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THE END OF THE PORTUGUESE EXCEPTIONALISM. CHEGA, THE EMERGENCE AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT IN PORTUGAL

A b s t r a c t

The exceptionalism that historically characterized Portugal as being immune to radical right-wing populist formations has come to an end. In 2019, for the first time since the end of Antonio Salazar's authoritarian regime, a radical right-wing populist party gained representation in the Assembly of the Republic, and Chega has since become the third largest political force in the Portuguese party system.

In order to understand the reasons why Portugal has remained immune to the rise of radical right-wing populist parties, this article offers an analysis of the emergence and consolidation of Chega in the Portuguese party system, exploring the context in which Chega's emergence took place, the reasons why Portugal had been immune to such formations since the transition to democracy, and the causes that led the formation led by André Ventura to break the exceptionalism that characterized Portugal.

Based on the typology established by Cas Mudde, the article evaluates Chega's ideological and discursive positioning, trying to determine to what extent the Portuguese formation shares the ideological elements of radical right-wing populist formations.

K e y w o r d s: populist radical right; political system; political parties, Chega; Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

The exceptionalism that characterized Portugal as immune to the formations of the populist radical right has come to an end. In 2019, for the first time since the end of the authoritarian regime of Antonio Salazar, a populist radical right-wing party gained parliamentary representation in the Portuguese political system. In the legislative elections of October 2019, Chega (Enough!) secured a parliamentary seat, and in less than three years, the party led by André Ventura has become the third political force in the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal.

With the end of Portuguese exceptionalism and the consolidation of Chega in Portugal's party system, it is time to analyze the political context in which Chega is framed and understand the reasons that led it to break the exceptionalism that characterized Portugal as immune to populist radical right-wing parties.

The article aims primarily to understand the reasons why Portugal has remained immune to the rise of such political formations since the establishment of democracy in 1976, and the causes that led Chega to break the exceptionalism that characterized Portugal. Likewise, using Cas Mudde's typology¹ as a reference to define and classify a political party within the family of the populist radical right, it evaluates to what extent Chega shares the ideological characteristics of this party family: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, as well as other ideological elements distinct from those attributed to the radical populist right.

The article is structured into five sections following this introduction. Firstly, a theoretical-conceptual foundation is presented to provide conceptual clarity to the existing debate on the definition of these political formations. Next, the objectives and methodology of the research are presented. Subsequently, the end of Portuguese exceptionalism is contextualized, analyzing the reasons why Portugal had been immune to these political formations since the transition to democracy. In the following section, the causes of Chega's emergence in the 2019 legislative elections and its consolidation in the Portuguese party system are explored. Then, Chega's political and discursive agenda is presented in light of Cas Mudde's theorization (2007), and

¹ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

its economic agenda is analyzed based on Herbert Kitschelt's² theory of winning formulas. Finally, the study's conclusions are presented, and possible future lines of research are proposed.

THEOREICAL-CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION: DEFINING THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT

The study of the Populist Radical Right (PRR) has gained significant political and academic attention in recent years due to its electoral growth and political consolidation. This phenomenon, closely linked to the 'third wave' of extremism in Europe,³ 'the Silent Counterrevolution',⁴ as well as the so-called Populist Zeitgeist,⁵ or the 'fourth wave' of post-war far-right,⁶ has aroused great political, academic, and media interest across Europe.

Despite the widespread consensus regarding the existence of a group of political parties with certain ideological similarities, positioned to the right of other political formations such as conservatives or Christian democrats, identifying their ideological and organizational characteristics remains problematic. Theoretical and terminological confusion, a veritable 'war of words',⁷ has permeated much of the literature, generating endless debates and hampering analysis.

It is widely accepted that this phenomenon is multifaceted, taking on different forms depending on the time and context in which it emerges and develops, similar to other phenomena studied in the Social Sciences.

Various academics and experts have used different terminologies to define or characterize these political formations. Labels such as anti-immigration, nativism, reactionary tribalism, ethnonationalism, extreme right, new right, and combinations of words like radical, right-wing, and populism, among others, have been employed. This variety

² Herbert Kitschelt's, 'Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies: Theoretical Propositions', *Party Politics* 1: 4, 1995, pp. 447–72.

³ K. von Beyme, 'Right-Wing Extremism in Post-War Europe', *West European Politics* 11: 2, 1988, pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0140238808424678>.

⁴ P. Ignazi, 'The Silent Counter-Revolution: Hypotheses on the Emergence of Extreme Right-Wing Parties in Europe', *European Journal of Political Research* 22: 1, 1992, pp. 3–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1992.tb00303.x>.

⁵ Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition* 39: 4, 2004, pp. 541–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

⁶ Idem, *The Far-Right Today* (John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

⁷ Idem, 'The War of Words: Defining the Extreme Right Party Family', *West European Politics* 19: 2, 1996, pp. 225–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402389608425132>.

of labels is confusing since, essentially, all these studies essentially address the same phenomenon.

The use of these expressions to denote does not fully encompass its complexity, as it would reduce its scope and meaning. Therefore, any reductionist terminology of the investigated phenomenon must be rejected.

On the other hand, to define these formations, it is necessary to discard concepts that allude to fascism, such as fascist, neo-fascist, Nazi, or neo-Nazi terms, etc. Currently, such accusations against leaders or parties of this political family are common in different media and political debates. Fascism is a concept that in recent years has been emptied of meaning, and as Jason Stanley asserts, it 'has become an insult.'

After World War II, fascism was rejected by most European countries, although it did not completely disappear and gradually transformed into a new phenomenon: neofascism, represented by nostalgic groups that survived the war and reorganized into social organizations like the Italian Social Movement or the Reich Socialists.

The term 'far-right,' especially during the decades of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, became, until recent times, the academic and political reference used to refer to this phenomenon. However, this term has been used by the vast majority of scholars⁸ in a descriptive and spatial manner to ideologically locate these parties.

Cas Mudde's work *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*⁹ marked a turning point in this discipline. The typologies of the radical (populist) right and the far-right, with significant differences but also similarities, are often grouped and categorized as part of a broader party family: the far-right.

The concept of far-right, proposed by Mudde, refers to these political parties whose main distinctive criterion is their stance towards democracy. While the far-right rejects the essence of democracy, the populist radical right supports democracy but aims to change the institutions and values of liberal democracy.¹⁰

⁸ von Beyme, 'Right-Wing Extremism in Post-War Europe'; Ignazi, 'The Silent Counter-Revolution'; Mudde, 'The War of Words'; E. Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2005).

⁹ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*.

¹⁰ Idem, *The Far-Right Today*.

Despite the varied conceptual approaches, the terminology 'radical right' is the most commonly used by comparative politics scholars¹¹ to define these political actors, whose main ideological elements are nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.

Nativism is an ideology that argues that the nation-state should be inhabited only by those considered 'natives,' excluding individuals or ideas that threaten the unity and homogeneity of the nation.¹²

Discursively, radical right-wing parties express their nativism through anti-immigration policies. Closing borders to immigration or the obligation to adapt to national culture are some of the most common political proposals of the radical right. Beyond anti-immigration discourse, these formations express their ideological fetish for nativism through a strong defense of the national way of life or the exaltation of belonging to the nation.

Authoritarianism is the second nuclear characteristic defining the radical right, understood under the belief of a strictly ordered society that severely punishes infringements on authority. Radical right-wing parties translate their ideological authoritarianism into the defense of traditional values, such as family and the protection of religious institutions.

In addition to nativism and authoritarianism, there is a third element associated with this party family: populism. The term populism is probably one of the most problematic and attention-grabbing terms in recent decades from various disciplines in the social sciences. The relationship between the radical right and populism is a source of discrepancies. The association between both was established in the nineties when authors like Betz and Taggart¹³ presented populism as a defining trait of the radical right. The publication of the book *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, by Mudde,¹⁴ supported the idea that populism is part of the ideological core of this party family. However, Mudde himself points out that although the populist radical right is the most successful form of the radical right, it is not the only one. This implies that the primary and unchanging ideological core of the radical right consists of nativism and authoritarianism, while populism might be a present but circumstantial element.¹⁵

¹¹ H. Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (Hounds mills, London: Macmillan, 1994); Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*; J. Rydgren, 'The Sociology of the Radical Right', *Annual Review of Sociology* 33, 2007, pp. 241–62.

¹² Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*.

¹³ Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism*.

¹⁴ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

OBJETIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This article aims primarily, on the one hand, to analyze the reasons why Portugal has remained immune to the rise of populist radical right-wing political formations since the establishment of democracy in 1976, as well as the causes that led Chega to break the exceptionalism that characterized Portugal. On the other hand, it aims to analyze the ideological and discursive elements of this political formation to evaluate the extent to which Chega shares the ideological characteristics of the European populist radical right-wing party family.

The secondary objectives seek to analyze the evolution of the Portuguese political system since the establishment of democracy, as well as the trajectory that Chega has experienced since its origins in 2019.

To achieve the established objectives, a research method has been implemented based on the deployment of various techniques to address the inquiries posed by this investigation.

To provide conceptual clarity in the existing terminological debate on how to denominate this family of political parties, and their evolution in recent years, and to establish a definition of the populist radical right, an exhaustive bibliographic review of specialized literature on the populist radical right has been conducted.

To understand the reasons why Portugal remained immune to the emergence of populist radical right-wing political formations since the transition to democracy and to explain its 'exceptionalism,' a qualitative approach has been followed, grounded in the analysis of publications on the Portuguese political system and its political parties.

For obtaining data and information on the emergence and consolidation of Chega within Portugal's party system, a qualitative approach based on the analysis of party publications, and a quantitative approach based on the analysis of electoral data from PORDATA have been employed.

Finally, to analyze Chega's political and discursive agenda to evaluate the extent to which Chega shares the ideological characteristics of the populist radical right-wing family, following Cas Mudde's theorization, a qualitative approach based on the party's political manifestos and the statements of its leader has been adopted. Likewise, this method has been used to examine the party's economic agenda following Herbert Kitschelt's theory of winning formulas.

RESULTS

THE END OF PORTUGUESE EXCEPTIONALISM

For years, Portugal had been immune to the reactionary wave threatening Europe since the late seventies. The Carnation Revolution, the civic-military uprising that ended Salazar's dictatorship, had equipped the Portuguese with the necessary democratic antibodies to resist the contagious advancement of the populist radical right wing. However, nearly half a century later, the political reality of Portugal is vastly different. The apparent 'exceptionality' that characterized Portugal's immunity to the populist radical right-wing came to an end, and in 2019, for the first time in the country's democratic history, a populist radical right-wing party gained representation in the Portuguese parliament.

In a span of just three years, Chega, with a single seat and less than one hundred thousand votes, was perceived as an uncertain possibility, a phenomenon that could either become a footnote in Portuguese history or another reference point in the geography of the European populist radical right-wing.¹⁶ However, at present, Chega has become the third-largest party represented in the São Bento Palace, surpassing the alliance between Greens and Communists, the Unitary Democratic Coalition, and the progressive left coalition in the Bloco de Esquerda.

Faced with this unexpected panorama, the need arises to address the question of how Portugal has arrived at this situation, analyzing the causes that have motivated the emergence and consolidation of Chega in the Portuguese political system.

Portugal has historically been considered an unfavorable terrain for far-right political forces. Since the Carnation Revolution and the consolidation of the party system in the mid-1980s, the country has maintained a moderate multi-party system characterized by centripetal competition between the center-left-oriented Socialist Party (PS) and the center-right-oriented Social Democratic Party (PSD), which have alternated in power and garnered the majority of votes over the last decades.

The Socialist Party, founded in 1973, has gradually shifted towards the center, abandoning the Marxist legacy that characterized it during

¹⁶ S. Forti, *Extrema derecha 2.0: Qué es y cómo combatirla* (Siglo XXI de España Editores, 2021).

the period known as the Ongoing Revolutionary Process. In economic terms, it has adopted a pragmatic stance, evolving towards a more moderate and centrist position over time.

On the other hand, the Social Democratic Party (PSD), initially named the Democratic Popular Party and founded in 1974 by advocates of internal liberal semi-opposition to the dictatorship, initially embraced social democratic principles. However, by the late 1970s, the party began progressively adopting a more liberal policy, promoting private enterprise, and labor market flexibility.

Since the transition to democracy, Portuguese political activity has revolved around these two parties, alternating in government. The Socialist Party, when requiring parliamentary support, has preferred to seek it from the center-left rather than approaching more radical left-wing parties, such as Bloco de Esquerda (BE) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP). These preferences stem from marked programmatic differences and divisions rooted since the regime's election in the 1970s.

However, after the legislative elections of 2015, for the first time since the establishment of democracy in Portugal, left-wing parties agreed to form a government coalition, known as 'Geringonça'.

On the other hand, the Social Democratic Party has traditionally tended to form coalitions with the CDS-People's Party, a minority Christian-democratic formation. Founded in July 1974, the party is known for its defense of Catholic values and its ideological ambiguity, which oscillated between economic liberalism and conservatism until the early 2000s, when conservatism ultimately prevailed.¹⁷

For a long time, the Portuguese political system has been structured around the founding parties of democracy: on the left, the Socialist Party and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), which since its creation has maintained strong cohesion and ideological continuity in defense of workers' interests, participating in elections in coalition with the Ecologist Party 'The Greens' since 1987. Meanwhile, on the right, the system has revolved around the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the CDS-People's Party.

This political dynamic remained relatively stable until the early 21st century when the Left Bloc (BE), a new left party emerging in the legislative elections of 1999, founded by radical sectors critical of real socialism, gained representation in Parliament.¹⁸

¹⁷ M. Lisi, *Os partidos políticos em Portugal: Continuidade e transformação* (Almedina, 2011).

¹⁸ Ibid.

The Resistance of the Portuguese Party System

In contrast to other Southern European countries like Greece, Spain, and Italy, where traditional political parties experienced significant electoral setbacks and new 'outsider' parties achieved notable electoral results, Portugal maintained a stable and resilient party system during the years of crisis. Despite sharing common conditions such as electoral systems tending towards bipolarity, a marked division along the left-right axis, the presence of highly conservative right-wing parties, and the shadow of authoritarian regimes from the past, the Portuguese political system did not undergo significant changes during the crisis period. Portugal did not suffer drastic changes in its political system during the crisis, demonstrating its stability and resistance. Party system indicators such as fragmentation, polarization, and volatility remained relatively stable, and no new parties emerged with significant electoral impact.¹⁹

During the 'lost decade' of economic stagnation in the early 2000s, exacerbated by the international financial crisis, and the austerity policies imposed by the Troika in 2011 and subsequently adopted by the PSD, popular dissatisfaction did not lead to the emergence of new 'outsider' parties or substantial electoral losses for major parties.

In the elections following the 2008 crisis, in a context of widespread mistrust, support for the main parties remained stable, with PS and PSD alternating in government. The stability of the party system was also maintained thanks to the strength of the two parties positioned to the left of the PS: the PCP and BE. These parties maintained similar levels of support during the economic crisis and the Troika's intervention, channelling certain popular discontent during the austerity period.

Despite the economic crisis, there were no populist parties equivalent to Podemos in Spain, the Five Star Movement in Italy, or the Golden Dawn in Greece. Both BE and PCP adopted an inclusive populist discourse on socio-economic issues, advocating for the protection of the welfare state to reduce unemployment, and poverty, and improve the healthcare system. Both parties supported the nationalization of certain sectors and state control over specific industries, as well as 'democratic' control of banks. They also channelled the populist

¹⁹ M. Lisi, 'Parties, Citizens and the Eurozone Crisis: How Europe Has Contributed to the Resilience of the Portuguese Party System', in *Rethinking Democratisation in Spain, Greece and Portugal* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 151–75.

discourse generated by the crisis, criticizing external actors and the democratic deficit of the European Union.²⁰

The Shadow of Authoritarian Past

Portugal's political culture has been conditioned by the specter of Salazarism and the ingrained values of the Carnation Revolution, which have become mythological foundations of the new democratic system. The transition from dictatorship to democracy left a profound mark on contemporary political culture, partially explaining the absence of successful radical right-wing populist parties in Portugal.

The explicit rejection of the authoritarian past and the institutional commitment to commemorating the transition to democracy have been essential pillars upon which the Portuguese democratic system was built. This rejection and social condemnation of the authoritarian past have kept radical right-wing populist parties on the fringes of the party system due to the deeply rooted perception in Portuguese society that these parties cannot free themselves from the strong stigma associated with the authoritarian regime of António Salazar.

The stigma linked to the authoritarian regime has been so notable that the Portuguese party system has tended to shift towards the center as a reaction to Salazar's regime's marked right-wing character.

Since the Carnation Revolution, which ended the dictatorship, radical right-wing populism has not managed to achieve significant importance in Portugal. The different nationalist factions, which were fragmented during the last years of the overthrown regime, did not show significant interest in uniting around a shared project.

Although the Portuguese radical right experienced divisions in the 1980s and 1990s, some radical activists sought to consolidate themselves in the political sphere and take advantage of emerging movements of populism, identity politics, and protest that began to take shape in Europe with the arrival of the new millennium.

The National Renovator Party (PNR) emerged in 1999 from the merger of several smaller parties and extreme right-wing movements, including neo-fascists and individuals nostalgic for the Salazar regime. Despite attempting to renew itself and distance itself from the nostalgic and retaliatory attitudes of Salazarism, moving closer to the political discourse of the European radical right-wing populism, the party never managed to gain representation in the Assembly of the Republic.

²⁰ Ibid.

The experience of the dictatorship, the widespread rejection of authoritarianism, and the significant repression of the fallen regime, coupled with broad support for the democratic transition led by the Carnation Revolution, are factors that have largely delegitimized political forces resembling ideologies from before the transition.²¹

Political Competition Around Socioeconomic Issues

Political competition in Portugal continues to have a predominantly socio-economic focus. This focus became especially evident during the last elections, where the rescue programs implemented between 2011 and 2014, along with measures taken to overcome 'austerity' policies, displaced other issues from the country's political agenda.

Sociocultural issues such as immigration, abortion, the LGBTQ+ community, and feminism have had a relatively limited presence on the Portuguese political agenda, making it challenging to articulate radical right-wing populist discourses.

In contrast to other European countries, immigration has not been a dominant issue in Portugal. Compared to other European countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, or France, Portugal has one of the lowest immigration rates. The 2008 financial crisis had a significant impact on the immigrant population, resulting in, in some cases, higher-than-average unemployment rates and a consequent decline in immigrant arrivals. Despite this decline, from 2012 until the Covid-19 crisis in 2020, immigration rates have quintupled according to Pordata data (2022).²²

Regarding refugees, Portugal has not been recognized for receiving a large number of asylum applications or for hosting refugees, despite an increase in asylum applications in 2015 due to the Middle Eastern refugee crisis. Compared to other European countries, asylum in Portugal remains a marginal phenomenon.²³

Most immigration in Portugal comes from countries such as Cape Verde, Angola, Mozambique, and Brazil, where the native language is

²¹ M.S. Mendes and J. Dennison, 'Explaining the Emergence of the Radical Right in Spain and Portugal: Salience, Stigma and Supply', *West European Politics* 44: 4, 2021, pp. 752–75.

²² 'Portugal Inmigrantes Permanentes: Total y por Sexo', Pordata, 2022, <https://www.pordata.pt/en/portugal/permanent+immigrants+total+and+by+sex-3254> (access: 12 January 2025).

²³ B. Borrego, 'Demographics of Immigration in Portugal: Support for and Opposition to Immigration in Portugal', *European Commission*, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/demographics-immigration-portugal_en (access: 28 December 2024).

Portuguese.²⁴ Despite the challenges, this immigration has managed to integrate satisfactorily into Portuguese society, as indicated by the Migrant Integration Policy Index (2020).

Recent research²⁵ has indicated that Portugal is the European country with the lowest level of immigration politicization. This is not a central issue in the Portuguese political debate, as neither the media, the main political parties, nor society attribute great relevance to it.

Moreover, Eurosceptic sentiment is not widely spread in Portuguese society, which mostly shows a high level of favorability towards the European Union. Despite significant changes in public opinion during the crisis years, where 80 percent of Portuguese citizens felt that their opinion was not considered by the European Union, divisions on EU-related issues did not generate autonomous divisions, remaining subordinate to existing divisions on socioeconomic issues.

Unlike in other European countries, Eurosceptic attitudes linked to populist appeals did not provoke new dynamics of party competition or the emergence of new political actors. During the years of the economic crisis, Eurosceptic sentiment was capitalized on by radical left-wing parties such as the PCP and the BE, with a notable increase in Euroscepticism by these parties, according to the Chapel Hill expert survey (2019), which recorded an increase in Euroscepticism from 5.3 in 2006 to 7 in 2014.²⁶

The low prominence of the sociocultural dimension in Portuguese politics helps explain why radical right-wing populism has been marginal in Portugal in recent years.

THE EMERGENCE AND CONSOLIDATION OF CHEGA IN PORTUGAL'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

Portugal, unlike most European countries, had remained immune to the rise of radical right-wing populism. However, this situation came to an end in 2019 with the creation of Chega (Enough), a splinter from the Social Democratic Party (PSD). Since then, the party led by André Ventura has experienced constant growth in popularity and electoral support.

²⁴ 'Portugal Inmigrantes Permane'.

²⁵ J. Carvalho and M.C. Duarte, 'The Politicization of Immigration in Portugal between 1995 and 2014: A European Exception?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 58: 6, 2020, pp. 1469–87.

²⁶ 'Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999–2019', *Electoral Studies* 75 (February), 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420>.

Chega is the result of the political entrepreneurship of its founder, André Ventura, born in 1983 into a family of the suburban petite bourgeoisie of Lisbon. Ventura graduated in Law from the Nova University of Lisbon and later obtained his doctorate from the University of Cork, Ireland. He began his career as a university lecturer at private universities and worked as a tax inspector in public administration.

His interventions in the public sphere as a sports commentator and a supporter of Benfica served as a springboard to connect with the public and refine his skills as a polemicist in polarized public debates. During that period, Ventura was a member of the PSD. In 2017, he ran for mayor of Loures, a significant urban center within the Lisbon metropolitan area governed by the left. Although far from victory, Ventura managed to capture media attention and provoke reactions from left-wing parties through a radical discourse, marked by a firm stance against the Roma community in Loures.

The favorable results obtained were used by Ventura to compete for the party presidency and introduce a discursive shift towards more right-wing positions in disagreement with the party's centrist orientation. Faced with the refusal of the CDS (Christian Democratic Party), Ventura made the decision to found the Chega party in 2018.

The rise and consolidation of Chega in the Portuguese party system have been meteoric (Graph 1), going from obtaining 1.29 percent of the votes in 2019 to surpassing seven percent in just two years. After the 2019 European Parliament elections, where Chega presented itself for the first time as an alliance with other smaller formations—PPM, Citizenship, and Christian Democracy Party, and the Democracy21 movement—under the name Basta, it obtained only 1.49 percent of the votes (just under 50,000) and no MEPs. However, the party has significantly improved its electoral results. In 2022, it became the third most-voted political force in the Portuguese Assembly, obtaining 7.18 percent of the votes (399,510 votes) and 12 parliamentary seats.

In less than three years, Chega has not only managed to end Portugal's exceptionalism of being immune to radical right-wing parties but its presence has raised questions about the apparent stability of the Portuguese party system, as it represents a challenge to democracy.

GRAPH 1
Electoral results of Chega since its foundation

Year	Elections	Number of Votes	Percentage (%)	Number of Seats
2019	European Parliament	49,496	1.49	0/21
2019	Legislative	67,826	1.29	1/230
2021	Municipal	208,232	4.3	–
2021	Presidential	496,653	11.9	3rd Position
2022	Legislative	385,543	7.15	12/230

Source: Own elaboration based on PORDATA.

The party led by André Ventura has managed to evade the stigma associated with old radical right populist parties by being perceived as a democratic and non-violent party, as opposed to extremist formations resembling the forces of the former dictatorial regime.

As previously noted, Portugal's political culture is deeply influenced by the legacy of Salazarism and the values of the Carnation Revolution. One of the main reasons why radical right populist parties hadn't gained representation in Portugal was their inability to shake off the stigma of extremism. The National Renovator Party (PNR) failed to project a relatively moderate image. Since its founding in 1999, the party embraced ideological characteristics associated with far-right parties, maintaining certain traits typical of the Portuguese far-right by upholding the *Estado Novo* and criticizing those involved in the April 25, 1974 revolution. Additionally, its connections with extremist groups and the lack of prominent figures within the party contributed to its stigmatization and low visibility in the media.²⁷

In contrast, Chega has benefited from the political background of its leader, André Ventura, and favorable media coverage. The circumstances surrounding the party's formation, as well as the political backgrounds of its founding core, have contributed to normalizing Chega as a credible political party distanced from extremism. Unlike other leaders of the European radical right, both André Ventura and Chega's founding core do not come from the Portuguese far-right, but rather from the PSD, whose political culture is rooted in economic liberalism and conservatism. Moreover, Ventura has repeatedly rejected any nostalgia for *Estado Novo*, attributing

²⁷ A. Afonso, 'Correlates of Aggregate Support for the Radical Right in Portugal', *Research & Politics* 8: 3, 2021; Mendes and Dennison, 'Explaining the Emergence of the Radical Right'.

Salazar with the responsibility for Portugal's economic and structural backwardness.

Since its inception, Chega has managed to establish itself as a credible party for a significant portion of the Portuguese electorate. The party has been able to capitalize on the existing resentment within certain sectors of Portuguese society, particularly regarding corruption. Chega has been highly aware of this reality, and Ventura's anti-corruption discourse has deeply resonated in a country perceived as more affected by corruption than the European average.

Furthermore, Chega has received more media attention and visibility compared to other Portuguese radical right-wing parties, such as the Renovator Party, which had been portrayed negatively, and whose positions had been rejected. Social media has played a fundamental role in increasing the party's visibility, being a central pillar in its leader's discursive strategy, and seeking to expand its presence in the media space through sensationalist statements and aggressive attitudes.

The far-right party has been able to adapt to Portugal's context and specific needs, validating the argument that populist radical right parties gain more electoral support by addressing specific issues in each country. In the absence of a specific political context, such as the Great Recession in Greece or Italy, or the Catalan conflict in Spain, and without prominent sociocultural problems like immigration, Chega has capitalized on the crisis of political representation and the weakness of the center-right political space to gain the support of the Portuguese electorate through an anti-system and provocative populist discourse.

Chega's political project positions itself within the center-right space in a context marked by the decline of the PSD and CDS. Additionally, its success has been influenced by a context of political representation crisis where weariness and resignation have translated into extraordinary levels of electoral abstention: over 50 percent in the 2019 legislative elections, over 60 percent in the 2021 presidential elections, and almost 50 percent in the 2022 legislative elections. Despite low immigration, mobilizing voters against other more stigmatized minorities, such as the Roma, has proven to be effective in electoral terms at a local level.²⁸ Electoral results have been exceptional in municipalities with a larger Roma presence and

²⁸ Ibid.

areas with a higher proportion of social welfare beneficiaries.²⁹ Its political discourse has had a greater impact in municipalities with a higher Roma presence, such as Moura (18.22 percent of votes) and Beja (10.27 percent), as well as in border municipalities with Extremadura, La Raya, such as Mourão, Reguendos de Monsaraz, Monsaraz, Arronches, Castelo Branco, or Vila Velha de Ródão, where it has consolidated as the third political force with 10–12 percent of votes. Even in locations like Elvas and Monforte, Chega has obtained nearly 20 percent of the votes, trailing closely behind the PSD.³⁰

ANALYSIS OF CHEGA'S POLITICAL AND DISCURSIVE AGENDA

Chega, unlike other populist radical right-wing formations that reject positioning themselves in terms of left and right, avoids classifying itself as a right-wing party. In its founding manifesto, it self-identifies as a 'national, conservative, and personalist' party.³¹ However, in its 2021 electoral program, it has slightly adjusted this description to present itself as a 'right-wing, conservative, reformist, liberal, and nationalist' party³².

Nativism

One of the party's primary concerns is nativism, evident in its interest in preserving Portugal and Europe's sociocultural cohesion against increasing multiculturalism. This stance is reflected in the party's focus on prioritizing employment and professional access for Portuguese citizens while restricting immigration reception, especially from individuals posing security or social equilibrium risks. Additionally, the party seeks to establish stricter criteria for Portuguese citizenship acquisition to prevent the loss of national identity in present and future generations.³³

²⁹ P. Magalhães, 'Portugal: La Victoria Socialista y el Día Despues', *Agenda Pública*, 2022, <https://agendapublica.elpais.com/noticia/17705/portugal-victoria-socialista-dia-despu> (access: 15 November 2024).

³⁰ Rodríguez Sánchez, 'Extremadura Observa Cómo La Extrema Derecha Asoma Desde La Raya', *El Periódico de España*, 1 February 2022, <https://www.epe.es/es/extrema-dura/20220201/extremadura-extrema-derecha-la-raya-13175182> (access: 11 December 2024).

³¹ Chega, *Programa Político 2019*, <https://partidoChega.pt/programa-politico-2019/> (access: 15 January 2024).

³² Idem, *Programa Político 2021*, <https://partidochega.pt/programa-politico-chega/> (access: 15 January 2024).

³³ Ibid.

These nativist positions also extend to the party's stance on the European Union. Chega advocates for a new European treaty aligned with the Visegrád Group's policies, particularly regarding borders, immigration, and the preservation of European cultural values.³⁴ Furthermore, it promotes Portugal's exit from the UN Global Compact, arguing that 'immigration should be considered according to each country's reality and sovereignty'.³⁵

While racism and immigration are not predominant issues in Portuguese politics, Chega has attempted to politicize and emphasize matters related to immigration, identity, or racism. André Ventura has sought to challenge the presumed 'taboo on racism' by transforming it into an alleged 'taboo on minorities' in Portugal. He argues that negative opinions about those deemed different must be freely expressed. Chega's programmatic documents advocate for a controlled and responsible immigration system based on the national labor market situation, prioritizing Portuguese and legally resident foreigners for employment and professional development access.³⁶ Additionally, it proposes preferential treatment for immigrants sharing language and culture with Portugal, arguing for better social, cultural, economic, and professional integration capacity. Simultaneously, it rejects the entry of immigrants that might pose risks to national security or become burdens on the State.

Unlike other European populist radical right-wing formations critical of Muslim communities and culture, Chega directs its discriminatory stances toward Roma communities, present in Lisbon's periphery and rural areas like Alentejo. Despite constituting a minority group representing between 0.3 and 0.6 percent of the Portuguese population, André Ventura has centered his discourse on these communities. He accuses them of living comfortably at the expense of the State and of disrespecting the rule of law. During the first wave of the pandemic in April 2021, Ventura proposed confining the Roma population in forced camps, arguing the need to prevent high virus spread within this group.

During the 2022 presidential campaign, Ventura repeatedly stigmatized the Roma, portraying them as lazy individuals unwilling to work, seeking to live at the expense of others' work and benefits. He described them as the 'privileged of the country,' associating them

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Chega, *Programa Político 2019*.

³⁶ Idem, *Programa Político 2021*.

with criminals and aggressive individuals attacking Portuguese people and the police.

Authorianism

Populist radical right-wing parties often manifest marked authoritarianism in their political discourse, reflected in their proposals related to law and order.³⁷ These formations tend to perceive every political problem as a threat to the natural order and advocate for solutions imposing severe control.³⁸ Chega is no exception and promotes a societal model based on law and order through its political positions.

In its programmatic documents, the party advocates for a strong state in terms of the rule of law and the application of repressive measures. Notable examples include proposals for harsher sentences for crimes, introducing life imprisonment for the most serious offenses, chemical castration for those convicted of sexual crimes, and full sentence completion in cases of rape.³⁹

Regarding security issues, the party advocates for the legalization and regulation of self-defense for individuals victimized by criminal situations. It labels immigrants, especially those in irregular situations, as criminals, proposing to strengthen border surveillance and reconsider border immigration policies.⁴⁰

Authoritarianism can also manifest through policies aimed at safeguarding and promoting traditional norms, values, morality, and lifestyles.⁴¹ In Chega's political proposal, this is reflected through a discourse favoring family, tradition, and morality.

The defense of the family occupies a central place in Chega's political program and in the societal model proposed by the party. It regards the family as 'the basic structure of society' and proposes the 'creation of a Ministry of Family' due to the observed decline in recent decades. It advocates for a model of a 'natural family,' consisting of a man and a woman, contrasting with other cohabitation models. It emphasizes the authoritarian role of parents, whose protection is their responsibility rather than the State's. Additionally, it promotes

³⁷ S. Alonso and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Spain: No Country for the Populist Radical Right?', *South European Society and Politics* 20: 1, 2015, pp. 21–45; Mudde, *The Far-Right Today*.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Chega, *Programa Político 2019*.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ E. Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*.

policies aimed at supporting the family and increasing the birth rate through aids and incentives, conditioned on the parents being Portuguese, along with tax benefits for larger families.⁴²

Chega stands against abortion, proposing its removal from the public health system, and advocates for the legalization of prostitution, arguing that it 'would have advantages in terms of public health, fiscal policy, and integration'.⁴³

Moreover, it defends the rural world and its popular traditions, asserting good agricultural and livestock practices against the threats of animalist ideology.⁴⁴

Populism

There are strong arguments to consider Chega as a populist party. Despite different approaches to the term, academics agree on highlighting anti-elitism and the central role of the people as fundamental characteristics of populism. These elements are present in Chega's political discourse.

André Ventura, leader of Chega, adopts populist rhetoric by presenting a Manichaeian and highly moralistic view of society, confronting a morally pure 'us' with a morally inferior 'them'.

Since its inception, Chega has positioned itself as a political party aimed at voicing discontent and uniting those who consider politics to be dominated by corrupt and dishonest individuals.⁴⁵ In its Founding Political Manifesto, the party denounces the existence of an 'organized oligarchy surrounding the parties of the system,' accusing it of being corrupt and prioritizing its own interests over representing the people.⁴⁶ Additionally, it holds a 'dictatorship of interest groups, elites, and minorities' responsible for the 'state decadence and degradation' of the democratic regime in Portugal.⁴⁷

André Ventura presents himself as an honest, educated, patriotic, and hardworking man aiming to represent the aspirations of the Portuguese people to reform a corrupt political system. He positions himself as the defender of 'pure and good' Portuguese people with the goal of transforming Portugal. In his own words, 'Chega gives voice to

⁴² Chega, *Programa Político 2021*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Chega, *Programa Político 2019*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

an entire people fed up with corruption and impunity, presenting itself as the liberator of a people who, for 45 years, were under the control of a political elite that seized power through a Marxist revolution’.

In line with other European radical right-wing populist parties, Chega advocates for a radical transformation of the political system. In its 2019 political program, it proposed a profound revision of the political system, advocating for the abolition of the III Republic and proposing the establishment of a new IV Republic, arguing that the current system lacks legitimacy due to restrictions imposed by parties.⁴⁸

Through a markedly anti-system stance, the party proposes a series of reforms, including the establishment of a pure presidential system, the abolition of the position of prime minister, reducing the number of deputies to one hundred, and decreasing the number of ministries. Its central argument is the need to ‘extinguish the privileges of the political class,’ also proposing changes in the electoral system to enable more diverse parties’ access to the Assembly of the Republic.⁴⁹

Chega’s political discourse shares similarities with the family of radical right-wing populist parties by endorsing a nativist, authoritarian, and populist ideological perspective. However, it presents notable contextual particularities, such as its opposition to the Gypsy community and a marked rejection of the established system. Despite the centralized leadership in its leader, Chega’s political project still lacks a clear ideological orthodoxy. Nevertheless, Ventura’s ambition and personalistic approach have led the party to adopt a populist discourse that has allowed it to capitalize on the support of a disillusioned society with politics.

In addition to the three defining elements of radical right-wing populism, these formations use other ideological elements to build an attractive programmatic proposal for their voters. Historically, radical right-wing populist formations have supported pro-market policies. According to Herbert Kitschelt,⁵⁰ the success of these formations relied on combining neoliberal socio-economic proposals and authoritarian ones in the socio-cultural sphere. However, the economic agenda of radical right-wing populism has evolved in recent years, and now there is a broad group of parties advocating for a ‘welfare chauvinist approach,’ advocating for a strong welfare state

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Kitschelt’s, ‘Formation of Party Cleavages’.

that provides social benefits exclusively to the native population, excluding non-natives.⁵¹

Chega presents a neoliberal economic agenda and a more libertarian discourse compared to other radical right-wing populist parties. The party unequivocally supports the free market and private property.⁵² However, socio-economic issues do not occupy a central element in its political discourse, preferring to focus on themes like anti-elitism, nativism, and the defense of law and order.

The primary goal of Chega's economic policy is to reduce the redistributive functions of the state in economic activity while maintaining its role in regulation and arbitration.

In its 2019 electoral program, its anti-statist stance was prominent, advocating for the elimination of the state's social functions in favor of an agenda more focused on regulation. However, this position generated some discomfort within its support base, leading the party to make significant changes. In its 2021 program, it significantly softened its anti-statism by recognizing the essential functions of the state and mentioning the indispensable social functions of the State. Nevertheless, Chega maintains its skepticism towards social assistance, arguing that the welfare state benefits those who evade responsibilities and live at the expense of the State and their compatriots,⁵³ opting for a more limited Welfare State model.

Regarding tax policy, the party proposes a reduction in political spending, including a decrease in the number of deputies in the Assembly of the Republic.⁵⁴ It also advocates for tax reduction, which it considers 'fiscal extortion and state terrorism,' proposing a flat income tax based on the principles of subsidiarity and self-responsibility.⁵⁵ Additionally, it advocates for a tax reform that reduces taxes for companies and inheritances.

Despite the anti-system rhetoric present in its political discourse, the neoliberal economic proposals tend to mainly favor individuals with higher incomes.

⁵¹ K. Abts, E. Dalle Mulle, S. van Kessel, and E. Michel, 'The Welfare Agenda of the Populist Radical Right in Western Europe: Combining Welfare Chauvinism, Producerism and Populism', *Swiss Political Science Review* 27: 1, 2021, pp. 21–40; G. Schumacher and K. Van Kersbergen, 'Do Mainstream Parties Adapt to the Welfare Chauvinism of Populist Parties?', *Party Politics* 22: 3, 2016, pp. 300–12.

⁵² Chega, *Programa Político* 2021.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Chega, *Programa Político* 2019.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

CONCLUSIONES

This article offers an analysis of the political context in which Chega emerges, identifying the reasons that led Portugal, since its transition to democracy, to remain immune to formations of radical right-wing populism, as well as the causes that have contributed to Chega ending the exceptionalism that characterized it. The emergence and consolidation of Chega in Portuguese politics has also generated a certain uncertainty about the stability that characterized the Portuguese party system.

The implicit rejection of the authoritarian past, political stability, the absence of political opportunities similar to those in other countries such as Spain, Italy, or Greece during the economic crisis, as well as the focus of politics on socio-economic issues, are some of the reasons that explain why Portugal remained immune to the emergence of formations of radical right-wing populism until 2019.

Chega, born as a breakaway from the PSD and the brainchild of its leader, André Ventura, has managed to overcome the stigma weighing on radical right-wing populist parties in Portuguese society, becoming a credible political option for part of the Portuguese electorate. Through a nativist, authoritarian, and populist discourse, Chega has adapted its message to the Portuguese political context, capitalizing on the crisis of representation and the weakness of the center-right political space, becoming the third political force in the São Bento Palace.

Despite its contextual naturalness, Chega shares with other radical right-wing populist parties its nativist, authoritarian, and populist character. However, its political strategy has not yet managed to build cross-sectional majorities in Portuguese society. Through a populist anti-system discourse and provocation, it has been able to channel the crisis of representation and the weakness of the Portuguese right. In its early years, through a populist anti-system discourse and provocation, it managed to channel the crisis of representation and weakness established in the center-right political parties' spectrum in Portugal. However, unlike other European radical right-wing populist parties, Chega has not managed to articulate a dominant ideological orthodoxy beyond its appealing anti-system discourse. Following the coordinates of the radical right-wing parties of the eighties and nineties, Chega has preferred to articulate itself as an identity-based and anti-system formation that mobilizes a large part of the conservative electorate.

The parliamentary elections of 2024, following the resignation of Prime Minister Antonio Costa, represent a key date for Chega. Early polls suggest that the formation led by Andrés Ventura could obtain up to 15 percent of the votes and 43 seats, nearly quadrupling the 12 obtained in 2021, which would be crucial for the formation of a new government. Will Chega manage to become a determining factor for the change of government in Portugal? Will Chega be able to abandon its neoliberal positions in economics and adopt stances closer to welfare chauvinism, similar to other European radical right-wing parties, thus attracting more progressive voters? These and other questions open up new lines of research to continue to advance in the study of this political formation and the unstoppable advance of the radical right in European politics.

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