Echoes of the People: Unveiling Populist Constructs in Chega and Vox's Discourse on Elites

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Abstract: The following paper draws from the social constructionist approach (Burr 2015) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) to analyze the populist discursive frameworks in the Facebook accounts of populist far-right parties Chega (Portugal) and Vox (Spain) during January-March 2023. The aim is to demonstrate how country-based contexts affect and shape discursive constructions of the elites. Methodologically, this paper follows the discourse historical approach (Wodak, 2001) to critical discourse analysis. The results show that although both parties' constructions of "the people" are identical, the same does not concern the elites, as Vox's characterization of this group encompasses environmentalists, the media, feminists, trans people, and separatists. Neither Vox nor Chega places immigrants as part of either group but as a sub-group that is protected by the elites, with Chega adding the Roma ethnic minority to the same predicament.

Keywords: Social constructionism; Populist discourse; far-right; Chega; Vox

INTRODUCTION

Portugal and Spain seemed to be inherently resistant to the new far-right populist revival that has happened in other European countries, being described as the Iberian exception (Alonso & Kaltwasser 2015) within the context of EU politics. Both countries endured longstanding right-wing authoritarian regimes in the 20th century, which seems to have been misinterpreted as acting like immunizers against far-right populism (Ramos Antón & Baptista, 2022), as Chega and VOX's current positions as the third largest political forces in Portugal and Spain, respectively, evidently outlines.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis that affected the two nations particularly hard, a lengthy period of political turmoil and economic hardship

followed. In the Spanish case, Podemos, a newly found left-wing populist party, experienced a meteoric rise in 2015 by campaigning against economic austerity measures (Luengo et. al., 2016). In Portugal, Southern Europe's most stable party system (Luengo et. al., 2016), there was not any electoral breakthrough by emergent reactionary populist parties, despite significant electoral gains by those at the end of the left-wing political spectrum.

Within the realm of far-right populism, however, the economic and social crisis did not translate into electoral wins. In the Spanish case, Alonso and Kaltwasser (2015) argue that regional autonomies with variable degrees of self-governance, and a longstanding history of strong independent movements, which create a struggle between national and regional identities, prevented the use of the typical nativist rhetoric among far-right parties. In addition, Alonso and Kaltwasser (2015) claim that strong electoral performances by the mainstream right-wing party Partido Popular (PP) and its ability to attract votes from the radical right-wing sector of the electorate, coupled with Spain's disproportional electoral system, were also contributing factors to the failure of the Spanish populist far right. In the Portuguese case, Marchi (2013) argues that organizational disarray, fragile leadership, and weak political programs prevented the far-right from achieving electoral success.

As Mendes and Denison (2021) point out, the turning point in Vox´s surge in popularity was the Catalonian constitutional crisis of 2017, which effectively activated a countrywide nationalist sentiment in the country. Most Spanish citizens opposed the possible secession of Catalonia from Spain, regardless of their own regional sentiments and identities. Vox's strong opposition to Catalonian independence resulted in a significant growth in support for the party.

Additionally, the change of the migratory influx onto the Spanish coast in 2018, after Italy decided to close its ports to migrant boats while Spanish prime minister Pedro Sánchez opted to keep the countries' ports opened, provoked a rise in the anti-immigrant sentiment, which was strategically leveraged by Vox (Mendes & Dennison, 2021).

In the Portuguese case, Santana-Pereira and Cancela (2020) argue that populist attitudes were significantly widespread in the country before the surge in popularity of Chega, which could be explained by a lack of supply from the political spectrum, rather than a lack of demand from the electorate. Furthermore, analysis by Garcia and Salgado (2020) of the prevalence of populist features in online comments on the websites of mainstream newspapers in both countries in 2019 highlighted the surprising parity in the demand for populist parties in both nations (19.8 % in Portugal and 18% in Spain).

The analysis was conducted during a period when Vox was on the verge of becoming the third-largest political force in Spain, while Chega was only a few months old and seeking parliamentary representation for the first time. This

supports the argument that Chega's rise was driven by a lack of supply from the political spectrum, contesting the belief that there was a lack of demand from the electorate, challenging the idea of a "Portuguese exception".

Chega's disproportionate focus on anti-corruption policymaking, which occupies a central role in its electoral program, proved to be a successful approach in a country marred by a longstanding history of political and corruption scandals (Mendes & Dennison, 2021).

Another pivotal point of Chega's agenda is its strong focus on welfare beneficiaries (Heyne & Manucci, 2021), which the party argues frequently constitutes a misuse of public funds, a position that has also helped Chega garner significant support.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO POPULISM

Populism's conceptualization has sparked extensive academic debate. It has been labeled as an antagonizing attitude regarding the perceived elites, a political style, a political strategy, an ideology, a discursive style, a frame, or simply as a trait that certain political actors and movements possess. Moreover, Taggart (2004) argues that populism does not possess palpable core values and is, therefore, "highly chameleonic."

Cass Mudde's paper "The populist Zeitgeist" (2004) introduced the concept of populism as a "thin ideology", which states that populism is a small, thin-centered ideology that hardly exists in isolation and must be attached to another "thicker" ideology. Mudde claims that populism can manifest itself in a wide range of political ideologies, displaying distinct appeal to voters. As Brubaker (2017) states, the core element of populism is alleging to speak in the name of "the people", composed of honest, well-intended, proud, and hard-working citizens who represent the backbone of the nation and are despised by an elite. However, some characteristics may vary from left to right-wing ideology and vice-versa. The sovereignty of "the people" who want to break away from "the elite" is another key concept of populism.

Populism is closely related to identity politics. An example of this is Muller's (2017) reflection on populist parties' restrictive selection of those who get to be a part of "the people". Although everyone who is not part of the "elites" should be automatically part of "the people", that is not the case since only "real people" get to be a part of "the people", since populism considers certain groups to be unworthy of such label and therefore excludes them. This is particularly true within right-wing populism, where nativism constitutes a core trait in the populist people-centered and anti-elite discursive framework (Afonso, 2021).

Laclau (2005) argues that this divisive framework arises from a discursive narrative filled with 'empty signifiers', which consist of context-dependent terms that have floating meanings and are employed by populist actors to connect with broad sectors of the electorate.

Therefore, this paper contends that the traditional populist discursive framework of the people versus the elites is subject to variations concerning the characterization of both groups, which are shaped by distinct historical, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds and contexts. By identifying and characterizing the members of these groups within Chega and Vox, drawing from the social constructionism approach (Burr, 2015) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), the paper aims to show how this discursive framework is prone to shift, despite these are two parties belonging to the same political family.

Social constructionism argues that knowledge is constructed through individual perceptions and social interactions rather than being an objective reality (Burr, 2015). It contrasts with the positivist approach of the natural sciences, which seeks objective facts through observation and measurement. Within social sciences, it provides a new epistemological perspective by suggesting that social, historical, and cultural contexts shape constructions of truth and knowledge (Burr, 2015).

Burr (2015) claims that social constructionism abides by the premise that reality is a matter of individual or social perspective, and some of the facts that we perceive to be the truth are merely a social construct. Therefore, we can consider that our views of the world are prone to being biased by personal interests that lead us to construct the fabricated reality we want to see.

Airoldi (2022) provides a novel perspective on the subject, asserting that technological advancements and artificial intelligence have integrated various facets of daily life, with social media being a prime example. As a result, these digital platforms have become constructors of social reality alongside the aforementioned social, cultural, and personal contexts. This is particularly relevant given that this paper focuses on Facebook as its primary subject of analysis.

Therefore, and following social constructionist theory, this paper approaches these two distinct groups ("people" and "elites") as a social construct adopted by populist parties fueled by individual interests that result in a biased perception of society.

Social identity theory addresses an individual's self-perception of membership and belonging to a particular social group (Tajfel, 1974). These can be, but are not limited to, ethnic, national, religious, or gender groups, among many other smaller social identities that individuals can feel a part of. The theory suggests that these perceptions of social identity affect its member's attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of other social identities of which they are not a part.

This introduces the concept of in-groups and out-groups. Members of a specific group tend to be biased in favor of their own group (in-group) and prejudiced against the rival group (out-group). The more an individual feels part of or is affiliated with a particular social group, the stronger influence social identities will play out in their relationship with other groups (Tajfel et al., 1979). Hence, the people are seen as the in-group and the elite as the out-group within the populist discursive framework. As populists see themselves as part of the people, they will tend to formulate antagonistic discursive constructions of the out-group (elites).

METHODOLOGY

This paper addresses the following research questions:
- RQ1: What are the differences in the discursive constructions by Chega (Portugal) and Vox (Spain) of "the people" and "the elites"?
- RQ2: How can these differences be attributed to each country's socio-economic, cultural, and historical contexts?

This qualitative exploratory-comparative study employs the discourse-historical approach (Wodak, 2001) to critical discourse analysis, which is a qualitative analytical method of interpreting, explaining, understanding, and describing how discourses maintain, construct, underline, and ultimately legitimize social inequalities (Mullet, 2018). The discourse-historical approach focuses on context, historical background, ideology, and the underlying meanings of language, and has been employed in research concerning racism, far-right populism, islamophobia, and nationalism (Reisigl, 2017).

Wodak (2001) argues that the discourse-historical approach is problem-oriented, multidisciplinary, and heavily focused on historical contextualization to interpret discourse. It introduces the concept of interdiscursivity, which happens when a particular text, speech, or semiotic representation has varied types of intertwined and paired discourses. This allows for the identification of the underlying ideologies embedded in the discursive processes, which serve to hold and maintain the hierarchical societal power relationships.

The dataset comprises Facebook posts (N=513) from the official accounts of Chega (n=279) and Vox (n=244) during January to March 2023, which were subjected to thematic coding using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step coding process. The study thus collected, contextualized, and exported all the pertinent posts into the qualitative analysis software Nvivo.

No predefined codes were used. Instead, short descriptive labels were created after a thorough review of the dataset. These labels were then grouped into broader themes, referred to in this study as discourses.

Amongst the dataset were numerous discourses, but only those deemed suitable for addressing the problem at hand were considered relevant and effectively coded. Following the principle of interdiscursivity, themes were not coded as mutually exclusive, meaning each post could be coded into multiple types of discourses.

Three coding rounds were performed to ensure reliability and that the assigned themes accurately reflected the existing dataset. Furthermore, the final set of themes was subjected to a peer review to attest the validity of the thematic framework. Political parties do not directly address and identify those groups they perceive to be a part of "the people" and "the elites," as these are groups constructed through their own discursive practices.

Just 10 months prior to the analyzed period, in the snap general election of March 2022, the Portuguese had elected the Socialist prime minister António Costa to his third term of office. Costa's Socialist party had a parliamentary majority after obtaining 41.37% of the votes and 120 out of 230 members of parliament in the general election. However, Costa′s third term was marked by political instability resulting from several corruption and political scandals that led to the resignation of several ministers and secretaries of state. Additionally, Costa's government struggled with widespread economic distress and the deterioration of public services such as healthcare and education. Following this period, political scandals continued to injure Costa′s government, leading to his resignation in November 2023.

In Spain, at the same time as in Portugal, the government of Pedro Sánchez' Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) experienced political turmoil largely caused by economic issues, the influx of migrants arriving at the Spanish coast, and the ever-present separatist question. This period culminated in the May 2023 Spanish regional elections, which resulted in a severe electoral loss for PSOE, leading to Sánchez' resignation and a snap election in July of the same year.

The dataset timeframe, spanning January to March 2023, was chosen to capture a non-electoral period and avoid the intensified polarization of electoral campaigns. This enables an analysis of how populist discourse was constructed and applied in non-election contexts, unveiling the influence of situational factors on populist rhetoric.

Moreover, given how academic scholarship converges on the pivotal role social media platforms play in the communication process of far-right populist movements (Khosravinik, 2017; Mudde, 2019), Facebook was considered a suitable platform for analysis given the affordances it offers regarding direct communication between party and audience.

RESULTS

The discourses presented in the following section help identify the discursive constructions by Vox and Chega of the people and the elites and outline important differences in how each party positions specific groups within the populist discursive framework.

Table 1. The seven major discourse topics employed by Vox (Spain) and the five by Chega (Portugal).

VOX		CHEGA	
Discourse	**Frequency**	**Discourse**	**Frequency**
Anti-system discourses	6	Anti-system discourses	36
"Bad for the country would be if, after years of economic pillage, ideological deliriums, and attacks on the institutions, others kept their policies or denied changing ways. Only Vox can, with its presence in the government, guarantee an alternative to Pedro Sánchez."		"Little by little, Portuguese people realize that there is one true alternative to the big center of interests that has been misgoverning us. Portugal needs a cleansing, and the political parties of the system are not the ones who will do it!"	
Corruption discourses	43	Corruption discourses	122
Santiago Abascal about the electoral pacts of Coalition Canaria: "They are very comfortable with this dilapidated bi-party system. Yes to partnerships with PSOE, but no to Vox. This is saying yes to corruption, with the ones that live off bribes, with the ones that release criminals."		"Now is the moment to resist and start preparing the alternative Portuguese people so desperately need. Enough of socialism! Enough of corruption!"	
Media discourses	27	Media discourses	11
"The media should be plural, and the government that concedes television licenses should assure that plurality. It is outrageous that TV broadcasters occult the leader of Spain's third political force in such a blatant way."		"It is with tremendous pride that we reached, at the beginning of 2023, 100.000 subscribers of CHEGA TV. This is a team effort that displays the enormous work that this parliamentary group does every day, in an unfiltered, uncensored manner"	
Minority discourses	100	Minority discourses	45
"To enter illegally in any country is a felony punished by every penal code of the world. To finance illegal immigration and abandon your fellow countrymen while they are going through bad times is an attack against common sense. In any country of the world. And there is no censorship that can hide this."		"To some immigrants, there's houses, subsidies, and almost everything for free. For Portuguese people and for those who are forced to emigrate, there's taxes to pay and zero support from the state. A country turned upside down!"	

VOX		CHEGA	
Discourse	**Frequency**	**Discourse**	**Frequency**
Nation discourses	29	Nation discourses	22
"Santiago Abascal appeals for the "great coalition of honorable Spanish" against the worst government."		"They shall not pass in their attacks to our traditions, our rurality, our Portugal!"	
Environmental discourses	34		
"Brussel's bureaucrats have declared war against the European popular classes. No one asked Europeans if they wanted to submit to the environmental deliriums of the progressive elites. Vox will reject any restrictions that would limit Spanish people's liberty and mobility."			
Separatism discourses	35		
"Santiago Abascal on the Socialist Party: "It has done the worst thing a political party could do: surrender to separatism by setting putschists and terrorists free, ruining coexistence, and steal prosperity away from Spanish people.""			

Source: All quotes in this table are taken from public posts on the official Facebook pages of Vox and Chega, published between January and March 2023.

ANTI-SYSTEM DISCOURSES

These can be found in both the Facebook rhetoric of both Vox and Chega, albeit the former does not rely heavily on anti-system discourses, only employing them to present itself as the sole reliable alternative to solve Spain's issues. This includes characterizing the rest of the political spectrum as being unable to address specific issues and positioning itself as the only "real opponent" to "*Sanchismo*", a term coined by the party to describe Spain´s prime minister Pedro Sánchez´s rule. Anti-system discourses are also visible when the party addresses the flaws of the democratic system in Spain, and its lack of direct representation, advocating for referendums to be conducted in crucial legislative policies.

In contrast, Chega employs anti-system discourses much more predominantly, using them to consistently criticize the inability of other political parties, both left and right-wing, to address Portugal's issues, asserting that only Chega can "save Portugal." It discredits the entire political system, claiming that the "political system is sick and only Chega can cure it." Furthermore, Chega often produces discursive constructions in which the focus alludes to pre-democracy times, highlighting the failures of the bi-party system dominated by the *Partido*

Socialista (PS [Eng: Socialist Party]) and the *Partido Social Democrata* (PSD [Eng: Social Democratic Party]) over the past "forty-something years" that have led the Portuguese populace to ruin.

CORRUPTION DISCOURSES

While corruption discourses are central to the discursive strategy of Vox, they undoubtedly constitute the major focus of Chega′s discursive strategy. Vox targets media outlets, the PSOE government led by Pedro Sánchez, and, to a lesser extent, the mainstream right-wing political party, *Partido Popular* (PP [Eng: People's Party], due to connivance with PSOE's unlawful policies. Media outlets are criticized for bias and partisanship, while the PSOE government was accused of corruption, involvement in scandals, and questionable alliances with corrupt people, putschists, and former ETA members. Vox even goes as far as accusing PSOE of extravagant spending on illicit activities.

In the case of Chega, its focus on corruption was fueled by political scandals in early 2023, which led to the resignation of various government members. The party heavily criticized the government and expressed widespread distrust in political institutions, portraying corruption as deeply embedded in Portugal's political system, positioning itself as the only "fighter against corruption", and advocating for legislative measures to mitigate and tackle corrupt practices.

MEDIA DISCOURSES

All of Vox's media discourses analyzed in this paper portray Spanish mainstream media outlets as subservient to PSOE or as protesting the lack of coverage of Vox's political activity. These discourses usually revolve around a mainstream media conspiracy against Vox and the gatekeeping and agenda-setting practices, which the outlets conduct with the aim of harming the party.

Recurrent themes include manipulating public opinion and adulteration in news coverage, mediatic pressure on the party, and the left-wing ideological stance of most of Spain's major media conglomerates. The party encourages its audience to watch live events through its own digital platforms, citing censorship on external media that may distort the coverage to fit their interests.

Chega's media discourses mainly focus on its own newspaper, *Folha Nacional*, which the party claims to be the only uncensored newspaper in Portugal, automatically implying that all others in the country are censored to some extent. Chega also criticizes online censorship of its own content and *Polígrafo*, a Portuguese fact-checking newspaper, for lying and trying to harm both Chega and the image of its founder, André Ventura. The party criticizes *Consórcio*, a group of journalists it ironically labels as "independent," alleging they are left-wing activists

funded by Open Society. The party claims *Consórcio*'s sole purpose is to attack Chega, ridiculing the group's first "investigation," which was centered on the party's connection to hate speech.

MINORITY DISCOURSES

Even though Vox refers to minority discourses on a much more frequent basis, these make up a crucial element of the discursive strategy of both parties. Although both Chega and Vox target illegal immigrants, immigrants from Islamic backgrounds, and refugees, they diverge concerning other minority groups, with Vox focusing on feminists and trans people and Chega addressing concerns regarding the Portuguese Roma Community.

Vox frequently targets the immigration groups mentioned above, claiming they bring crime and insecurity to the country. The party also accuses the government of financing illegal immigration and contributing to the insecurity that has taken over Spanish neighborhoods. Vox often shares news articles about Muslim extremists perpetrating acts of terrorism or violence, with the aim of portraying a scenario of a cultural clash between Spanish citizens and intolerant, violent, and extremist Muslim immigrants, who pose a threat to European identity and values.

In the context of feminists and trans people, Vox is primarily a strong opponent to the existence of the Spanish Ministry of Equality, labelling it a waste of public funds used to promote left-wing gender and feminist policies. The party is the most vocal opponent to the country's trans law, which allows youngsters from the age of 16 to legally change gender without the permission of their parents or legal tutors. Vox calls the trans law an "abomination". In the context of feminist discourses, the party claims the government does not actively protect women, but only adopts policies that obey the feminist agenda.

Chega's immigration discourses openly condemn the government and other political parties' immigration policies, namely the "policy of open borders," which caused an influx of "ideological, uncontrolled, and irresponsible immigration," a big portion of which is illegal. Chega often creates a separation between immigrants who come to Portugal and Portuguese emigrants living abroad. Chega claims they cannot be compared since many immigrants come to Portugal for welfare subsidies and fail to integrate into Portuguese society. In contrast, Portuguese emigrants are hard workers who respect the cultural habits of their host countries. The party raises concerns about immigration from countries possessing "failed regimes with a culture of terrorism, violence, and Islamic fundamentalism."

Furthermore, Chega also labels the Portuguese Roma community as problematic and unintegrated in Portuguese society. The party's narrative emphasizes

the Roma's heavy reliance on welfare subsidies, increasing school dropout rates, disregard for women's rights, and conflicts with neighboring communities.

NATION DISCOURSES

As shown in Table 1, both parties use nation discourses with a relatively similar frequency. Vox's nation discourses primarily focus on one central topic: national unity. The party accused Pedro Sánchez's government of attacking the Spanish constitution, endangering national sovereignty, and destroying Spaniards' sense of unity and freedom.

Chega's nation discourses are often embedded in nationalist or patriotic rants. Some examples are the "great Portugal" and the profession of love for the nation ("our beloved country"). Other topics are also the historical revisionism being employed by the far-left and the attacks on "our traditions, our rurality, our Portugal." The party emphasizes rebuilding national pride, claiming it will "fight with everything it has" to achieve that goal. The party also claims to be fighting for the "good Portuguese", creating a separation between those and the rest of the people.

ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES

These discourses constitute a substantial part of Vox's Facebook communication. The party is a vocal opponent of energy transition and the UN's 2030 agenda for sustainable development. Vox states that citizens were never asked to vote for its implementation and that it will be "deadly" to Spain, leading to the loss of jobs and energy sovereignty in the country. Vox criticizes the government and EU legislators for a plethora of policies, such as introducing insect-based food products in supermarkets, restricting car circulation in Madrid, abolishing fossil fuel vehicle production in the EU from 2035, and new government taxes on plastic. The party is particularly vocal regarding fossil fuel vehicle production and circulation restrictions, claiming these attack the middle class and the freedom of movement of "humble and hard-working people".

SEPARATISM DISCOURSES

Separatism discourses occupy an important role in Vox's discursive strategy in a country with such historical divisions as Spain. The party often addresses separatism in Catalonia and the Basque country, labelling separatists as traitors, putschists, and enemies of Spain. Vox views separatist parties as unconstitutional and advocates for their illegalization, accusing both PSOE and PP of striking pacts with these groups and granting pardons to political leaders from the

2017 Catalonian crisis and former ETA members instead of prosecuting them. Separatist discourses focus on division and the promotion of national unity.

INTERDISCURSIVE PRACTICES

The following section outlines Vox and Chega´s interdiscursive practices identified in this study (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Vox's interdiscursive practices

	A: Anti-system discourses	B: Climate discourses	C: Corruption discourses	D: Media discourses	E: Minority discourses	F: Nation discourses	G: Separatism discourses
1: Anti-system discourses	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
2: Climate discourses	0	34	2	0	0	0	2
3: Corruption discourses	0	2	43	27	1	1	8
4: Media discourses	0	0	27	27	0	0	0
5: Minority discourses	0	0	1	0	100	4	5
6: Nation discourses	0	0	1	0	4	29	7
7: Separatism discourses	0	2	8	0	5	7	35

Source: own evaluation

In Vox's case, the aspects that instantly stand out are the interdiscursive practices between media and corruption discourses. All media discourses intersect with corruption discourses, with media agents being portrayed as dishonest, biased, manipulative, and subservient to Pedro Sánchez's government. This data accurately displays Vox's hostile views on Spanish media, which explains why many news articles the party shares on its Facebook account come from *La Gaceta de la Iberosfera*, a Vox-owned newspaper. Nation and separatism discourses are also often intertwined. This is a predictable outcome since Vox labels separatists as enemies of the nation. The dynamic between union (nation) and division (separatism) that Vox employs in its discursive practices also contributes to this paradigm. Separatism also intersects with corruption discourses, which is explained by Vox's accusations of PSOE and PP establishing political pacts with anti-constitutional and criminal political parties and giving pardons to those involved with ETA or the Catalonian independence proclamation.

Chega, by contrast, has scant interdiscursivity except for some between anti-system and corruption discourses, which are employed to contend that all parliamentary adversaries, with an emphasis on the governing socialist party, are corrupt.

Table 3. Chega's interdiscursive practices

	A: Anti-system discourses	B: Corruption discourses	C: Minority discourses	D: Media discourses	E: Nation discourses
1: Anti-system discourses	36	7	1	2	2
2: Corruption discourses	7	122	4	0	2
3: Minority discourses	1	4	45	0	2
4: Media discourses	2	0	0	11	0
5: Nation discourses	2	2	2	0	22

DISCUSSION

The results offer a detailed overview of the key discourse topics in Chega and Vox's Facebook communication strategies, providing substantial empirical data. This data is combined with relevant literature to address the two research questions (RQ):

RQ1 – WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES IN CHEGA AND VOX'S DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF "THE PEOPLE" AND "THE ELITES"?

The two parties share similar discursive constructions of the people, which Vox describes as "a coalition of honorable Spanish". In contrast, Chega presents it as "the good Portuguese," with both depicting an elite exploited group composed of proud, hard-working, honest nationals, who include, for instance, the working classes, the elderly, and army veterans. Both parties depict the people as being neglected by the elites, who are invested in protecting their interests and favoring minorities over the bulk of national citizens.

Immigrants comprise the most concrete example. They are not portrayed as part of either the people or the elites, but, according to both parties, are privileged in the sense of being protected by elites and favored over ordinary citizens.

Both Vox and Chega characterize immigrant minorities, predominantly refugees, illegal immigrants, and immigrants coming from Islamic backgrounds, as being privileged and subsidy-dependent at the expense of taxpayers, who do not receive such financial aid from the state.

A pertinent observation is that the emphasis Chega places on the Roma community is not proportional to their demographic presence in Portugal. Despite Spain having both a larger absolute number and a higher percentage of Roma people (approximately 1.5% in Spain vs. 0.5% in Portugal (European Commission, 2023; IOM, 2016)), it is Chega, not Vox, that more prominently constructs the Roma as a discursive target. This suggests that the salience of Roma discourses in far-right rethoric is not driven solely by population size.

This study's empirical findings, coupled with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), enabled the identification of multiple out-groups that make up the discursive construction of the elites. As expected, in the discourses of both Chega and Vox, the political class occupies a leading and central role in the out-group, which is a precise alignment with the traditional populist discursive framework. In the context of media discourses, Vox openly positions media institutions as being not only a part of but also an instrument of the ruling elites. Vox accuses Spanish media outlets of being biased and ideologically aligned with the left, using agenda-setting, gatekeeping, and framing strategies aimed at twisting, manipulating, and decreasing the party's media coverage, undermining its relevance on the Spanish political landscape. Chega only hints at perceived censorship while also occasionally attacking specific media outlets over negative coverage. Whereas Chega effectively suggests that media organizations are indeed a part of the elites, Vox's hardline narratives undoubtedly position media as a preeminent member of the aforementioned group.

In contrast to Chega, Vox's diversity of discourse topics depicts an enriched and nuanced depiction of the elites, enlarging this discursive construction to other groups: environmentalists, feminists, and separatists. The party argues that environmentalists, the sole group to be labeled as part of the "progressive elite," advocate for extreme left environmental views, arguing that initiatives like the energy transition and the UN 2030 Agenda are luxuries only accessible to the privileged. According to Vox, these policies obstruct Spain's resource exploration, leading to unemployment, poverty, a shift in cultural habits, and the erosion of past working-class achievements.

Regarding feminism, Vox sees the topic as ideological silliness and claims the feminist lobby has infiltrated the government. Vox aims at drawing a line between feminism and women, characterizing the former as the privileged minority that only intends to fulfill its own agenda, and not actively trying to improve women's condition in society. Vox claims it does, contrary to the rest of the Spanish political spectrum.

Lastly, separatists, seen as the divisive force obstructing Spanish unity, are also depicted as part of the elite due to mainstream parties' concessions with separatist leaders. Vox accuses the government and judiciary powers of not prosecuting separatist leaders and ETA members for crimes against Spain.

RQ2: HOW CAN THESE DIFFERENCES BE ATTRIBUTED TO EACH COUNTRY'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC, CULTURAL, AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS?

While RQ1 outlines significant differences in both parties' discursive constructions, specifically in references to the Roma people being addressed by Chega as a minority group that is protected by the political elites, the disparity in media discourses between both parties, and Vox´s inclusion of feminists, trans people, environmentalists, and separatists as members of the aforementioned group.

Separatism can be straightforwardly explained by the regionalist sentiments prevalent in the country, which have already been extensively covered in the academic realm. Regrding the Roma, the community has historically been one of the most marginalized ethnic minorities in Europe (Kende et. al. 2021).

According to the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (EFRA) survey on minorities and discrimination in the EU (EFRA, 2016), 47% of the Roma respondents in Portugal felt discriminated against due to skin color, ethnic origin, or religious beliefs in the previous 12 months period, compared to 35% in Spain. This difference becomes more prevalent when analyzing the results for a 5-year period, with Portugal scoring 71%, considerably more than in Spain—51%. Therefore, this paper speculates that the level of prejudice against the Roma community in Portugal is significantly higher than that of Spain, which translates into a more salient topic for Chega to leverage. Discrimination against the Roma community has been a longstanding paradigm within Portuguese society. Research also suggests that Chega is the only political force that targets the Roma community by labelling it as problematic and unintegrated into Portuguese culture, and thus can capitalize on this paradigm by effectively obtaining larger proportions of the vote in municipalities with large Roma communities (Afonso, 2021). Magalhães and Costa-Lopes (2023) argue Roma citizens are the beneficiaries of welfare ethnocentrism, similar to the populist rhetoric other far-right parties employ in Eastern Europe.

Even though the anti-Roma sentiment still exists in Spain (Gonçalves, 2020), it does not seem to be such a salient topic as in Portugal. Studies focusing on successful integration cases highlight Roma individuals' pivotal role in some of Spain´s cultural practices, such as flamenco music and Andalusian and Spanish cultural heritage (Chinoy & Arias, 2023). On a political level, the existence of three Spanish MPs of Roma origin (Público, 2022) suggests that this ethnic minority has integrated better as a community and faces less prejudice

in Spain than in neighboring Portugal. Unlike Chega, which seems to fit more into the Eastern European populist discursive framework on the topic of Roma people (Kende & Krekó, 2020), Vox focuses on other minorities to employ its nativist ethnocentric discourse.

Regarding environmentalist discourses, Moreno and Thornton (2022) argue that Vox aligns with other familiar climate action contrarian discourses in the US and Europe, employing denialist and obstructive narratives against pro-climate laws. The authors correlate Vox's environmental views to those of other far-right parties in Europe (Moreno & Thornton, 2022). This is, however, a rather simplistic view of the far-right climate policy, especially when taking into consideration numerous contradictory examples such as the far-right ecologism displayed, albeit in an incoherent and slow-paced fashion, by the Hungarian and Polish far-right (Lubarda, 2024), or the Identitarian movement (Zúquete, 2018).

Chega, by contrast, does not seem to devote noteworthy attention to environmental policies. Unfortunately, this seems to be an unexplored research topic within the far-right populist realm in Portugal, which means that little can be added.

On the topic of feminism, Vox's anti-feminist discourse is linked to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies, which threatened traditional gender roles that positioned men as primary providers. As these roles weakened, women's empowerment in both public and private spheres grew (Santamarina, 2021). Portugal experienced similar economic distress during the same period, even though that did not translate into the results presented in this research, with virtually no anti-feminist discourses being reported in the data. This does not mean that the party does not employ anti-feminist discourses or promote an anti-feminist sentiment. A quick search on the parties' Facebook page easily spots an array of moments when Chega, a self-proclaimed "defender of the traditional family" (Chega, 2024), attacks the "feminist agenda" and gender equality policies. Indeed, in the beginning of 2024, André Ventura vocally opposed the planned usage of a portion of Portugal's state budget to implement legislative policies to narrow the gender equality gap (Lusa, 2024). However, this topic does not appear to be as important and prevalent for Chega compared to Vox. It is also important to note that, in contrast to Portugal, Spain has a Ministry of Equality, of which Vox is a strong opponent, which resulted in a higher volume of anti-feminist rhetoric in the dataset.

Regarding trans people, it is essential to contextualize the timeframe in which the sample was gathered. In January-March 2023, the Spanish parliament promulgated a new nationwide trans law allowing self-gender determination to all citizens aged 16 and over and for those aged 14 to 16 with parental or legal tutor consent. Additionally, trans issues have long been an increasingly salient topic in Spanish society (Olveira-Araujo, 2020), generating a political landscape

that partially explains Vox's focus on the trans community. On the other hand, no such pressing issues were occurring in Portugal at the time, which resulted in the press barely mentioning the trans community. It is important to point out that, despite the situational context that was presented, Vox appears to attribute a higher level of prominence to both feminists and trans people and, through its discursive practices, effectively attributes elite membership to these groups.

In the realm of media discourses, the strenuous relationship between populist parties and mainstream media institutions has been extensively documented (Nærland, 2023), with the term "anti-media populism" (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021) being coined to describe a status quo in which the media, alongside the political class, is a part of populist parties' discursive construction of the elites. Nærland (2023), however, argues that a multiplicity of situational factors shapes this relationship and can vary on a country and regional basis. Furthermore, this paper's empirical findings outline the distinct discursive approaches each party has adopted when directly addressing the media. Vox undoubtedly displays harder antagonistic views on the subject, as demonstrated by both parties' inter-discursive practices regarding media agents.

Catarralá and Palau-Sampio (2022) analyzed Vox's media discourses throughout both the April and November 2019 general election campaigns. They observed how Vox's discursive constructions of the media revolved around three central components: being excluded from the media agenda, the ideological stance of some media outlets, and accusations of deceiving or misleading news articles, which falls in line with the findings presented in this paper, with additional nuances that were presented in the results section. Research carried out during the 2018 Andalusian regional election, a pivotal moment in Vox's political resurgence, noted that during this period, and at a moment when Vox was a residual party in the Spanish political landscape, the party benefited from greater mediatic focus when compared to parties of similar size (Ollala et al., 2019).

Weighting the empirical findings of this study with the available literature, Vox appears to be aligned with the traditional anti-media populist positioning, which is not the case for Chega. André Ventura maintained a prominent presence as a television football and legal commentator beyond his election to parliament, along with his role as a columnist for Portugal's most-read daily newspaper, *Correio da Manhã*. The argument is that complicit media coverage benefitted Ventura and Chega with platforms for increased visibility, effectively facilitating the party's growth trajectory (Serrano, 2020). As visible in the data, this does not translate into the party's favorable portrayal of the media. Still, it creates a separation from Vox's more radicalized discursive approach.

CONCLUSIONS

This study expands the research on far-right populist discourse in the Iberian Peninsula and argues that populism is fragile, versatile, and malleable as an ideology and a discursive approach. Beyond the traditional discursive framework that associates the political class with the elite and working-class, and native citizens as members of the people, this paper contends that the categories of 'the people' and 'the elites' serve mostly as empty signifiers (Laclau, 2005). This is especially valid regarding the latter, as distinct populist parties populate them in numerous ways. Furthermore, it highlights how assorted contexts produce varied outcomes in the populist discourse.

There are a few important limitations to consider. Given that the dataset is confined to a specific time frame, the discursive constructions identified in this study are inherently influenced by that period's political and social context and may have evolved since. While the study provides a framework that can be applied to comparative analyses, the results should be viewed cautiously when generalized to other political parties or countries, as differing national contexts and political dynamics could generate divergent outcomes.

As a prospect for future studies, and still, within the discourse-historical approach domain, there are interesting possibilities in exploring the discursive strategies employed by Chega and Vox in their respective social media communication process. Although this study did identify some strategies of positive-self and negative-other presentation, research on this topic should be performed in the future. Longitudinal studies analyzing how both parties' discursive focus shifts over time would also provide valuable insights.

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