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# Portugal's New Kid in Town: the Populism of Chega

## *El Nuevo Jugador en Portugal: El Populismo de Chega*

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### **Abstract**

In just five years (2019-2024), *Chega* has emerged as a dominant force, positioning itself as the most successful radical right-wing populist party in Portuguese politics. Drawing on a discursive approach to populism and through a longitudinal research of primary and secondary sources, this research examines the populism of *Chega* — with a special focus on the key role played by its leader, André Ventura. It looks at strategy, as well as the prevalence of common themes in the verbal and non-verbal discourse of its leader: 'the people', and 'the elites' as well as references to demography, democracy and religion. This study contributes to the broader literature on populism by offering a detailed empirical analysis of *Chega's* discourse and political practices, ultimately shedding light on the party's alignment with the radical right-wing contemporary populist movement and its growing influence on Portuguese democracy.

*Keywords:* Chega, André Ventura, Populism, Radical Right, Democracy, Demography, Religion.

### **Resumen**

En solo cinco años (2019-2024), Chega ha emergido como una fuerza dominante, posicionándose como el partido populista de derecha radical más exitoso de la política portuguesa. Basándose en un enfoque discursivo del populismo y a través de una investigación longitudinal de fuentes primarias y secundarias, este estudio examina el populismo de Chega, con un enfoque especial en el papel clave de su líder, André Ventura. Analiza la estrategia del partido y la prevalencia de temas recurrentes en el discurso verbal y no verbal de su líder, como 'el pueblo' y 'las élites', así como referencias a la demografía, la democracia y la religión. Este estudio contribuye a la literatura sobre el populismo al ofrecer un análisis empírico detallado del discurso y las

prácticas políticas de *Chega*, arrojando luz sobre su alineación con el movimiento populista de derecha radical contemporáneo y su creciente influencia en la democracia portuguesa.

*Palabras clave:* *Chega*, André Ventura, Populismo, Derecha Radical, Democracia, Demografía, Religión

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## INTRODUCTION

In roughly five years (2019-2024), the newcomer *Chega* has become a heavy hitter in Portuguese party politics. In a very short time, the party led by André Ventura, the former newspaper columnist and TV commentator turned leader of a national movement whose self-proclaimed aim is to regenerate the country, grew into the most successful radical right-wing populist party since the Carnation Revolution. Although there have been examples in the past of populist forces enjoying significant support, *Chega* is not only the latest iteration but also its most developed case of populism in Portugal (Zúquete, 2022). The 2024 legislative elections — where the party obtained the support of 18% of the electorate — and the subsequent European elections (9.8%) consolidated its place as the third political force in Portugal.

With a rare exception — when the now-defunct PRD (Partido Renovador Democrático) secured third place as the most-voted party in the 1980s, garnering nearly 18% of the vote — the Portuguese political system has, since the advent of democracy in 1974, been characterized by a bipartisan dominance of the center-left Socialist Party (PS) and the center-right Social Democratic Party (PSD). The resounding success of *Chega* in the 2024 legislative elections has shaken the apparent inevitability of bipartisanship in Portugal, just as it had previously disrupted the supposed immunity of the country to radical right-wing parties in 2019 (Heyne and Manucci, 2021), when the party was founded and Ventura was elected as a member of parliament.

Unlike PRD, which proved to be an ephemeral phenomenon, *Chega* appears to be here to stay, much like many other radical right-wing parties across Europe. Given the varying degrees of the core elements presence — nativism, authoritarianism, and populism — that broadly define these parties (e.g., Rydgren, 2018; Mudde, 2019), this research primarily focuses on the populist dimension of the Portuguese party.

“I do not see myself as a populist”, said André Ventura in a February 2022 TV interview given a few days after his party elected twelve representatives to the Portuguese parliament (Pimenta *et al.*, 2022). Even if Ventura has refused to adopt the label, *Chega* has been described by academics, media, and his party’s opposition as a typical radical right-wing populist party since the party’s breakthrough in the 2019 legislative elections (Marchi, 2020).

This research delves into the populist nature of *Chega*, mapping out its main features and the major themes and narratives that drive the party — from anti-system and anti-elitism to people-centrism, as well as key issues related to democracy,

religion, and immigration. The selection of these elements presented in this paper's sections stems from an intensive examination of André Ventura's rhetoric, conducted in a previous paper (Pimenta *et al.*, 2022). This prior analysis — an unprecedented measurement and coding of the Chega leader's populist discourse — made an original contribution to the literature by demonstrating that Chega's populism is, in fact, irregular, occurring with varying intensity depending on the moment and context. Building on this originality as a foundational reference, this research embarks on an in-depth investigation of Chega, one that has not yet been undertaken to this extent. Among the major definitions of populism (namely, economic, structural, political-institutional and discursive), this paper adopts a discursive approach that frames populism as a dualistic Manichaean discourse opposing a virtuous people's will to a wicked and conspiring elite (Laclau, 2005; Hawkins, 2009; Pimenta *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding the methodology, this study primarily focuses on Ventura's discourse — including speeches, interviews, social media posts, and non-verbal and symbolic communications — considering that, since its formation, the party has been heavily dependent on its leader's rhetoric and performances (Pimenta *et al.*, 2022). However, despite Ventura's dominant leadership, other sources of the party's populism are also analyzed, such as official party documents and content produced by other party leaders.

The analysis covers the period between 2019 and 2024, drawing on sources such as CHEGA TV, the party's official YouTube channel, as well as social media platforms, namely X and Facebook. To ensure a comprehensive examination of Chega's populism and its leader, a heterogeneous and longitudinal sample was used, incorporating some of the most representative and widely publicized speeches and statements identified. Not surprisingly, these include clear elements of populism, such as Manichaean rhetoric and the reinforcement of the General Will, portraying the 'good' majority in opposition to the 'evil' minority, among others (Hawkins, 2009; Pimenta *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, this study, which integrates both theoretical and empirical elements, contributes to the analysis of the global phenomenon of populism in contemporary politics, with a particular focus on the Portuguese case.

## PEOPLE AND ELITES

Populism's conceptualization suffers from chronic discussion and ambiguity, but it is widely accepted that populism is built on the confrontation between the 'good' people and the 'evil' elite (Hawkins, 2009; Zúquete, 2022). *Chega's* populism is no different, although its leader's populism is actually mild and irregular, in the sense that his populist rhetoric fluctuates in intensity, according to the time and place of action (Pimenta *et al.*, 2022).

To answer the question of who are the 'good' people and the 'evil' elite according to *Chega*, we must delve into the party's evolving nature. Besides showing elements of

populism and authoritarianism (concerning the advocacy of 'law and order' and punitive stances against those who transgress), *Chega* features nativist flavors in the same fashion as other radical right-wing populist parties — a heterogeneous political universe united by nativism as a core feature, referring to “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group...and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state” (Mudde, 2007: 22).

### *The 'good' people*

There are numerous examples of speeches, interviews and social media posts that allow a characterization of what the 'good' people are for the party. *Chega*'s 'good' people have been essentially depicted as the so-called common people, associated with honest hardworking and tax-paying citizens, which include a universe of people from different activities: “War veterans, professors, doctors, policemen, businessmen and businesswomen” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 9/1/2022). They are the ones “Who work the most, (...) invest the most, and create wealth” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 6/1/2022), they “come from a lifetime of hard work, that knows what real life is” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 4/10/2021). Overall, they are the “‘good’ Portuguese.” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 11/1/2022) and contrast with those “who don't want to work (...) living off subsidies.” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 3/1/2022). However, a closer analysis shows also a nativist side that has been present since *Chega* foundation and is becoming more notorious as the party matures.

Since its early days, the party blamed the Roma people for being unfit within the Portuguese society. They were considered to be mainly outlaws who originated from a Roma outlaw culture: “The majority of gypsies, refuse to follow the rule of law, there is almost a cultural pattern for not following the rule of law, considering the disrespect of women's rights, underage weddings, and the sense that the state has the duty to give them everything and they don't need to give it back” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 11/1/2021). Ventura targeted Roma community often and openly stated “that, in Portugal, there is a problem with a gypsy community” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 17/1/2022).

Besides the Roma community, *Chega*'s leader targeted minorities (sometimes without specifying which minorities he was referring to) as being welfare abusers and living above the law: “We want a country where if minorities want to have rights, they must also have duties.” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 19/7/2020); “We are close to the candidate that represents the worst that Portugal has — the more mediocre left-wing linked with the minorities that have explored Portugal and those who have destroyed Portugal” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 24/1/2021); “We will fight (...) so that no minority lives above the law” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 17/1/2022).

During the years 2023 and 2024, *Chega*'s nativism reached new heights, resembling the anti-immigration and anti-Islamic nativist stances commonly seen in older

European radical right-wing populist parties (Zúquete 2008). In several posts, the party endorses the great replacement narrative, which holds that native Western people and civilization are being replaced by non-Western immigration — a process put in motion by progressive elites. In this sense, *Chega* posts that “the population replacement of the Portuguese people is in progress” (*Chega* X account, 30/10/2023) and also, warns that a population replacement is in motion across UE and the UK, and urges that efforts should be made to save Portugal from this situation (*Chega* X account, 11/8/2023 and *Chega* X account, 29/9/2023). Moreover, in the 2024 legislative elections campaign, the party's X account shows several posts with a nativist tone, namely the accusations of negative discriminatory treatment given to natives when compared with foreign people (e.g., *Chega* X account, 28/2/2024, in which is stated that “We cannot give to others what we don't give to Portuguese people”), or the alarming posts that depict immigration as an uncontrolled invasion which puts in danger Portugal's identity (e.g., *Chega* X account, 26/2/2024, in which is stated that “Or we stop this massive and uncontrolled immigration or one day it will be too late and Portugal will never be the same again”). A *Chega* major figure, Diogo Pacheco de Amorim, even entered the controversial race discussion, by arguing that the Portuguese people's original color is white and belong to the Caucasian race (Figueiredo and Penela, 2022); these declarations followed an opinion article from 2019, where he stated that “all races are welcomed (in Portugal) as long as our race is respected” (Figueiredo and Penela, 2022).

Although *Chega* commonly refuses any racist connotation, it operates within a nativist framework, where the ‘good’ people are identified as the natives or, at least, those who are considered to possess native identifiable elements (regarding the native culture, language, religion, etc.).

### *The ‘evil’ elite*

The number of references regarding the ‘evil’ elite is even more abundant when compared with the ‘good’ people. First and foremost, *Chega* is characterized as an anti-establishment party, typical of populist parties (Laclau, 2005; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017); a party with a mission of changing the so-called ‘system’ or, using harsher words, “*Chega* was born to break with the system” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 3/12/2021). By system, the party means a political *status quo* linked to the Third Portuguese Republic (born out of the Carnation Revolution) and the main political actors, i.e., the dominating political parties (*Chega* Manifesto Político Fundador, 2019 and *Chega* Programa Político, 2019), namely the PS and PSD parties. *Chega* frequently associates the two parties, arguing that they are the same (e.g., *Chega* X account, 15/2/2024). But, according to *Chega*, the ‘evil’ elite is beyond the parties and is disseminated throughout the banking system, judicial power, media, academia and other sectors.

There are numerous examples of *Chega*'s anti-establishment and anti-elite stances: “We are tired of seeing the system more rotten and more corrupt, where the privileged

are illegitimate owners of everything” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 8/8/2020); “In the next elections we will send the power owner elite straight back home” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 8/8/2020); “Our problem was never the people but the elites that governed us,” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 9/1/2022); “This a historical night because an anti-establishment party beat the traditional right-wing (...) and created an overwhelming anti-establishment wave” (Ventura, CHEGA TV 24/1/2021); and many more examples could be presented.

The elites are not necessarily non-natives but include those who act against the best interests of native people (the majority) by pursuing self-interest goals and the interests of certain minorities — being internal minorities (like the Roma community and the LGBTQIA+ community), or foreign minorities, namely immigrants and conspiring globalist elements; often, the governing elites are accused of being the major responsible for massive and uncontrolled immigration (e.g., *Chega* X account, 11/2/2024, in which is stated that “The Socialist Government aims to regularise in a rush more than 350 hundred thousand immigrants before it collapses. This is shameful!”). The ‘corruption’ issue, associated with power abuses, is one of *Chega*’s hot topics, if not the party’s main issue, and the elites are the main target.

Overall, *Chega* operates in a dualistic and Manichean framework, where the elites are the root cause of Portugal’s problems; they are the ‘evil’ forces that oppose the ‘good’ people of which *Chega* is its only true representative or, in more dramatic words, its voice — “Until my last drop of blood, I will be your voice,” (Ventura, elections presidential campaign, 8/8/2020).

## MAJOR THEMES

### *Democracy*

Political adversaries and hostile media, often depict *Chega* as an anti-democratic party. An analytical look shows, however, that both the party and its leader present some elements supportive of a pluralist democracy (Chega Programa Político, 2021; Programa Eleitoral Legislativas, 2022; Pimenta *et al.*, 2022; Chega Programa Eleitoral Legislativas, 2024). All in all, the party vows to change the political system in a non-revolutionary way (via democratic elections) and to respect the rule of law. *Chega* uses a typical populist narrative concerning the defense of a ‘true’ democracy in opposition to a ‘fake’ democracy (e.g., *Chega* X account, 5/3/2024 “Yes, we defend a democracy, but not this one”).

Nevertheless, *Chega* also presents illiberal elements, typically found in other populist radical right-wing parties, associated with a mix of nativist and authoritarian features. Those elements menace liberal democracy characteristics like the respect and promotion of social diversity and minority rights (Heyne and Manucci, 2021: 3). Being a party with nativist elements, *Chega*’s democratic nature shows ties with the ethnocracy concept, where citizenship is based on ethnicity (Mudde, 2019: 28). In

the 2024 legislative election political program, in a chapter dedicated to immigration and borders issues, the party presents several proposals that concern a change in nationality acquiring and preservation; *Chega*, proposes that nationality can only be given to those who know Portuguese language and culture, adding that nationality can be taken and deportation applied if certain crimes are committed by those who were not born in Portugal (Chega Programa Eleitoral Legislativas, 2024).

The populist radical right-wing parties' intellectual ethnocratic foundations go back to the French *Nouvelle Droite*'s ethnopluralism doctrine — a doctrine which holds that different ethnic groups should not mix, in order to ensure its preservation (Zúquete, 2018: 266-319). And, adding authoritarian elements to its nativism, *Chega* presents a narrative of 'law and order' targeting ethnic outgroups, namely Roma people and immigrants.

*Chega*'s anti-establishment stance is anti-elitist and, although it does not reject the representative democratic model prevailing in Portugal, the party advocates for a more dominant executive power and the implementation of some direct democracy practices. There are several examples across time, considering a wide range of issues, that illustrate the party's defense of a popular and direct democracy: in 2020, the party asked for a referendum to reduce the number of MPs (Ralha, 2020); at the beginning of 2023, Ventura stated that the only way to solve the debate around euthanasia was to call a referendum (Agência Lusa, 2023a); in March of 2023, the party called for a referendum on the evaluation of the educational performance (Agência Lusa, 2023b); also in 2023 *Chega* MP, Bruno Nunes, asked for a referendum on immigration (What about a referendum on immigration? CHEGA, 18/10/2023) and stated that Brussels bureaucrats are not legitimized representatives of the people and therefore a decision on European immigration policies should rest on popular referendums (Identidade e Futuro X account, 27/11/2023).

Although there is no data that supports the idea that *Chega*'s base members would prefer a direct democracy (Marchi, 2023), a recent survey, performed on the Portuguese population, revealed that 70% of the respondents are in favor of referendums to decide on the most important issues for the country (Ribeiro, 2024). These survey results are an example that may help to explain the strong bet of *Chega* on popular and direct democracy instruments like the referendum.

According to Ventura's rhetoric, *Chega*'s democratic genealogy traces its origin to the 25 of November — a historic date in 1975, in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution, that refers to an event when political moderate forces counter-couped a far-left coup — while suggesting that the Carnation Revolution of 25 of April didn't represent freedom at all. In this line of thought, Ventura performed an anti-establishment speech, on the 25 of November of 2023, against what he called a democratic regime led by a 'bunch of crooks' that usurped democracy and promoted uncontrolled immigration that takes advantage of the Portuguese welfare state, though the common people suffer (Ventura, 25 of November Speech 25/11/2023). Moreover, Ventura blames the establishment for trying to adulterate history (concerning the revolutionary period of 1974 and the following years) and questions if Portuguese people are

really free today (Ventura, 25 of November Speech 25/11/2023); for *Chega's* leader, the 25 of November “will be the day of Portugal, the day to celebrate freedom in our country” (Ventura, 25 of November Speech 26/11/2023), a celebration typically solely associated with the 25 of April.

Although *Chega* never rejects or literally opposes the Carnation Revolution (in fact, the party celebrated the 25 of April in previous years), it focuses on the failed promises from the establishment born out of the revolution and polarizes the political debate by celebrating the 25 of November, a divisive date that fires up the confrontation between right-wing and left-wing political forces and among those who advocate socialist democracies versus other types of democracy. When looking beyond the 25 of April and the 25 of November, it is important to note that *Chega* rejects any nostalgia in regard to the non-democratic right-wing regime of *Estado Novo* (Marchi, 2023); nevertheless, research (Manucci and Van Hauwaert, 2024) found that those who are willing to vote *Chega* are more nostalgic of *Estado Novo*, while it is suggested that the party uses some of *Estado Novo's* rhetoric to seduce those voters.

There is a certain match between what *Chega* supplies and the typical demand of populist radical right-wing voters. As noted by several scholars (e.g., Bowler *et al.*, 2017), populist radical right-wing voters tend to be among the most unsupportive groups regarding how democracy works, motivating parties like *Chega* to offer an alternative kind of democracy. Research has shown that *Chega* party members follow this same path: they support democracy as a political system and even some of its pluralist features (Marchi, 2023) although they, simultaneously, show illiberal stances regarding minorities.

In Portugal, there is overall support for democracy and a growing discontent regarding the functioning of democracy (De Sousa *et al.*, 2014; Pequito *et al.*, 2019; Carvalho, 2023), in this sense, it is predictable that any populist radical right-wing party with governing ambitions, like *Chega*, will show clear pro-democratic stances. *Chega* struggles to manage carefully its image in order not to be branded as racist or anti-democratic — elements associated with extreme right-wing that would be very much unattractive to voters (Golder, 2003; van der Brug *et al.*, 2005; Mendes and Dennison, 2021).

### *Demography and Immigration*

“No matter how much the judicial system or others call me to task, I will continue to say this: there are problems with minorities in Portugal. And I will continue to say it as a parliamentary leader, as a candidate for President of the Republic... And as long as these minorities do not comply with what others do, you will have me here saying exactly the same thing”, Ventura stated in a TV interview in the run-up to the 2021 Presidential election (RTP, 2020). Since its founding, *Chega* and its leader have mobilized a populist discourse of ‘majority identity’ (the ‘good’ Portuguese people) against both treacherous elites and some ethnic minorities. There have been two major phases



in the party's narrative and focus on the majority-minority binary. The first one, which lasted roughly until 2022, saw the party's focus to be mainly on the country's Roma population, in the name of economic (social welfare) and public safety. The second phase, which has become more prominent since the years 2023/2024, expands the targets to include a wider group of immigrants, especially those from non-EU countries, for economic *and* demographic/cultural reasons. A caveat: this distinction between phases is generic and does not preclude evident overlaps.

The anti-Roma narrative — central in the first phase — has drawn on producerism, the division of society opposing the 'producers' versus the 'moochers'; in other words, the dichotomy between the hard-working, tax-paying people and the ethnic minority that exploits and abuses them through welfare assistance and subsidies. This advocacy of producerism was not invented by *Chega* — it has antecedents in the history of Portuguese right-wing populism (Zúquete, 2022). Ventura embraced producerism even before the founding of *Chega*; he was the center-right candidate for Loures' mayor position, a city on the outskirts of Lisbon, where he made the 'parasitism' of the Roma community a central issue of his campaign ("Gypsies live almost exclusively on state subsidies" he said in an interview, [Bugalho, 2017]). However, he has not simply embraced producerism, he has amplified its intensity further indicting the Roma people, in a political discourse laced with a heavy moral indignation, as an entitled minority that sees itself as above the law, crime-prone, and creating justifiable resentment among the majority population. The alleged high incarceration rates of Roma people have been highlighted by the *Chega* leader: "In [the city of] Beja I saw the fear that the entire population has of the gypsy community. They make up around 1% of the population and fill Portuguese prisons. Maybe they are around 15% or 20% of the prisoners. Unacceptable. Gypsies are a problem in many regions and this cannot continue!" (Ventura X account, 22/9/2021). Alleging its non-compliance with the health and safety rules imposed on all citizens during the Covid pandemic — and amidst episodes of conflict between Roma communities and the surrounding population — Ventura advocated that they should be subject to an ethnically-specific lockdown (Lopes, 2020). In this first phase, the depiction of the Roma community as a minority that was owed special privileges by the political status quo was central to the grievance politics pushed by *Chega* and its leader.

Shortly after the party's VI Congress, in January 2024, a political analyst asked rhetorically "where did the gypsies (...) go in *Chega's* speech?" (Tavares, 2024). The focus on the Roma community, in the last years, lessened in the party's narrative, gradually replaced by the targeting of non-European immigration. This shift was in part to reflect the steep increase of non-EU nationals in Portuguese territory (mostly from the Indian sub-continent, and Portuguese-speaking countries) which the party saw as an opportunity to politicize an issue that was increasingly under the headlights of the media, and to exploit it. In the party's manifesto ("To Sweep Portugal") for the 2024 general election, mass immigration is rejected not only for economic motivations but also for cultural considerations: "CHEGA is, indeed, against uncontrolled immigration, with 'open doors', where anyone can enter Portugal without any type of

inspection. CHEGA is against immigration that only seeks social benefits. Massive. That doesn't want to integrate. That intends to transform us and subjugate us culturally, that does not respect our traditions" (Chega Programa Eleitoral Legislativas, 2024). This emphasis on culture was not novel per se; in the first phase of the party it emerged — in a desultory fashion and mostly in relation to Islamism — with the leader alluding to the necessity to limit Muslim communities in Portugal and Europe as a civilizational defense. What characterizes this new phase is a higher frequency of discussion of the cultural question and greater consistency in its messaging — with non-EU immigration as a whole viewed under the lens of a wider critique of multiculturalism and global migration policies. Throughout, as with the first phase, *Chega* takes for itself the role of protector of the people against both the elites' 'mad' policies and threatening immigrant minorities.

At the same time, demographic concerns have started to play a key role in *Chega*'s discourse on immigration — with the 'Great Replacement' seen as a direct threat to the physical survival of Portuguese and European-descent populations. Already in the Fall of 2021, in the national parliament, Ventura pointed for the first time to this menacing demographic shift: "We can beat around the bush as much as we want, there is a structural problem not only in Portugal but also in the European Union that is called 'demographic replacement'. And don't try to tell us that we are being racist or xenophobic, the truth is just one: the European Union as a whole has been demographically replaced by the children of immigrants. And this is a problem that Europe has to face" (Ventura Facebook account, 15/8/2021). With time, 'replacism' became a keyword in *Chega*'s excoriation of immigration policies — "It is not with immigrants that we solve our demographic problems. It is not by replacing the Portuguese that we help develop Portugal!" (Ventura X account, 18/5/2022). And this denunciation is done both in Portugal and abroad. At a 2023 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held in Budapest, Ventura attacked the global elites that "prefer mass immigration to replace the [autochthonous] families" (Ventura, CHEGA TV 15/5/2023).

Other *Chega* officials subsequently employ the frame of population replacement too, as when Rita Matias, a member of parliament, on the social network X posted a photo of the Portuguese cricket team (made of south Asians) with the words, "Last week @AndreCVentura spoke about the ongoing population replacement. Media accusations ranged from racism to conspiracy theories. Look at the national cricket team. Is it really a conspiracy?" (Matias X account, 30/11/2023); or when another MP, Pedro Frazão, posted on the same network a population pyramid of Portuguese and foreigners, saying, "For those who think that there is no population replacement underway, please analyze the following age pyramid. This is the disastrous result for the nation of policies that attack the family, degrade the economy, and of uncontrolled immigration" (Frazão X account, 22/1/2024). A few months later, commenting on a news article focused on the surge of foreign mothers in the country, he wrote on Instagram, "Population replacement is underway and if we don't do anything about it, we are at serious risk of extinction. Save the Portuguese! Save Lusitânia! [the name

of the Roman province where modern Portugal is]" (Frazão Instagram account, 19/4/2024).

Faced with the 'demographic winter' of the country, the elites in power are accused of steering Portugal into a suicidal path of replacement of the native population. As stated by Matias at the end of a speech in the national parliament, "It is time to say 'enough is enough' to those who seek to solve the birth rate problem through immigration, because this is just the assisted suicide of our country. It's time to rebuild Portugal" (Matias, 2022). At a TV debate she criticized the choice of government ministries, defending the creation of a Ministry of Demography: "Instead of creating a Ministry of Youth, why not a Ministry of Demography? [a Ministry] that confronts the birth rate problem, alert to the fact that our young people are leaving abroad, and that unfortunately the socialist party government preferred to import people from the third world to fill the gaps in the labor market" (Matias, 2024). The fact that the total population of Portugal started to grow again, mainly sustained by growing immigration and a slight increase in birth rates (also due to immigrants) led Matias to comment in a dry manner, "Keep saying that population replacement is a conspiracy theory" (Matias X account, 17/9/2023).

In the coming years — and if the recent past serves as a guide — it is only to be expected that the triad of native population decline, the influx of non-EU immigrants, and demographic dread will only accelerate *Chega's* defense of the 'good Portuguese people' against its own ongoing 'replacement' and physical, cultural, and civilizational decline.

### *Religion*

"Even in the middle of the election campaign, I had some time to reconnect with God. Fortunately!", wrote the *Chega* leader on the social network X during the 2024 European Parliament election, accompanying it with an image of him, kneeling, hands clasped at the Church of the Holy Cross, in Coimbra (Ventura X account, 4/6/2024). This episode is one of many throughout the years in which André Ventura, who attended a seminary in his youth, has exhibited publicly and in front of cameras his religiosity. This performance is an important aspect of Ventura's populist style — by behaving in a way that is more typical of ordinary people he distances himself from the elites that have been typically more restrained, or even at odds with, any sort of open and ostentatious displays of faith. By embodying the culture of those 'below' against that of those 'above' he distinguishes himself and the party he leads from the rest of the political establishment. This performative dimension, enacted through verbal and nonverbal cues — which is at the heart of populism as the expression and boasting of the 'low' against the styles and manners of the 'high' (Ostiguy, 2017) — is a form of resistance and challenge to any sort of claims of moral and cultural superiority by the elites in power. At the same time, it is also central to Ventura's religious populism (Zúquete, 2017) — a form of populism that shares its conceptual center

(the antagonism between the people and the elites) — but reproduces it in a specific religious key or fashion. It expresses itself both in the politicization of religion and the sacralization of politics — which, although theoretically distinct, intertwine in the discourse and behavior of religious populists such as the *Chega* leader.

The eagerness to flaunt religious piety is one of the ways that faith is politicized in the discursive-performative populist style of Ventura. This is often done by showcasing the leader's devotion at altars and in churches, sometimes accompanied by his wife, whether in praying by himself, going to the Mass and/or taking the Holy Communion (Moniz and Brissos-Lino, 2024: 12). The instances are myriad. For example, on social networks, Ventura posted an image of him kneeling at a church with the message: "I turn 40 today. I came here to be grateful for every minute, even the not so good ones and those that hurt a lot. And above all [for] the privilege that God granted me to be able to fight for my country" (Ventura X account, 15/1/2023). Often in those images he is surrounded by popular saints. In one of those occasions, Ventura was photographed in St. Nicholas Church, in Lisbon, "in a religious triangle with Portuguese saints: one of them a popular preacher, the first saint born in Portugal [Saint Anthony]; another a military man, and savior of independence at the battle of Aljubarrota [Nuno Álvares Pereira, the Saint Constable]; and another (hidden) the protector of the poor and health services [John of God]" (Torres, 2020). Furthermore, Ventura's initial reactions to electoral results are traditionally delivered after attending Mass (RTP, 2024).

Ventura's politicization of religion also manifests itself in the regular use of scriptures — Biblical frames and citations (Strømmen, 2022) — in order to legitimize his role and his party in Portuguese politics and also to convey political messages or reinforce their impact. Ventura quoted Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews (10:38) writing, "Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him," as the caption of an image of him leading a political protest (Ventura Facebook account 27/6/2020). In one of the 25 of April celebrations in the Portuguese parliament, *Chega's* leader ended his speech by quoting yet again the apostle Paul (Romans 8: 31) — this time to reinforce the self-image of the righteous people persecuted by an impious and unjust power: "What, then, shall we say in response to these things [injustice]? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Ventura, CHEGA TV 25/4/2023). In justifying his bluntness in attacking the establishment, Ventura invokes the scriptures saying at a radio show that "Saint Paul used to say that God vomits out those who are lukewarm, those who don't have a very clear position on things, who are always jumping from one side to the other. I like to follow this Saint Paul maxim" (Ventura, Rádio Renascença 15/2/2024)— Even if, in this case, the citation is actually from the Book of Revelation (3: 16 "So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth").

Another expression of the politicization of religion can be seen in an intense Marian devotion that Ventura regularly displays in his communication with the wider public — often establishing a direct link between the human and the divine. When he visited the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Conception in the town of Vila Viçosa, he wrote

an illustrated post on Facebook with his image kneeling at the altar: “In 1646, D. João IV recognized the miracle of recovery of our independence and proclaimed Our Lady of Conception as the Patroness of Portugal. At her Sanctuary, in Vila Viçosa, I asked for a new miracle to happen to this great country” (Ventura Facebook account, 2/2/2020). Ventura vaunts his personal relationship with Our Lady of Fátima — and Portugal's main place of worship. Once, on the day of the anniversary of Mary's apparitions to the shepherd children in Fátima, Ventura proclaimed on social media that “today is a very special day for me. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1917, Portugal changed forever [the Marian apparition]. I too felt this profound change on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May in my life. Today I feel, I know, that somehow my political mission is deeply linked to Fátima. This is, perhaps, my great Secret” (Ventura X account, 13/5/2020). This prophetic language clashes head-on with the more bureaucratic language typical of other politicians, helping to further distinguish the *Chega* leader from them. The veneration of Mary goes as far as pilgrimages — for example, he traveled by foot, together with other party MPs, as a pilgrim from Lisbon to the shrine of Fátima and along the way documented the pilgrimage route on social media. In this instance again he tied the temporal with the otherworldly — while on his journey he gave an interview to a national TV saying “Let's hope that Our Lady of Fátima helps us to change Portugal” (Durão, 2023).

At the same time, within the discourse of Ventura, dynamics of politicization of religion have also emerged beyond the *belief*/theological dimension and into the *belonging*/cultural combat. Christianity is also used as a marker of identity (Zúquete, 2017: 448; Lamour, 2022: 320) — a way to distinguish and separate Europeans from ‘Others’, especially Muslims — hence warnings against the “rapid Islamization of Europe” and the need for a civilizational defense and to “maintain a balanced European cultural matrix, which is a Jewish-Christian matrix” (*Agência Lusa*, 2024). “It's time to unite the patriots of Europe and our Christian civilization against the invaders!” (Ventura X account, 14/6/2023) or “To think that Europe's roots are Christian and that they should be defended is to be radical? Then I am a radical” (Ventura, *Universo Português* 21/5/2024).

Finally, — and as the second dimension of this case of religious populism — politics has repeatedly been sacralized in the discourse, verbal and non-verbal, of the leader of *Chega*. In it, Ventura comes across as a chosen man with a mission of salvation for Portugal. In one of his first interviews as a member of parliament, on one of the morning television programs, Ventura, after showing the interviewer a crucifix (“it is with me all the time”), said: “I am extremely religious (...) I see politics as an almost religious mission. I've never said this, and I know it's going to be misinterpreted, but I think it's a kind of mission from God” (Zúquete, 2022: 229). Ultimately at stake is a fight of Good against Evil and, as declared by Ventura on social media, “God entrusted me with the difficult but honorable mission of transforming Portugal. And I will not abandon the Portuguese, no matter how many traps are placed in my path” (Ventura X account, 12/12/2020). Obviously, Ventura's messianism was not born in a vacuum — the *Chega* leader activated a historical, cultural, and mythical repository,

especially the long political-religious tradition in Portugal of Sebastianism (Zúquete, 2013); a messianic myth, with a popular dimension, based on the belief that King Sebastian of Portugal would reappear and return to Portugal to save the nation and inaugurate an era of true Christian doctrine. Even martyrdom — in his discourse — is not off the table. André Ventura himself admitted the possibility of a final sacrifice as the price to be paid for the mission of transforming Portugal, saying at the end of the Third National Congress of *Chega* that “maybe one day a bullet will end my life, but it will never end this force that is Portugal” (Zúquete, 2022; Dias, 2022). Be it as it may, this missionary style of doing politics opens yet again another path of *distinction* and *transgression* from the traditional, non-prophetic, day-to-day politics of the Portuguese political establishment.

## EPILOGUE

Despite the inherent limitations arising from the impracticality of covering Ventura’s and *Chega*’s discourse to its full extent, this research has provided an in-depth characterization of *Chega*’s populism. Through an immersion in the party’s key discursive moments — primarily conveyed by its leader — it has explored the most recurrent and central themes, including ‘the people’ and ‘the elites,’ as well as the party’s approaches to demography, democracy, and religion.

This study also sheds lights on the fact that *Chega* shares ideological foundations and political objectives with the extensively studied Western far-right parties and often collaborates with them to achieve political success both in the national context and on the international stage. Since its foundation, *Chega* has maintained connections with an international family of like-minded parties and political figures such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Santiago Abascal, Geert Wilders and Viktor Orbán. This internationalist push has gone beyond Europe and *Chega* developed a close relationship with politicians from across the Atlantic Ocean, like the Bolsonaro family (namely Jair Bolsonaro and his son, Eduardo Bolsonaro); also, Ventura was the only Portuguese politician invited to Donald Trump’s inauguration.

*Chega*’s officials — prime among them the undisputed leader — have always dismissed the populist label. That is clear in the manifesto for the 2024 general elections: “it is not exaggerated, and much less populist, to say that the current political system has effectively hit bottom, plunging into a profound political and institutional degradation that Portugal has not seen for many decades” (*Chega Programa Eleitoral Legislativas*, 2024).

However, the political logic, as well as the political practice, that pulses at the heart of the party, establishes it — notwithstanding its own discomfort — as a paramount case of populism in present-day Portugal. Its political logic is radically antagonistic: a Manichean framework of politics (between the ‘good people’ and a myriad of evils), a dramatic division between *Chega* and the rest of the system, and an attempt to rekindle political conflict seen as a moral/final battle where *Chega* presents itself as a tool of

salvation to most of Portugal's long-lasting problems. Its political practice sustains and strengthens this logic of antagonism: through discourse and repertoires of action and contention — verbal, symbolic and performative, consistently articulated, with a heavy dose of media and digital savviness, by its leader.

The junction of both logic and practice constitutes — as the endgame — a strategy to get to power and to govern. This remains an as-of-yet-unachieved goal but *Chega* already shows significant accomplishments, especially in such a short time frame. It has both impacted and challenged the political/media ecosystem, and has shown success — for which it was rewarded electorally — in becoming the voice of discontent and of unaddressed grievances on a number of topics.

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