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**Book Section:**

Leston Bandeira Gilbert, C. [orcid.org/0000-0002-6131-4607](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6131-4607) and Goes, E. (2022) The Role of the Portuguese Parliament. In: The Oxford Handbook of Portuguese Politics. Oxford University Press . ISBN 9780192855404

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## Chapter 9

### The Role of the Portuguese Parliament

Eunice Goes and Cristina Leston-Bandeira

**Abstract:** This chapter charts the development of the *Assembleia da República* (AR—Assembly of the Portuguese Republic) since 1976 until the present and argues that the Portuguese parliament is now a mover and shaker in Portugal’s politics. To show how the AR became an assertive legislature, the chapter explains the different roles it performs in the Portuguese political system. As such, it explains its relationship with the executive, followed by a discussion of the role played by parliamentary party groups and parliamentary committees. This sheds light on how the Portuguese legislature influences the legislative agenda and scrutinises the executive. The chapter also shows how the AR is reclaiming a more active role in the scrutiny of European legislation and is responding to the decline of public interest and trust in democratic institutions.

**Keywords** Portuguese parliament; parliamentary party groups; parliamentary committees; scrutiny; representation

#### 9.1 Introduction

With almost half a century of existence, Portugal’s *Assembleia da República* (AR) shows the signs of a maturing democratic institution which has adapted to new circumstances and moments of crisis. Since 1976, the Portuguese parliament accumulated a wealth of formative experiences that ranged from periods of considerable political turmoil to phases of great political stability and economic prosperity, and which included three IMF interventions, adapting to being a member of the European Union (and in particular of the Economic and Monetary Union), and adjusting to a changing electorate who gradually have become more educated, diverse and demanding (Goes and Leston-Bandeira xxxx; Norton and Leston-

Bandeira 2005; Tibúrcio 2017). Over this period, the AR changed from being a somewhat timid institution focused on its legitimisation role (Leston-Bandeira 2004) to becoming a ‘central player’ in Portuguese politics (Ribeiro, Araujo, Rodrigues 2019, 168; Tibúrcio 2017).

This chapter examines and evaluates the changing role of the Portuguese Parliament since its creation in 1976 until the current period. It starts by offering a brief overview of the AR’s different stages in recent history. Next, it examines the institutional powers enjoyed by the AR, paying particular attention to the role played by political parties, through their parliamentary party groups (PPGs), and parliamentary committees. The chapter subsequently analyses the AR’s relationship with the executive and with the president of the Republic, and goes on to explain how the Europeanisation of Portuguese politics has affected and transformed the role of the AR. Finally, the chapter shows how the different initiatives to opening up parliament to public access and scrutiny have enhanced the relevance of the AR in the Portuguese political system.

## 9.2 An Evolving Legislature

The founding of the *Assembleia da República* in 1976, two years after the Carnation Revolution, marks a key moment in Portugal’s democratisation process. It came a year after the first democratic election in Portugal, which elected the constituent assembly responsible for drafting the constitution that underpinned the new democratic system in Portugal. The election of the AR in 1976 inaugurated democratic representative politics in Portugal, despite being followed by a decade of great political turmoil and uncertainty, which culminated with Portugal joining the then-European Communities in 1986 and other solid democratic institutions.

Since then, seven constitutional reforms, as well as changing political, demographic and economic circumstances, transformed the role of the AR (Ribeiro et al 2019, 170) in Portugal’s democracy. Over this period, we can identify three main phases in its life (Leston-

Bandeira and Freire 2005, 64). In the first phase, which immediately followed the approval of the constitution in 1976 and lasted a decade, the AR was mostly focused on ensuring the upholding of democracy using its legislative procedures and scrutiny tools (Leston-Bandeira and Freire 2005).

During this first phase, the AR was also affected by the same instability that affected Portuguese politics. Indeed, political instability led to a fragmented and polarised party system (Jalali 2019)<sup>1</sup> and governmental instability. During this period, governments lasted an average of 12 months, sometimes less. At a time when the institution was still becoming established and the new institutional and constitutional framework was being tested, scrutiny took place mainly in the form of political responsibility nuclear option tools, such as motions of no confidence, instead of routine scrutiny of government action, more focused on specific policies. Only with time would the more routine scrutiny tools, such as questioning the government, become more established. Predictably, in a period when minority executives tended to be the norm, the regular recourse to votes of no confidence or to motions of censure often resulted in the collapse of the executive.

In the second phase, the executive dominated the legislative process through the control of the parliamentary majority (Norton and Leston-Bandeira 2005). From 1987 to the early noughties, parliamentary business was mostly decided by the government which at the time controlled an absolute majority in parliament. In a parallel development, membership of the EU contributed to the marginalisation of parliament as so many areas of public policy

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars classified the Portuguese party system in this period as ‘radically polarised’, but this categorisation is not consensual. Jalali argues that Sartori’s typology does not match the Portuguese party system that emerged in 1976 (Jalali: 2015, 181).

were now being decided in Brussels. As a result, during this period, the AR was perceived as an ineffective and unimportant institution.

However, this state of affairs was not set in stone. The different PPGs started to use the full gamut of scrutiny tools to monitor the activities of government and to develop new ones. For example, in 1985, scrutiny practices like written questions (*requerimentos*) and questions to the government were institutionalised. Similarly, the PPGs acquired the right to ask the executive to attend plenary debates and emergency debates in the AR, and to create new opportunities to express their views and deliberate on matters of public interest (Leston-Bandeira 2004).

Parliamentary activities were also rationalised. The number of MPs was reduced (from 250 in 1979 and 263 in 1976, to 230 in 1991) and parliamentarians became more professional in the way they exercised their role. Finally, parliament became more transparent and more accessible to citizens. For instance, in 1993, the media gained access to committee meetings and citizens' right to petition the AR was strengthened.

In the third and most recent phase, the Portuguese parliament adapted to the obligations associated with being a members of the EU and in particular to the requirements of participating in the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Indeed, the constitutional reforms of 2004, 2005, and 2010 dealt specifically with these requirements. But while it is true that these constitutional changes presented new constraints to parliament's ability to scrutinise the executive and to have a say on policy areas that have been Europeanized, they also created new opportunities for the AR to reclaim a more active and assertive role in Portuguese politics.

In this third phase, the AR developed new resources to strengthen its role as a scrutiniser of the executive and demonstrated a new willingness to assert itself as a key institution in Portugal's democratic life (Tibúrcio 2017; Norton and Leston-Bandeira 2005).

Two of the most visible signs of the AR's growing relevance were the emergence, in 1993 and 2007, of scrutiny tools like the annual State of the Nation debate, and the fortnightly regular debate with the prime minister. Since 2020, the periodicity of the regular debate with the prime minister was reduced to a monthly occurrence.

The strengthening of the role of the AR in democratic life was also visible in the new powers enjoyed by parliamentary committees. In addition, the professionalisation of the role of MPs contributed to the AR's more assertive behaviour. Some entrepreneurial MPs started to use the media to publicise their bills or interventions in parliamentary debates to great effect. Indeed, this latter feature has enabled small parties like the Left Bloc to gain a projection and recognition that exceeded their electoral weight.

### 9.3 The Role of the Assembleia da República

The *Assembleia da República*, a unicameral parliament composed of 230 representatives who are elected for four years by a proportional representation list system, was designed to provide legitimacy to the new democratic Portugal, following the typical model of separation of powers adopted by representative democracies. As such, the constitutional framework established by the 1976 constitution establishes a *tripartite* organization of political power and legitimacy (Canotilho and Moreira 1991, 213), which is divided between parliament, the president and the executive, as explained in Chapter XX

If the institutional design of Portugal's political system was modelled on established European democracies, there is something singular in the way the country's different political institutions interact. In the Portuguese political system, political parties play a pivotal role in national politics, namely when it comes to influencing the relationship between the executive and the legislature, and also with the president of the Republic. Few representative democracies bestow such a privileged role to political parties. This privileged role reflects the

concern held by the drafters of the 1976 constitution to prevent repeating past mistakes that had negatively impacted the development of a representative democracy.

To prevent the emergence of clientelism, which had undermined Portugal's previous parliamentary experiments (Leston-Bandeira 2004), the 1976 constitution established that only political parties can present candidate lists for parliament. As a result, the lists of parliamentary candidates are determined by party headquarters, which has the effect of centralising power in the hands of party leaders (Jalali 2015, 69).

The role and power of the AR is also influenced by the role played by the president of the Republic, who acts as a political system referee and a guardian of the constitution and of the constitutional court which monitors the constitutionality of each piece of legislation. The president is also responsible for the promulgation of laws and decrees-law. When presented with a bill, they have three options: to promulgate it; to veto it (in which case the legislation is sent back to parliament); or to question its constitutionality (a matter then assessed by the constitutional court). In the exercise of this role, the president, together with the constitutional court, acts as a guardian of the constitution and, crucially, of parliament's powers and rights against executive overreach.

## 9.4 The Relationship between the AR and the Executive

The fact the president has the ability to act as a referee in the relationship between the executive and the AR suggests there is a tension between the legislative and executive powers. The first dimension of this tense relationship pertains to the formation of governments. Simply put, the executive cannot govern without parliamentary support (Leston-Bandeira and Fernandes 2015). On the other hand, parliament has the ability to put an end to a government by means of a vote of no-confidence, which requires the support of an absolute majority of elected MPs.

Predictably, this tension affects the legislative process, as both the AR and the executive can initiate legislation; however, as mentioned earlier, the AR has primacy over the legislative process. This means that the AR has the power to enact legislation on all matters, except for those under the exclusive domain of the executive. As Ribeiro et al (2019, 168) explain, the AR's legislative powers are sub-divided into three types of competence: 1) exclusive competence over matters like elections, the state budget, the foundational principles of the education system and national defence; 2) partial exclusive competence over matters that parliament can delegate to the government via delegated legislation, covering areas such as rights and freedoms, fiscal, agricultural and information policies; 3) shared competence with the executive in the areas not covered by exclusive or partial competence.

In addition, the AR has the power to amend and/or reject legislation. Even when the opposition parties do not have enough support in parliament to pass their own legislation or to amend the government's proposals, they can nonetheless present their own proposals (known as projects of law), which are discussed together with government proposed legislation.

But the executive also enjoys ample legislative powers. Indeed, the government has its own exclusive right to legislate on questions pertaining to its internal functioning and organisation (Leston-Bandeira 2004, 20), as well as considerable powers within delegated legislation, which takes the form of decrees-law. Furthermore, the executive can propose bills in parliament under the forms of draft legislation (*propostas de lei*).

In addition to its law-making powers, the AR has several tools available, which have been enhanced over time, to scrutinise the executive. These tools include the right to ask written and oral questions, the right to request emergency debates, the right to question the government in the annual State of the Nation debate, and the right to request information and depositions from ministers, officials, and the public in parliamentary committees (their role is



examined further below), as well as to establish ad hoc inquiry committees to investigate specific actions taken by the executive.

The balance of power between the executive and the AR is not so much determined by its official roles established by the constitution, but by electoral politics. In truth, the size of parliamentary majorities determines the degree of parliamentary assertiveness. When minority governments are in power, the AR tends to have considerable legislative powers, forcing the executive to negotiate with the PPGs on a law-by-law basis. This was the case of Cavaco Silva's 1985 government, António Guterres's 1999 government, and António Costa's 2015 government, whose survival depended on the support of opposition PPGs. On these occasions, parliament becomes Portugal's authoritative political institution.

In contrast, in absolute majority governments, the AR's legislative role becomes marginal, as was the case during Cavaco Silva's 1991 and 1995 governments or Sócrates's 2005 government. In these periods, the executive controls the legislative agenda through its parliamentary majority (and partly thanks to strong party discipline). However, the differences in performance between minority and majority governments should not be overstated. Research by Moury and Fernandes (2018) shows that minority governments can be as effective at fulfilling their electoral pledges as majority governments. This happens for several reasons, namely because opposition parties are penalised if they block legislation that fulfils one of government's electoral promises, and because minority governments have strong incentives to deliver on electoral promises, therefore being very active in seeking deals with other PPGs (Moury and Fernandes 2018, 336; see also Lisi, Moury and Belchior 2019).

Likewise, the AR's scrutiny role varies considerably depending on the government's share of votes and also on different political circumstances. For instance, in the 1970s, this role was not a priority for the drafters of the constitution. At the time, parliament's key role was undoubtedly seen primarily as a legislative one, albeit with important accountability

duties which could be triggered through motions of no-confidence. As Leston-Bandeira argues, scrutiny was initially ‘seen as a guarantee of democracy, rather than a practice of democracy’ (2001, 150). It was only when democracy became more established and politics more stable that scrutiny tools began to expand.

Scrutiny as a routine day-to-day check on government would therefore only fully develop from the early 1990s onwards. What triggered this change was the absolute parliamentary majority enjoyed by the PSD government at the time. Opposition parties started to complain of executive overreach and of the marginalisation of parliament. As a result of this pressure, new scrutiny tools emerged. The AR gained new opportunities to question the executive, to launch committees of inquiry regarding government activities, and to hold debates. Importantly, the role of parliamentary committees was strengthened.

Despite these new tools, the effectiveness of parliament has been heavily constrained by a lack of resources. Although, over the years, it has acquired new resources, namely in research areas, to support its activities, the AR has only modest resources at its disposal to conduct its work appropriately. Indeed, the AR employs only 413 permanent staff to assist 230 MPs in the conduction of their legislative and scrutiny roles, which is comparatively low when compared to other European parliaments. This corresponds to about 1.99 staff per MP, compared with 2.12 in Spain, 3.9 in Belgium and 3.8 in the Dutch parliament, the latter two being a comparable size to the AR.

This is particularly noticeable in the areas of research, transparency, oversight and public engagement<sup>3</sup>. The library employs very few expert staff members who can draft reports and briefings to assist the work of MPs, who, as a result, are very dependent on their own parties’ support services. When considered individually, MPs don’t have specifically

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Portugal: Assembleia da República’, IPU Parline, , accessed on 16 February 2021.

allocated support staff, they rely instead on a pool of staff employed by their PPG, and often share their office with another MP, lacking suitable office space. Similarly, parliamentary committees have few assistants and MPs lack appropriate communication resources and the administrative support required to be an effective parliamentarian (Leston-Bandeira 2004, 45). Although this situation has improved, it is still noticeably lacking in comparison with other European legislatures; and as research has repeatedly shown (see for example Ryle 1981, Hammond 1983, Jones 2006, Geddes and Mulley 2018), staff is a key resource in any parliament. MPs cannot hold expert knowledge on all matters and their ability to scrutinise and draw good legislation is affected by the support they receive.

## 9.5 The Role of Parliamentary Party Groups

The weakness in resources is somewhat (though not completely) counterbalanced by the central role performed by PPGs. As in other legislatures, PPGs are a pivotal organisational unit of the AR (Saalfeld and Strøm, 2014; Jalali and Teruel, 2019: 49), but their role in the political system is recognised and institutionalised in the constitution to an exceptional extent. Indeed, the constitution makes 15 references to PPGs, a number that is only exceeded in the Greek constitution (Jalali and Teruel 2019, 53; van Biezen 2012, 202). For example, Art.180 of the constitution specifically and exclusively ascribes a number of rights to PPGs, namely the right to initiate an interpellation (a type of debate).

Within parliament, most of the key resources, such as quotas of parliamentary business or budget entitlement, are distributed by parliamentary groups and not to individual MPs. Indeed, PPGs have the power to decide on matters that range from the time allocated to speak in the Chamber, to the composition of committees, or the number of questions raised in parliamentary debates. PPGs' primacy is such that committee voting is conducted by party block (Jalali and Teruel 2019, 68).

The central role performed by PPGs is further demonstrated by the role of the Conference of Leaders. This body, which assembles the leaders of all the PPGs and the AR's president, sets most of parliament's agenda (Leston-Bandeira 2004, 44). Although revisions to the rules of procedure (namely in 1993 and in 2007) granted some rights to independent MPs, such as a time slot to speak in the Chamber, parliamentary business is still organised according to the requirements of PPGs.

Occasionally, parties include non-party candidates on their lists, but the election is fought on a party ticket. Once elected, representatives need to remain within the PPG through which they were elected; it is against the constitution to cross the floor. Each MP's activity is determined by their PPG for the entire duration of a parliamentary session, from speaking times, to the number of questions they can ask the government during a debate. Those who wish to act as truly independent representatives have fewer rights and opportunities to intervene in the chamber, to ask the government questions or to integrate a parliamentary committee. That being said, there is some flexibility within the system which grants individual MPs a degree of autonomy from their PPGs (Leston-Bandeira 2009, 699).

The direct implication of these rules is that PPGs, and by implication the national political parties, have determined the role and power of the AR (Leston-Bandeira and Freire 2005, 60). The second implication is that party discipline is very strong in the Portuguese political system.

## 9.6 The Role of Parliamentary Committees

The growing assertiveness of the Portuguese parliament is directly linked to the role performed by parliamentary standing committees. As Fernandes and Riera argue, the 'committee system is the most critical decision-making arena in today's Portuguese *Assembleia da República*' (2019, 75). However, this has not always been the case.

The Portuguese committee system underwent significant changes since the 1980s. In its first decade, the main power arena was the AR plenary, where the affairs of the nation were debated (Leston-Bandeira 2004). There was, of course, a healthy number of parliamentary committees, which enabled specialisation, but they were restricted in their activities. For example, committees could not meet at the same time as plenary sessions and could only scrutinise bills after their first reading. As Opello puts it, the role of committees in law-making was mostly about working out ‘the details of compromises made in plenary’ (1986, 302).

In addition, the effectiveness of committees was affected by the high turnover rates in their membership. Political parties did not recognise the value in appointing committee members for a long period of time (Fernandes and Riera 2019, 76). To make matters worse, there was also a high turnover amongst MPs. Many did not complete their mandates, and, thanks to a list replacement system, many only remained MPs for short periods of time. Because members of parliamentary committees rarely had the opportunity to develop expertise in the areas they were scrutinising, their performance tended to be amateurish (Leston-Bandeira 2004).

As parliamentarians learnt how to perform their roles in the AR, the rules governing parliamentary committees began to change. Since the 1980s, committees gained the right to sit in whilst plenary sessions were taking place. Committees also started to play a role in drafting legislation and became the stage for the second reading of bills. The process works as follows: PPGs present their proposals to the presidium, whose role is to select the most appropriate committee for the bill. Next, in the pre-floor stage of the bill, the appropriate committee reports on the bill. If the proposal is approved on the floor of the AR, then it returns to the committee for further scrutiny, debate and vote. At this stage, the committee

has the opportunity to propose amendments. Following this stage, the bill is subject to a final vote in the Chamber (Fernandes and Riera 2019, 82).

The annual budget approval is a good example of the key role performed by parliamentary committees. Over the regulated period to debate and vote on the annual budget, PPGs use the scrutiny period in the different parliamentary committees to vote and amend the annual budget proposed by the government of the day. This central role was particularly visible in the period 2015-19, when the approval of the national budget required extensive negotiations with the three radical left-wing parties (Fernandes 2016; Ribeiro Araujo, Rodrigues 2019, 171).

Over time, parliamentary committees have gained more powers to gather evidence on policymaking or on any important aspects of public life. For that purpose, committees have been allowed to carry out research, ask for information, undertake parliamentary auditing sessions, and ask members of the public, officials and ministers to testify in committee hearings and inquiries (Leston-Bandeira 2004, 51) which have been opened to media scrutiny. Moreover, the executive is now expected to keep the committees regularly informed about its activities, to submit official reports over all areas of public policy, and to testify in committee hearings. Crucially, parliamentary committees enable small parties to gain visibility and latitude in their scrutiny roles (Fernandes and Riera 2019, 79), especially regarding European affairs.

All these powers, and particularly the fact that the work of committees is open to public and media scrutiny, contribute to their strength (Tibúrcio 2017, 57). However, as Fernandes and Riera argue, publicity can be ‘detrimental to efficiency’, given that ‘MPs are more willing to engage in inter-party consensus behind closed doors’ (2019, 82). As a result, the assertiveness of parliamentary committees is highly dependent on the strategies of political parties and on parliamentary arithmetic.

## 9.7 The AR and the EU

The impact of EU membership in the role played by the AR cannot be overstated, as it has affected the AR's ability to scrutinise the executive and to legislate on all matters of public policy. These limitations are partly a direct result of EU membership, and of the concomitant leading role of national governments in EU affairs.

The consensus in the literature on the Europeanization of public policy suggests that as a result of EU membership, national executives have gained discretion and power to the detriment of national parliaments (Moravcsik 1998; Moury and Standring 2017; Carter and Poguntke 2010; Hertner 2015; Schmidt 2020). The fact the European Council is the main legislative body in the EU implies that national governments benefit from informational asymmetries vis-à-vis national parliaments (NPs). In some instances, governments have utilised the structure of EU policy-making to enact the policies they wanted to implement but were afraid to propose to their voters. This was the case with the public spending cuts implemented by the centre-right government led by Prime-Minister Pedro Passos Coelho in the 2011-15 period. The prime minister had expressed the desire to 'go beyond the troika'; however, he justified a programme of austerity on the grounds of EU requirements to participate in the monetary union (Moury and Standring 2017, 661).

Though national governments play a leading role in EU policy-making, the Europeanization of public policy is not a one-way street. The powers of national parliaments have evolved in response to executive dominance in EU affairs and also to treaty changes. The changing role of the AR in terms of scrutiny and influence over European affairs confirms this trend.

When Portugal joined the EU in 1986, the AR only exercised *post-facto* scrutiny powers over the ratification of treaties; however, as it will be shown, this passive role gradually changed (Alvarez and Sande, 2019: 206). Over time, the AR developed new tools

to effectively scrutinise European affairs and to monitor and influence the government's strategy at European Councils. Following the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, the task of monitoring EU activities was extended to all standing committees, and the AR's competence to monitor European issues became enshrined in the constitution (Hix and Raunio 2005, 158).

Over time, the executive was required to fully inform the AR on a wide range of areas concerning Portugal's participation in the EU (Alvarez and Sande 2019, 206). Nowadays, the executive is required by law to consult parliament on Portugal's EU policy and negotiating strategy in the different EU institutions before each European Council. Indeed, the European Scrutiny Act, as amended in 2012, foresees a shift from *ex post* to *ex ante* scrutiny of all European council meetings and the organisation of regular plenary debates with the government on European affairs (Jančić 2016, 242).

The European Affairs Committee is, by virtue of the European Scrutiny Act, explicitly charged with developing relations with EU institutions. This is to be done by: (a) intensifying exchanges with the European Parliament (EP) and organizing regular meetings with Members of the EP (MEPs), particularly those elected in Portugal; (b) promoting meetings or hearings with EU institutions, bodies and agencies on matters that are important to Portugal (Jančić 2011, 98).

The AR also benefited from changes to the EU treaties which specifically aimed to strengthen the powers of national legislatures in the policy-making of the EU. For example, the Amsterdam Treaty made provisions to promote the greater involvement of NPs in EU decision-making processes. Later, the Lisbon Treaty recognised the role of NPs as part of the EU institutional framework through the early warning system, which allows NPs to ask for revisions or 'reasoned opinions' on proposed EU legislation. Finally, the Commission also started a new dialogue with NPs with a view to developing inter-parliamentary cooperation.



The AR has adapted quickly to these changes and has been keen to directly engage in the scrutiny of European institutions and ranks amongst the most engaged NPs in the institutional dialogue with EU institutions (Resende and Paulo 2017, 63), issuing one of the highest numbers of ‘reasoned’ opinions to the EU. Furthermore, because NPs are expected to participate in the governance of the Eurozone (Jančić 2011: 97; see also Resende and Paulo 2017), some statutes were amended to ensure greater parliamentary participation in budgeting and in EU economic governance.

Crucially, parliamentary committees have enabled small parties to gain visibility and latitude in their scrutiny roles regarding European Affairs (Fernandes and Riera 2019, 79). Moreover, EU affairs are closely followed by parliamentarians who can and do launch questions, set agenda issues, initiate debates and scrutinise legislation in the different committees that monitor EU directives on a wide range of public policy areas (Winzen, Ruiter and Rocabert 2018).

But there is a key policy area where the AR, like other NPs of the Eurozone, has lost considerable powers. The establishment of the European Stability Mechanism, the entry into force of the Fiscal Compact, of the Two-Pack and Six-Pack agreements and of the European Semester, which gave the commission the power to veto national budgets and monitor and discipline member states that do not comply with the rules, had an impact on the budgetary sovereignty of NPs (Auel and Höing 2014; see also Schmidt 2020, 203).

As a result of these changes, Auel and Höing argue that during the Eurozone crisis the Portuguese parliament was not particularly active in seeking to influence government policy (2014), but that assessment is not entirely accurate or fair. In truth, there was substantial parliamentary opposition to the legislation brought forward by the centre-right government (Schmidt 2020, 140), but the hands of parliament were tied because the government controlled the parliamentary majority. Moreover, this was an exceptional period when all

national institutions, including the executive, were being dictated by the troika (Schmidt, 2020: 120). Nonetheless it is noteworthy that despite these constraints, the different PPGs were able to influence the shape of the national budget.

Despite the changes in the governance of the monetary union, on balance NPs gained a new relevance in EU policy-making (Jančík 2011,103). That being said, the Portuguese parliament is still learning how to fully use its powers of scrutiny over European affairs (Resende and Paulo 2017, 61). In particular, the AR needs to fully develop its working relations with European institutions like the Commission and the EP as a strategy to overcome informational asymmetries, which at the moment benefit the executive.

## 9.8 The Public Engagement Turn

As the AR became a more professionalised and assertive actor in Portuguese politics, public interest and trust in its activities declined. To revert these tendencies, the AR has made an effort to be more accountable and accessible to citizens (Goes and Leston-Bandeira 2019; Leston-Bandeira and Tibúrcio 2013; Ribeiro et al 2019).

The trend towards greater openness is manifest in the strengthening of the process of citizens' petitions, and in the opening of the AR's doors to more regular visits from the public. The AR has also launched the Parliament of Young People programme (in place since 1995), introduced the citizens' legislative initiative and the Digital Parliament Group's initiatives in 2018, which strengthened the potential of e-petitions. These initiatives have supplemented earlier pioneering measures such as the launch of a parliamentary website in 1996 and of a TV channel devoted to broadcast parliamentary activities, well before other parliaments. Together, these initiatives have enhanced the visibility and openness of the AR.

But whilst some areas have shown considerable investment and development, others are lagging behind in comparison with other legislatures. This is particularly clear in areas of direct engagement with the public in relation to ongoing parliamentary business. The fact

remains that parliamentary activities continue to be opaque to most citizens and that, other than specific organisations such as trade unions, there is very little consultation with the public on matters being discussed in parliament.

## 9.9 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that, during its existence of almost half a century, the AR has evolved from a relatively timid legislature which was mostly focused on acting as a guardian of Portugal's young democracy, to an assertive institution which takes its role of scrutinising the executive and representing the Portuguese electorate seriously. This chapter has shown that the AR has adapted quickly to new political circumstances, but it has also benefitted from key institutional changes that enabled it to develop new scrutiny tools and new ways of influencing policy-making, especially when it comes to EU affairs.

But like other national parliaments in the EU, the AR's ability to shape national politics is constrained by the ongoing process of Europeanisation which has added a supranational dimension to policy-making. Future research on the activities of the AR should explore further the full effects of supranational policy-making in the ability of parliament to influence policy-making. Given that a substantial part of the legislation that affects the lives of Portuguese citizens is now drafted in Brussels, research must explore the potential institutional but also informal networks that can help a national parliament like the AR influence EU policy-making in a more direct manner.

Similarly, many other legislatures have recently invested in the development of public engagement methods which enable a closer input from the public into decision-making, and a more ongoing relationship with citizens between elections. Apart from its petitions tool, the Portuguese parliament is still a long way from developing this. However, we still know very little about this parliament's relationship with citizens, namely in terms of constituency activities. Future academic research should therefore also focus on this area. Although the

reality is that the AR is greatly under-studied: almost every single part of its activity desperately needs more attention. We are yet to experience the boom in legislative studies that has been observed elsewhere.

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