The Siren’s Song: Iberian Variations of the Populist Radical Right Script

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With a widespread rise of populist radical right (PRR) parties, Vox in Spain and Chega in Portugal have adapted the anti-immigration and anti-establishment narrative to address country-specific issues like national unity and economic inequality. The focus on these issues accounts for programmatic singularities that, while consistent with a broader PRR ideology, attract a national audience, especially disillusioned voters who feel neglected by their political leaders and threatened by globalization. A closer look at these singularities may help understand variations of the PRR script regarding mobility and migration – and, ultimately, these parties’ success

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The Iberian Peninsula was long perceived as ‘immune’ to a siren’s song luring many across Europe: the populist radical right (PRR). Although Spain and Portugal had seemed exceptionally resistant to PRR parties (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015), the end of ‘Iberian exceptionalism’ came in 2019 and, by now, Vox and Chega are the third-biggest political forces in their respective countries.

Like other PRR parties, Vox and Chega flourish on political dissatisfaction, attracting young voters and those with anti-globalization, anti-elite/-establishment and anti-immigration sentiments. However, some of their unique programmatic features highlight how the PRR script has been adapted to national contexts and gained traction in Spain and Portugal.

Vox and National Unity

Although some authors point to the nationalist, more than the populist, character of Vox (Ferreira 2019; Franzé and Fernández-Vázquez 2022), there is a consensus on its classification as a PRR party (Vampa 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020; Küppers 2024). Within an overarching nationalist rhetoric, anti-elite sentiments are apparent in Vox’s identification of ‘the enemies of Spain’, such as the government led by the socialist party (PSOE) and Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, foreign and ‘global’ elites, as well as autonomic (i.e., regional) elites (Vox 2023: 7).

Despite adhering to the overall PRR script, it was Vox’s recentralizing stance amidst Catalonia’s separatist claims that largely determined its success in the 2019 general elections. It seems, therefore, no coincidence that the rise of Vox occurred when a regional bid for independence became a particularly salient issue. Against this backdrop, Vox developed a program that opposes regional autonomy, emphasizing national unity to justify an aspiration to recentralize the state. Although Vox presents a unique interest in this issue, the party’s position is consistent with the PRR ideology: the key programmatic aim at recentralizing the state can be seen as an expression of nationalism.

While the national sentiment is a unifying element of the PRR electorate, the specific issue of national unity in Spain allowed Vox to emerge as a political contender, attracting a younger, male, more religious than average and less economically deprived electorate (Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020; Heyne & Manucci 2021).

Chega and Welfare Benefits

Although he is trying to distance himself and the party from *Estado Novo*’s authoritarian legacies, André Ventura and Chega seem to contradictorily resort to political slogans such as ‘God, Fatherland, Family, and Work.’ The addition of ‘work’ to a slogan borrowed from Salazar’s regime is telling of the central issue Chega focuses on: welfare and public services.

It can be said that Chega vilifies welfare recipients on the whole: the ‘virtuous Portuguese [portugueses de bem],’ those who Ventura claims to represent, are the ‘half of the country [who] work to pay for those who do not want to work’ (Agência Lusa 2021). However, this stigmatization often

assumes the contours of welfare chauvinism, as minority groups, such as the Roma community and immigrants, are accused of draining public funds.

According to Chega, national and local elites are also to blame due to widespread corruption and ‘socialist fiscal policies’ deemed as ‘inadequate’ as well as ‘persecutory of wealth creation,’ penalizing ‘the salaries of those who work the most’ (Chega 2024: 56). Chega’s stances on resource distribution, privatization, and provision of welfare have attracted dissatisfied male voters, without higher education, but who are not necessarily economically deprived. These include particularly rural voters who perceive their geographical areas as politically neglected (Magalhães & Cancela 2025).

Variations of the PRR Script on Mobility and Migration

The issues of national unity and distribution of welfare are reflected in the parties’ stances on mobility and migration: Vox alludes to both large- (post-imperial) and smaller-scale (rural) ideas of ‘Spain’ in their policy direction, while Chega departs from ideas of economic desirability.

Both Vox and Chega, even if not openly Euroskeptic, are at least Eurocritical. According to these parties, there is a link between supranational elites, with so-called ‘globalizing’ agendas and ‘progressive,’ ‘woke’ ideologies, and ‘open-doors,’ ‘irresponsible’ policies promoting ‘illegal,’ ‘uncontrolled,’ and ‘massive’ immigration.

Anti-immigration is a known element of the PRR script, although both parties consider that a degree of immigration is acceptable or even desirable. Chega argues a selection based mostly on labor demands, and Vox adds a nostalgic element, with a preference for immigrants coming from the ‘Iberosphere’, with a shared language, culture and ancestrality via past colonization (Vox 2023: 101). Securitization, welfare chauvinism, defense of traditional values, and distrust of non-nationals, particularly those of Muslim faith, are unsurprisingly present in both Vox’s and Chega’s discourses.

Regional and national emigration is also a concern. Vox looks at the issue through the lens of depopulation and social as well as territorial inequalities that, according to the party’s discourse, stem from an emptying process of ‘the rural Spain,’ imposed by ‘anti-countryside policies’ (ibid: 147), and furthered by independentist movements. Against rural depopulation, Vox prescribes natalist policies and incentives to stay that target the youth.

Chega has a nostalgic, twofold take on national-level emigration. On the one hand, unemployment and low salaries are perceived as ‘social catastrophes’ leading to brain drain and curbing economic freedom: “Youngsters are less free than their parents or grandparents were” (Chega 2024: 62); in other words, the past was better.

On the other hand, the diaspora is an ‘asset’ to the Portuguese economy, and its moral fiber is exalted. Chega’s proposal to create a ministry dedicated to the diaspora aggrandizes the nation (instead of 10 million, Portugal is considered to have 15 million inhabitants), being arguably reminiscent of

Salazar's imperialist propaganda of the 1930s, "Portugal is not a small country."

Tailoring Populism

Vox and Chega use both inward and outward migration to tailor a broader PRR ideology to the specific anxieties of their national audience. These parties not only take an anti-immigration stance with caveats shaped by historical legacies and the national context, but they also diagnose social and political unease that associates the issue of emigration with their ideological and programmatic goals.

The examples of variations in migration narratives with a focus on country-specific issues, provided by Vox and Chega, suggest that the success of PRR parties is not just about how appealing the ideology may be to predisposed demographics but also relies on the malleability of the PRR script itself.

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