion and mobilisation efforts in the Portuguese 1975 elections

Filipa Raimundo, José Santana Pereira



Posters for the elections to the Constituent Assembly on the walls of Amadora railway station in 1975. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

On 25 April 1975, Portugal witnessed a historic turning point as it conducted its inaugural elections under universal suffrage. The electorate participated in selecting the Constituent Assembly, entrusted solely with the drafting of a new democratic constitution. These elections - often described as founding elections - served as the cornerstone of Portuguese democracy, yielding outcomes that defied expectations, maybe due in part to the strategies employed during the campaign.

Mobilising voters and influencing their choices presented unique challenges during this pivotal period. Firstly, most political parties running in the election had only recently emerged, lacking solid grassroots support. Except for the *Portuguese Communist Party* (PCP), established in 1921, the 14 parties running in the election were remarkably recent, having arisen from a somewhat tortuous process of legalisation and registration. To the left, the list includes the *Socialist Party* (PS), created in 1973, as well as the *Portuguese*

Democratic Movement (MDP; 1969), the *Internationalist Communist League* (LCI; 1973), the *Popular Democratic Union* (UDP; 1974), the *Popular Socialist Front* (FSP; 1974), the *Popular Unity Party* (PUP; 1974), the *Communist Electoral Front* (Marxists-Leninists) (FEC m-l; 1975), and the *Socialist Left Movement* (MES; 1975). The remaining parties, not aligned to the left, were all created in 1974: the *People's Democratic Party* (PPD, renamed *Social Democratic Party -PSD* - in 1976) the *Democratic and Social Centre* (CDS) and the *Popular Monarchist Party* (PPM). [1]

Secondly, most citizens had never voted before, due to nearly five decades of authoritarian rule (1926-74) and a first semi-democratic experience (1910-1926) characterised by restrictive voting rights, especially for women. In 1973, a poll conducted for the first edition of the weekly newspaper *Expresso* reported that 63% of Portuguese adults had never voted. In fact, while the electorate in the 1973 elections (the last to be conducted under the dictatorship) was roughly 2 million citizens, in 1975 more than 6 million citizens were granted voting rights. In addition, in the mid-1970s, one in every four Portuguese citizens could not read nor write - a panorama that raised fears of lack of political sophistication and vulnerability to demagogic and propaganda.

In 1973, a poll conducted for the first edition of the weekly newspaper *Expresso* reported that 63% of Portuguese adults had never voted. In the mid-1970s one in every four Portuguese citizens could not read nor write

Thirdly, the election occurred amidst profound political instability, turmoil and sporadic violence between supporters and opponents of revolutionary ideals. The left-wing sectors of the military who toppled the regime sought to institutionalise their power by transforming the MFA (*Armed Forces Movement*) into a relevant political force whose influence grew after 11 March 1975, when an aborted right-wing coup strengthened military and civilian left-wing forces, particularly the PCP. These events aggravated the crisis that had emerged since 1974, marked by a struggle between the PCP and the PS and the parties to their right who advocated the dissolution of political-military structures and the institutionalisation of liberal democracy.

Lastly, the untested electoral system implemented in 1975 added uncertainty to the equation. The choice of a proportional representation system with closed and blocked lists, several small electoral districts and the D'Hondt formula was seen as a good compromise by the political forces involved in the electoral system design process, but the fact is that none of them had perfect knowledge of their electoral potential and the extent to which it could be impaired or boosted by the electoral rules.

Despite all these challenges, the 1975 elections witnessed an unprecedented voter turnout (about 92 percent), fuelled by a fervent desire for active participation in national politics after decades of authoritarianism. While spontaneous popular mobilisation provides part of

the explanation for such unprecedented participation, other aspects, such as the active involvement of both political parties and the military in mobilising and influencing choices deserve attention too. Another particularly interesting result of these elections was the fact that both the PS and the PPD emerged as the top vote winners, while the PCP, considered a strong opponent due to its level of territorial penetration and its control over co-operatives and collective farms in the south, obtained modest electoral support.

The 1975 elections witnessed an unprecedented voter turnout, about 92 percent, fuelled by a fervent desire for active participation after decades of authoritarianism

This article describes how both political parties and the military conducted campaigns to mobilise citizens to vote and influence their voting behaviour in this context of uncertainty. We start by describing the campaigns by the political parties, focussing on their general strategy, campaign intensity and main slogans and messages. The discussion turns to the Cultural Dynamisation Campaigns (*Campanhas de Dinamização Cultural*) spearheaded by the MFA, underscoring both the breadth of territorial outreach and the conveyed message. The article concludes with an analysis of the impacts of such endeavours.

Talking about politics under a revolution? Parties' campaign efforts in 1975

As mentioned above, uncertainty regarding the electoral potential of the main parties marked the entire period before the April 1975 elections. Indeed, the polls carried out in 1974 showed high percentages of undecided voters (50-70 percent), and the poll published in Spain on the eve of the election (pointing to a victory for the PS, placing the PPD in second place, and the PCP in a shocking third position), still reported more than 70 percent of undecided. [2]

This panorama made parties restless in terms of their campaign efforts, albeit relevant variations in terms of professionalisation and intensity can be observed. [3] The PS campaign was deemed the most professional with the most money involved. By contrast, PPD members carried out a campaign marked by decentralisation (and some lack of coordination), partly due to the illness of its leader, Francisco Sá Carneiro. As expected, PCP's mobilisation efforts were notable: the party organised 3,041 rallies and electoral sessions, being the most active party and one of the few (along with MDP, PPD, PPM and PS) that carried out such activities in all the electoral districts of Portugal. In contrast to this, the CDS largely carried out a media campaign. In fact, the party relied heavily on radio and television campaigning to the detriment of rallies and clarification sessions, which were deemed risky, as it was one of the main victims of the excesses of far-left militants. [4] As for the remaining parties, which would prove to be considerably less relevant in electoral terms, there was a dramatically diverse panorama in terms of actions, resources and

campaign finances. [5]



Socialist Party (PS) campaign event in Lisbon, 20 April 1975. Photograph by Peter Collins, archived at the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation (Casa Comum).

But what were these parties saying? To start with, the idea of defending freedom was, interestingly, an element distinguishing the PS and other moderate forces from the other political parties. The PS used the slogan *Construir um País Livre* (Building a Free Country) and promoted the motto *socialism yes, dictatorship no*, aiming at benefitting from the anti-communist sentiment arising in some segments of Portuguese society. The PPD highlighted on its posters that it was *Em Luta Por um Portugal Livre* (Fighting for a Free Portugal).

With regard to the CDS, in a TV campaign ad Adelino Amaro da Costa presented his party as a defender of a “*free and fair society (...) for each and every Portuguese person*” . [6] Combating accusations of totalitarian impulses from the moderate parties, the PCP also appealed to the value of freedom (*Dá Mais Força à Tua Liberdade*; Give More Strength to your Freedom) and adopted more neutral messages than the other far-left parties. This trend is reflected, for example, in the terms used during the official electoral campaign period: while the four words most often used by the PCP were democracy, economy, people and freedom, in the case of the other seven far-left parties, the most common words stemmed from the Marxist lexicon (bourgeoisie, people, struggle, workers, capitalism, nationalisation, revolution, class). [7]

The words most often used by the PCP were democracy, economy, people and freedom, in the case of the other seven far-left parties,

the most common words stemmed from the Marxist lexicon: bourgeoisie, people, struggle and revolution

It must be said that, besides persuasion, voter mobilisation was an important element for most political forces involved in the campaign – but not for everyone. In fact, parties who were not running in the election, such as *Reorganized Movement of the Party of the Proletariat* (MRPP; suspended by the Revolution Council due to activities deemed antidemocratic) or the *Revolutionary Party of the Proletariat* (PRP), campaigned for abstention, positioning themselves against these “*bourgeois elections*”. [8] In turn, as we will see in the next section, the MFA’s 5th Division also presented blank voting as a valid option.

Unconventional military intervention: mobilising and influencing voters against right-wing influence

In 1975, the military had two primary concerns regarding these first democratic elections in the country. Firstly, they believed that Portuguese citizens were unprepared for participation in the elections, lacking awareness of the brutality of the authoritarian regime and its impact on the country’s poor economic performance. Secondly, they feared that citizens in many local and rural areas would be swayed by local figures towards right-wing parties, which could pave the way for a potential return to right-wing authoritarianism.

To address these concerns, the military initiated a campaign aimed at enlightening the population. Dubbed the Cultural Dynamisation and Civic Action Campaign, this effort was run from a new division established by the MFA within the armed forces, known as the 5th Division. It focused on communication, public relations and psychological action, being the ideological, propagandistic, sociological analysis and cultural dynamisation arm of the military. The 5th Division controlled several newsrooms (especially after 11 March, 1975), such as the public TV broadcaster RTP, the radio stations *Emissora Nacional* and *Rádio Clube Português*, and the newspapers *Diário de Notícias* and *O Século*. Interestingly, it was said to be more at the service of the PCP’s and Prime Minister Vasco Gonçalves’s interests than those of the Revolution Council itself. Although it was accused of such left-wing bias, researchers have not substantiated formal connections between the main members of the 5th Division and the PCP. [9]



1975 Cultural Dynamisation Campaign Poster by João Abel Manta, stating that the people were alongside the military and promoting hospitality. Archived at the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation (Casa Comum).

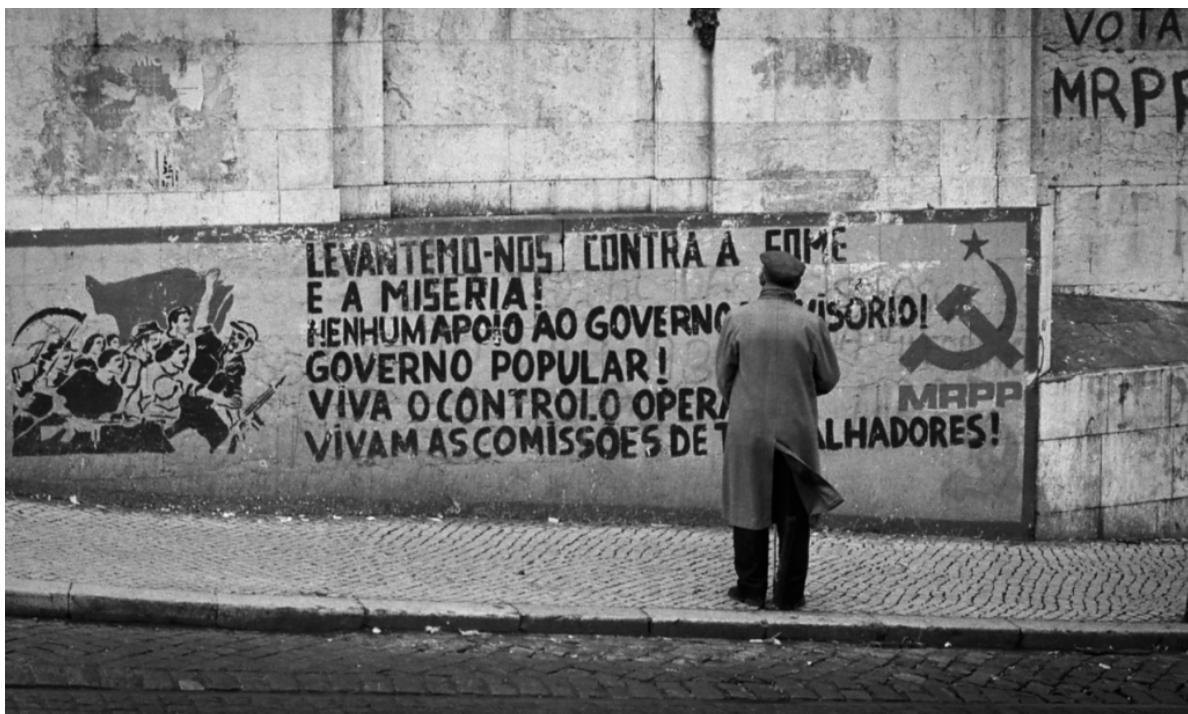
The Cultural Dynamisation efforts began months before the April 1975 election campaign but gained significant momentum during the electoral period, particularly concerning voter registration and mobilisation. It encompassed both cultural and political components, which were intertwined and challenging to disentangle. Anthropologist Vespeira de Almeida's pioneering work provides valuable insights into the campaign's cultural dimension. [10] Between October 1974 and March 11, 1975, the campaigns were itinerant, with the military not staying long in the parishes they visited. Initially, the focus was on prospectively analysing areas with the greatest needs and favourable reactions from the population. Following March 11, 1975, the military adopted cultural activities such as cinema, theatre and music to provoke discussions on social realities and improve basic infrastructures nationwide. They collaborated with artists from the left-wing political spectrum and specialists in relevant fields to achieve these objectives.

In turn, the political component aligned with the directive issued by the General Staff of the Armed Forces in October 1974, emphasising political engagement and public discussion on the nation's future paths, guided by the MFA programme. [11] During the press conference

in which the campaigns were introduced, the need to adopt an “antifascist outlook” was openly stated, and throughout the campaigns, there was continual talk about the benefits of building a “socialist society”. There are numerous examples of their intention to go beyond mobilisation and influence people’s voting behaviour. For instance, a statement made in one of the public sessions organised in the north in January 1975:

“Let everyone listen to all the parties. Those who cannot read can ask others to read their manifestoes for them, because, obviously, if this Revolution is made for the people, it seems incomprehensible that the people would vote for parties that do not defend their interests. People need to be attentive; they must not allow themselves to be deceived again. Employers must not manipulate or force their employees to vote for a certain party, nor threaten them with dismissal if they do not do this or that. The Portuguese are not reactionary [conservative]. The Portuguese must use their heads, they must think, they must see what is most convenient for them. Therefore, they cannot follow the conversations, neither of the rich, nor of those who clearly see that if the will of the people is clearly expressed, they may lose the privileges they have accumulated over all these years. This Revolution is to end privileges. It is to restore to the people their freedoms, it is to offer the people their dignity as men...” [12]

The content of these public sessions was variable, but there are many such examples among the 2,500 sessions held between 1974 and 1975 across Portugal, including the Azores and Madeira.



Political graffiti related to the elections to the Constituent Assembly, Rua da Misericórdia, Lisbon, 1975. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

As time passed, and the fear of being unable to influence voting behaviour grew, the military also ended up advocating blank voting. This is clear from an example in a press release, in which they openly say that “blank voting is not a crime, nor a betrayal; by doing so, we are making a choice, freely expressing what we think and feel, fulfilling our duty as patriots without violating our conscience or turning that weapon against ourselves. [13]

Impacts: turnout, electoral support for moderates, blank voting

In the previous sections, we show how intense the campaign activities carried out both by political parties and the military were. However, what impact did they actually have? Regarding parties' activities, in founding elections such as those held on 25 April 1975 in Portugal, effects such as persuasion, conversion and impact on the perception of the status quo (the so-called cognitive effects) are considered particularly likely. Most of the parties that were running for elections had been created and legalised very recently, so, with the probable exception of the PCP, party identities and political attitudes towards the actors of the new regime were not sufficiently crystallised. Mobilisation was also central for most parties, in a context of enormous uncertainty about their relative weight in electoral terms. [14]

Mobilisation efforts apparently worked well. Indeed, these founding elections were characterised by extremely high levels of participation (more than 90 percent of the registered citizens voted). This can be clearly understood as both a victory for the mobilisation strategy adopted by some political forces and simultaneously as unequivocal

popular support for the tool of free elections as a way of legitimising political power. [15] In terms of voter choice, after a campaign in which moderate and revolutionary alternatives to achieving the ultimate objective of “socialism” were the main competitors, the election results demonstrated that voters positioned themselves mostly on the side of the moderates, the proponents of a western liberal democracy (PS, PPD and CDS, which won about 72 percent of the votes). Interestingly, the PCP’s advantage provided by seniority, organisational structure, militant framework and mobilisation capacity [16] vis-à-vis the other parties did not translate into an electoral victory – indeed, the party only won about 12.5 percent of the vote.

The election results demonstrated that voters positioned themselves mostly on the side of the moderates, the proponents of a western liberal democracy; the PCP’s mobilisation capacity did not translate into an electoral victory

What about the impact of the campaign activities carried out by the military? Some scholars contend that the MFA failed to influence the election outcome [17] However, recent research provides a contrasting view. Through an analysis of campaign records, a mild yet notable impact was indeed observed. [18] . Firstly, in low-density areas targeted by the military, turnout increased by up to two percent compared to areas without campaigns. While this effect was not observed in high-density areas, it remains significant given the military’s focused endeavours. Secondly, this study unveiled a one percent increase in blank votes in areas where military campaigns took place, contributing directly to ongoing debates in the literature on the military’s influence on voter behaviour.

Lastly, of particular interest is the finding that left-wing parties benefited from these campaigns, with a five percent increase in votes for these parties in areas where sessions were held. The surprising aspect lies not in the left-wing parties benefiting from the campaigns, but rather in the lack of impact on the PCP. The party that most notably benefited from these endeavours was the PS, which saw a four percent increase in votes. Indeed, it is not impossible that people perceived the idea of the benefits of a “socialist society” as a call to vote for the PS.

REFERENCES AND FOOTNOTES

- 1 — Two other parties, established in Macau, also participated in these elections: ADIM and CDM. The former was able to elect one representative.
- 2 — Lisi, M.; Freire, A. (2015). “Os anos de transição: as eleições para a Assembleia Constituinte”. A: Lisi, M. (ed.). *As Eleições Legislativas no Portugal Democrático (1975-2015)*. Lisbon: Assembleia da República, p. 45-63.

3 — Santana Pereira, J.; Ribeiro, V. (2021). “Do princípio da incerteza à vitória dos moderados: as campanhas dos partidos para as eleições fundadoras de 25 de abril de 1975”. A: Raimundo, F.; Cancela, J. (ed.). *As Eleições de 1975: Eleições Fundadoras da Democracia Portuguesa*. Lisboa: Assembleia da República, p. 129-151.

4 — Paris, A.; Marchi, R.; Raimundo, F. (2019). *Breve História do CDS-Partido Popular*. Lisbon: Público/100 Folhas.

5 — Santana Pereira, J.; Ribeiro, V. (2021). “Do princípio da incerteza à vitória dos moderados: as campanhas dos partidos para as eleições fundadoras de 25 de abril de 1975”.

6 — Authors’ translation. See Lisi, M.; Freire, A. (2015). “Os anos de transição: as eleições para a Assembleia Constituinte”.

7 — Santana Pereira, J.; Ribeiro, V. (2021). “Do princípio da incerteza à vitória dos moderados: as campanhas dos partidos para as eleições fundadoras de 25 de abril de 1975”. See also Gaspar, J.; Vitorino, N. (1976). *As Eleições de 25 de Abril: Geografia e Imagem dos Partidos*. Lisbon: Livros Horizonte.

8 — Santana Pereira, J.; Ribeiro, V. (2021). “Do princípio da incerteza à vitória dos moderados: as campanhas dos partidos para as eleições fundadoras de 25 de abril de 1975”.

9 — See:

- Ribeiro, V. (2014). “Os primeiros passos da comunicação política democrática em Portugal: a 5ª Divisão do MFA como motor da propaganda revolucionária no PREC”. *História. Revista da FLUC Porto*, vol. VI, no. 4, p. 79-91
- Veiga, I. (2014). “A 5ª Divisão do Estado-Maior-General das Forças Armadas no processo revolucionário português. Modelos, apoios e antagonismos”. *Ler História* 67, p. 155-168. [Available online](#).

10 — Almeida, S. V. (2007). *A ruralidade no processo de transição para a democracia em Portugal. Campanhas de Dinamização Cultural e Ação Cívica no Movimento das Forças Armadas (1974-75)*. PhD Thesis in Anthropology, ISCTE-IUL, Lisbon.

11 — Begonha, M. (2015). *5ª Divisão MFA. Revolução e Cultura*. Lisbon: Edições Colibri.

12 — Authors’ translation. A: Begonha, M. (2015). *5ª Divisão MFA. Revolução e Cultura*, p. 26.

13 — Authors’ translation of the statement from the 5th Military Division of the MFA cited in Abreu, D. (1975). *Eleições em Abril: Diário de Campanha*. Lisbon: Liber, pp. 402-403.

14 — See:

- Santana Pereira, J.; Ribeiro, V. (2021). “Do princípio da incerteza à vitória dos moderados: as campanhas dos partidos para as eleições fundadoras de 25 de abril de 1975”
- Lisi, M., & Freire, A. (2015). “Os anos de transição: as eleições para a Assembleia Constituinte”.

15 — Lisi, M.; Freire, A. (2015). “Os anos de transição: as eleições para a Assembleia Constituinte”.

16 — See, for instance, Lisi, M. (2007). “O PCP e o processo de mobilização entre 1974 e 1976”. *Análise Social*, vol. XLII, no. 182, p. 181-205.

17 — Goldey, D. B. (1983). "Elections and the Consolidation of Portuguese Democracy: 1974-1983". *Electoral Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 229-40.

18 — Raimundo, F. et al. (2021). "Combater o obscurantismo, mobilizar para o voto. As campanhas de Dinamização Cultural e as eleições de 1975". A: Raimundo F., Cancela J. (ed.). *As Eleições de 1975: Eleições Fundadoras da Democracia Portuguesa*. Lisbon: Assembleia da República, p. 129-151.

**Filipa Raimundo**

Filipa Raimundo is Assistant Professor at Iscte's Department of Political Science and Public Policy, and Researcher at CIES-Iscte, Lisbon, Portugal. She holds a PhD in Political and Social Sciences (EUI, 2012). Her research interests include transitional justice, democratisation, authoritarian legacies, and authoritarian successor parties. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Democratization*, *South European Society and Politics*, *Acta Política*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* and *Mediterranean Politics*. She is the co-author of the book *Transitional Justice after Clean Breaks. The Case of Portugal* (Lexington, 2024) and author of *Ditadura e Democracia. Legados da Memória* (FFMS, 2018)

**José Santana Pereira**

José Santana Pereira is Associate Professor at Iscte's Department of Political Science and Public Policy, and Researcher at CIES-Iscte, Lisbon, Portugal. He holds a PhD in Political and Social Sciences (EUI, 2012). His research focuses on issues such as media systems, media effects on public opinion, campaigns, political attitudes and voting behaviour. His work has been published in journals such as *Electoral Studies*, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, *South European Society and Politics* and *Swiss Political Science Review*. He is the author of the book *Política e Entretenimento*. In 2019, along with Vasco Ribeiro, he edited the book collection *Representar os Portugueses: Breves Histórias de Grandes Partidos*.