

# Understanding the Emergence of Extreme Right Parties in Portugal in the Late 2010s

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After more than four decades of immunity to the extreme-right party family, this Portuguese exceptionalism came to an end after the electoral breakthrough of the *Chega* party in the 2019 general elections. Drawing on a case study approach, this article discusses different explanations for the timing of *Chega*'s emergence in Portuguese mainstream politics in the late 2010s. Considering this late success, Portugal can be seen as a crucial case study to assess the available theories. This investigation employs a popular schema that implies the distinction between explanations focused on 'demand-side' factors (the protest voting thesis and the public salience of immigration) from those concerned with 'supply-side' factors (the spatial competition theory and internal supply factors). Through the employment of the congruence method, this article highlights the interaction between party-centric factors as a more appropriate explanation for understanding the timing of *Chega*'s electoral breakthrough than demand-side approaches.

**Keywords:** Extreme-Right Parties, *Chega*, Electoral Breakthrough, Portugal, Case Studies

## 1. Introduction

The resurgence of extreme-right parties (ERPs) in Western Europe has been ranked as one of the most significant political trends in the past decades (Rygden, 2018). By the end of the 2010s, the far-right parties were observing the fourth wave of development which encompasses their mainstreaming and normalisation in their domestic political systems (Mudde, 2019). Consequently, ERPs have been included in national governments or have provided parliamentary support to minority centre-right governments in several European countries, such as Austria, Italy, Finland and the Netherlands (Akkerman *et al.*, 2016). At the global level, three of the most highly populated countries in the world (India, the USA and Brazil) had elected a president with a far-right background by the

late 2010s (Mudde, 2019). In general, ERPs abandoned the fringes of the political systems and moved into the political mainstream, as evidenced by their levels of electoral support and their parliamentary representation in several countries (Odmalm and Hepburn, 2017).

Against these global trends, Portugal persisted in being immune to the far right until the end of the 2010s, which constituted an exceptional case at the European level (Mudde, 2019).<sup>1</sup> This Portuguese exceptionalism ended after the 2019 general elections wherein *Chega* (Enough) performed an electoral breakthrough into the Assembly of the Republic after collecting 1.29 per cent of the vote (Fernandes and Magalhães, 2020; Afonso, 2021). Thus, the late emergence of this ERP<sup>2</sup> into mainstream politics constitutes a crucial case study for examining the relevance of the available theories to understand ERPs' electoral breakthroughs. Moreover, *Chega* demonstrated an extraordinary ability to expand its electoral support in national elections, as suggested by its consolidation into mainstream politics in a very short period. *Chega*'s political relevance in national politics was evident during the 2021 Presidential elections, where this ERP's leader—André Ventura was the third most voted candidate with 11.9 per cent of the total vote, representing the preference of 496,653 voters (CNE, 2021a).

The objectives of this in-depth study are twofold. First, this investigation will help overcome the lack of in-depth studies on the Portuguese far right (Ruzza, 2018).<sup>3</sup> Through the employment of the congruence method, this article will shed light on *Chega*'s electoral breakthrough in 2019 by exploring which theories are most consistent with the empirical observations. Drawing on a popular dichotomy in ERP literature, this investigation examines the relevance of a set of explanations aimed at understanding the emergence of far-right parties, which have been distinguished according to their demand-side or supply-side character (Mudde, 2007; Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). Secondly, the article assesses the relative strengths of the different available theoretical proposals to explain the ERPs' emergence into mainstream politics. Thereby, this investigation will contribute to the wider literature on the far right by comparing the level of congruence of the selected theoretical predictions and the empirical evidence extracted from this case study (Arzheimer, 2018).

Two proposals derived from the demand-side perspective will be assessed, one concerning the 'protest vote thesis' (Norris, 2005; Birch and Dennison, 2019), and the other the public salience of immigration (Dennison and Geddes, 2019; see

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<sup>1</sup>Ireland, Malta and Luxembourg are the only member-states of the European Union that lack the representation of a party from the extreme right in the national parliament.

<sup>2</sup>Right-wing extremism is hereby interpreted as the unique combination of two ideological properties: a rejection of the fundamental values, procedures, and institutions of the democratic constitutional state; and, foremost, the denial of the principle of human equality (Carter, 2018; Mudde, 2019).

<sup>3</sup>For some recent exceptions, see Mendes and Dennison (2020) and Afonso (2021).

**Table 1** Explanations for the emergence of extreme right parties

Demand-side explanations	Supply-side explanations
Protest voting thesis	Theory of spatial competition
Public concern with immigration	Internal supply side factors

Table 1).<sup>4</sup> In parallel, the congruence of two approaches related to the supply side will also be explored, encompassing the ‘theory of spatial competition’ (Kitschelt, 2017, 2018) and ‘internal supply-side factors’ (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). These latter factors refer to the type of right-wing extremist ideology and the political strategy adopted by the selected ERP’s leadership, as ERPs themselves are rarely considered as the cause of their own electoral fortunes (Carter, 2017). This investigation suggests that *Chega*’s emergence into mainstream politics in the late 2010s was most likely related with the interaction between party-centred factors rather than with political demand, confirming past explanations for the absence of the ERP family from Portuguese mainstream politics (Mudde, 2019, p. 144). The next section reviews the qualitative research strategy employed in this research.

## 2. The congruence method

Congruence analysis is considered the most widely used within-case study method in political science (Beach and Pedersen, 2016). Through this research strategy, a set of specific propositions are deductively derived from the selected theoretical approaches and then evaluated by comparing the congruence of those predictions with the empirical observations extracted from the in-depth analysis of a single case study. The explanatory power of the different proposals is evaluated by the degree of congruence between the deduced implications of a theory and the collected empirical data (George and Bennett, 2005). Thereby, the first step of this research strategy encompasses the identification of the most relevant theories for explaining the selected phenomenon. A congruence analysis that employs a plurality of theories proposes a more rigorous validity test of a theory by comparing its explanatory power with other competing theories (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). To attain this objective, the predictions derived from the selected theories should compete to explain a similar outcome and contain a mutually exclusive character to enhance the evaluation of their validity (Hall, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>The lack of representation of the *Chega*’s electorate in the samples of the electoral polls conducted in the 2019 parliamentary elections prevents the development of quantitative analysis of the socio-economic background or the political preferences of the Portuguese far right voters.

Data collection is closely intertwined with the selected predictions because these indicate the empirical data necessary to evaluate the congruence between the designated causal variables and the within-case observations (Beach and Pedersen, 2016). Thereby, the empirical data collected to assess the different theories can have varied and non-compatible forms. The advantage of the congruence method lies in the multiple observations that can be collected to assess the validity of distinct theoretical proposals in a single case study (George and Bennett, 2005). In short, a congruence analysis is not only employed to improve clarity regarding important political phenomena, but also and specially to develop theory testing in a particular case study in order to contribute to the wider theoretical debates in the discipline. Conversely, the analytical inferences of this in-depth study are less likely to be generalised to a population of similar cases (Blatter and Haverland, 2012). The next sections will present the distinct theoretical proposals analysed in this investigation.

### 3. Protest voting and support for the far right

The protest voting thesis highlights public alienation with mainstream politics as a primary cause behind electoral support for minor parties like ERPs (Norris, 2005; Arzeihemer, 2018). Protest voting has been envisaged as a rational, goal-oriented activity, which is driven by the aim to express discontent with the political elite and status quo (Van der Brug *et al.*, 2000). Thereby, protest voting is interpreted as an expression of the rejection of all established parties derived from public disaffection with an interparty consensus on a particular topic, the attitudes of the political elite as a whole or the performance of political institutions (Birch and Dennison, 2019). These trends will enhance both the decline of party identification with and political trust in established parties. These factors that will facilitate the emergence of minor parties like ERPs that have been located at the margins of mainstream politics. Mainstream parties who hold parliamentary representation cannot be considered political outsiders and can hardly benefit from protest voting (Norris, 2005).

From this perspective, the ERPs' electoral breakthroughs derive from intense and widespread political disaffection with traditional political elites, evolving from public disgruntlement with mainstream parties (Mudde, 2007; Betz, 2017). Likewise, the levels of ERPs' electoral support at the domestic level indicate a negative attitude towards the political system rather than individual political preferences. Thus, ERPs' emergence into national politics is supposedly independent from these parties' ideological outlooks and a reflection of protest voting. Through the examination of Eurobarometer polls conducted during the 2010s which include questions on the overall satisfaction with the domestic political systems and public trust regarding political institutions, the first hypothesis assessed by this investigation suggests that:

H1: *Chega's* electoral breakthrough in the 2019 general elections followed significant levels of political disaffection among Portuguese voters.

#### 4. The salience of immigration

Most of the available research on ERPs in Western Europe expresses a consensus that electoral support for these parties is closely associated with the xenophobic attitudes of the electorate. According to several studies, the ERPs' electorate is distinctive from the remaining voters in what concerns their negative attitudes towards immigration (Mayer, 2007; Rydgren, 2018). In a refinement of the protest voting thesis, it was suggested that public alienation reflects the lack of government's responsiveness to voters' preferences towards the restriction of immigration (Arzheimer, 2018). Two causal mechanisms have been associated with public opposition to immigration. First, the economic insecurity thesis indicates that intense competition between natives and immigrants in the domestic labour market will drive public concern and attitudes towards immigration (Mudde, 2019). The different strands of group conflict theory are rooted in the assumption that potential conflicts over the distribution of material benefits in a society will enhance public perception of unfairness (Arzheimer, 2018).

Secondly, the theory of a cultural backlash suggests that far-right voters are driven by a protest against neoliberal globalisation, including mass immigration and multiculturalism, which threatens their cultural identity (Mudde, 2019; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Recent research highlighted the intense correlation between the salience of immigration amongst segments of the electorate and the expansion of electoral support for anti-immigration parties (Dennison and Geddes, 2019). Moreover, this research suggested that: 'variance between countries concerning the salience of immigration largely predicts the support for anti-immigration parties' and contained a direct reference to Portugal's immunity to ERPs (Dennison and Geddes, 2019, p. 115). Drawing on the ranking of immigration among the most important problems assessed by the Eurobarometer polls conducted during the 2010s, the second hypothesis examines the extent to which:

H2: *Chega's* electoral breakthrough in the 2019 general elections followed intense levels of public concern with immigration.

#### 5. Spatial competition approach

Derived from the supply-side approaches, the 'theory of spatial competition' focuses on the influence exerted on electoral behaviour by the distance between the political positioning of mainstream parties and voters' preferences (Mudde,

2019). The degree of convergence between mainstream parties can enhance the observation of segments of voters whose policy preferences are no longer reflected by traditional political elites. The increasing distance between voters' preferences and the mainstream parties' political stances can facilitate the emergence of minor radical parties like ERPs (De Lange, 2017). Hence, the subsequent decline of party loyalty across the electorate due to mainstream party convergence is considered fundamental to enhance the chance of minor parties gaining sufficient electoral support to break into mainstream politics. Past research indicated that centripetal shifts among mainstream parties were more important to enhance an electoral breakthrough of an ERP than to understand their potential consolidation within the party system (Mudde, 2007).

While the positions of mainstream centre-right parties were regarded as crucial to understand the emergence of ERPs into mainstream politics, research on the British National Party during the 2000s highlighted that centre-left parties' centripetal shifts can have similar effects (Carvalho, 2015). Nonetheless, it was recently suggested that the centrist shift by the mainstream centre-right party should be primarily viewed according to the positions on the economic-distributive dimension rather than the general positioning on the left-right ideological spectrum or on cultural issues (Kitschelt, 2018). Following the later suggestion, this investigation examines the potential impact of the structured interaction between Portuguese political parties on *Chega's* emergence into national politics. Through the analysis of the centre-right party's discourse and the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys conducted in the second half of the 2010s, the third hypothesis examines whether:

H3: *Chega's* electoral breakthrough in the 2019 general elections followed the convergence of the main centre-right party on the economic dimension.

## 6. Varieties of right-wing extremism

Lastly, the electoral fortunes of right-wing extremist parties are frequently linked with 'internal supply factors' related to the ideological outlooks adopted by the ERPs' leaderships (Carter, 2017; Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). To classify *Chega's* ideological outlook, this investigation employs a fivefold typology<sup>5</sup> of ERPs that encompasses: (i) neo-Nazi parties that profess biological racism, overt opposition to liberal democracy and linkages with the fascist heritage; (ii) neo-fascist parties that also directly oppose liberal democratic systems but do not embrace xenophobia;

<sup>5</sup>The fivefold typology derived from the employment of three criteria: 1) salience of immigration, 2) nature of the party's racist attitudes (biological racism or cultural xenophobia), 3) party attitudes towards democracy, parliamentarism and pluralism (see Carter, 2017).

(iii) authoritarian xenophobic parties, which embrace cultural racism and demand significant constitutional reforms to establish a deeply authoritarian state but still respect the existing democratic order; (iv) neoliberal xenophobic parties, which are also extremely xenophobic parties that adopt cultural racism but demand constitutional reforms to foster individualism and diminish state intervention; (v) neoliberal populist parties, which fail to exhibit xenophobic or racist attitudes, but whose proposals to promote a minimal version of the existing state contain anti-democratic properties (Carter, 2017). This ERP typology was considered superior to other alternatives due to its exhaustiveness and the mutually exclusive character of the proposed categories (Kitschelt, 2007).

By the late 2000s, the electoral success of ERPs was associated with the relative moderation of their ideology, whereas the parties that cultivated ideological linkages to the historic extreme right observed a lack of popular support at the ballot box (Carter, 2017). Further comparative research conducted in the mid-2010s indicated that ERPs who overtly reject the principles of liberal democracy (like parliamentarism or pluralism), such as neo-Nazi and neo-fascist parties, observed low levels of electoral support. These ERPs are also characterised by their deep isolation from mainstream politics, because their hostility to democracy alienates potential allies that could enhance their electoral breakthroughs (Kitschelt, 2018). In contrast, ERPs that adopt one of the remaining three categories of ERP ideology and display moderate opposition to liberal democracy are more successful at the ballot box than their counterparts (Carter, 2017). Similarly, it was recently suggested that distinctions between radical and ERPs concerned the level of rejection of democracy, as the radical right was intensifying its hostility to liberal democracy (Mudde, 2019, p. 9). Through the in-depth analysis of *Chega's* electoral manifestos and public statements, the fourth hypothesis explores the extent to which:

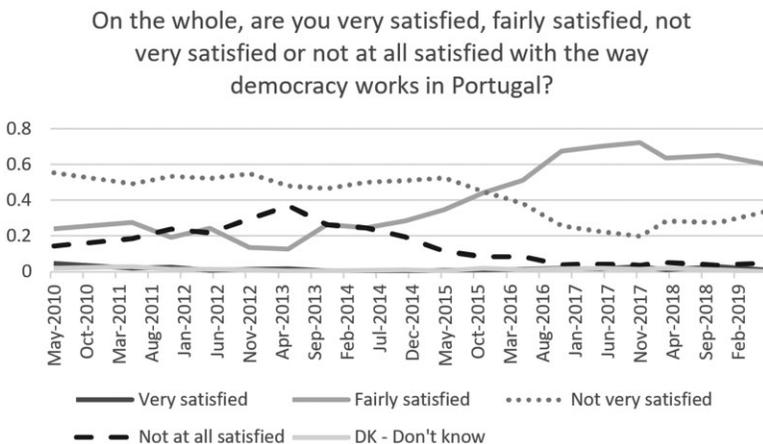
H4: *Chega's* electoral breakthrough in the 2019 general elections followed this ERP's adoption of one of the following ideological models: an authoritarian xenophobic party, a neoliberal xenophobic party or a neoliberal populist ERP.

## 7. Political disaffection and protest voting in Portugal throughout the 2010s

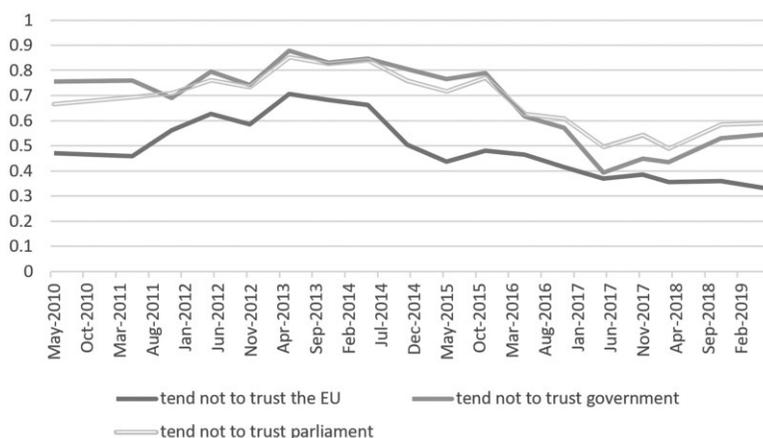
In general, Portugal's political culture has been classified as weak, whereby intense support for democracy has been accompanied by growing dissatisfaction with the way democracy works (De Sousa *et al.*, 2014; Pequito *et al.*, 2019). The ambivalence in public support for democracy was evident in the late 2010s, as 44 per cent of the respondents to the European Values Study (2017) indicated their positive appraisal of 'having a strong leader who does not have to bother with

parliament and elections'. Within the same context, political identification with established parties was very low in the last few decades. In April 2011, Portugal signed an international financial package with the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund. This agreement implied the implementation of deep austerity that led to the reduction of public services, rising unemployment and mass emigration. Consequently, public satisfaction with democracy plunged to the lowest level ever observed in Portugal, as the proportion of citizens who expressed complete dissatisfaction with democracy rose dramatically in the early 2010s, having attained a significant peak in 2013 (Figure 1; De Sousa *et al.*, 2014).

Following the latter trend, distrust in the most important exogenous and endogenous political institutions like the EU, the government and the parliament soared to acute levels (Figure 2). By the mid-2010s, Portugal was considered to have evolved into a pattern of permanent dissatisfaction with the national political system (Magone, 2014). Following the protest voting thesis, the intense public disgruntlement with the political system and the widespread distrust in political institutions observed in the early 2010s provided fertile ground to enhance an ERP electoral breakthrough into the national party system. However, the most prominent ERP in the 2015 general elections, *Partido Nacional Renovador* (PNR), only obtained 0.5 per cent of the vote, which represented a net gain of 10,000 votes in comparison to the 2011 election (Marchi, 2018). This ERP's ideology could be classified as that of an authoritarian xenophobic party, but this party's linkages to the neo-Nazi movement and its association to political violence indicated traits of the historic extreme right and boosted public alienation (Marchi, 2018). Thus, the plunge of democratic satisfaction to historic levels failed to



**Figure 1.** Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Portugal during the 2010s. Source: Eurobarometer (2019).



**Figure 2.** Public lack of trust in the EU, parliament and government during the 2010s. Source: Eurobarometer (2019).

enhance a wave of protest voting that would have led to this ERP's accession to Portuguese mainstream politics.

The autumn of 2016 marks a turning point among Portuguese public opinion, as the proportion of satisfied citizens reaches a majority of the electorate. According to the Eurobarometer surveys, positive appraisal of the national political system expanded by 32 points from May 2015 to November 2019 (Figure 1). Similarly, the overall lack of confidence in political institutions among the electorate also declined in the second half of the 2010s (Figure 2). Consequently, *Chega's* breakthrough into the national parliament in 2019 coincided with a significant increase in public satisfaction with the political system and a moderate decline of public mistrust of political institutions in comparison to the first half of the 2010s (Figures 1 and 2). These trends among public opinion watered-down the very favourable context for the observation of mass protest voting in the early 2010s. The divergence between *Chega's* success in 2019 and the decline of political disaffection among the electorate in this period seems to weaken the congruence between *Chega's* breakthrough and the prediction extracted from the protest voting thesis (H1). From a longitudinal perspective, the conditions for mass protest voting were more likely to boost a Portuguese ERP's emergence into mainstream politics in the mid-2010s than by the end of this decade.

## 8. Public concern and attitudes towards immigration in Portugal

As seen before, the ERPs' electoral breakthrough is frequently associated with the topic of immigration and political concern with this issue (Rygdren, 2018; Dennison and Geddes, 2019). However, this social phenomenon never

attained a significant salience amongst those ranked as the most important issues by the Portuguese electorate during the 2010s (Eurobarometer, 2020). A peak in public concern with immigration was observed in the autumn of 2015, when 0.5 per cent of the respondents ranked it among the two most important issues faced by the country (Eurobarometer, 2020). This overall lack of salience of immigration across Portuguese public opinion coincides with the absence of significant politicisation of this topic up until the mid-2010s, following an interparty consensus between mainstream parties over immigration (Carvalho and Duarte, 2020). This trend reflects the low intensity of this social phenomenon, as Portugal is among the EU Member States with the lowest proportion of foreign citizens, which is also evidenced by the low rate of family reunion or asylum seeking into the country. Recent research indicates that Portugal's negative net migration in the 2010s (meaning intense outflows and diminished inflows) is closely associated with the feeble economic development in recent decades and the country's positioning in the semi-periphery of the world economy (Carvalho, forthcoming).

Notwithstanding the lack of public concern with immigration, the Portuguese electorate displayed intense levels of xenophobia in the late 2010s. According to the European Social Survey, 62 per cent of respondents expressed biological or cultural racist beliefs against 11 per cent who totally disagreed with those views (Henriques, 2020). Discrimination in Portugal is disproportionately directed towards the national Roma community, which face very poor housing conditions, low life expectancy and high levels of unemployment (ECRI, 2018). The widespread diffusion of xenophobic attitudes across public opinion could lessen the stigmatisation of ERPs' discourse towards ethnic minorities and foster its normalisation. However, the intense prevalence of racist beliefs failed to be accompanied by significant public concern with immigration in the late 2010s, which severely diminishes the congruence of the second hypothesis (H2). Recent research employing local electoral results for the 2021 presidential elections found that the statistical relation between *Chega's* vote and the share of immigrants was considered insignificant (Afonso, 2021). In short, the Portuguese case study undermines suggestions that ERPs' electoral breakthrough can be predicted by the salience of immigration among public opinion.

## 9. The PSD's convergence towards the centre

Until the mid-2010s, the Portuguese party system was characterised by two main patterns: (i) intense bi-polarised political competition between the mainstream centre-left party—*Partido Socialista* and centre-right party—*Partido Social Democrata* (PSD) and (ii) the absence of cooperation for government formation on the left (Jalali, 2017). Nonetheless, the stability of the Portuguese party system

was shattered from the mid-2010 onwards. At the 2015 general elections,<sup>6</sup> the incumbent coalition formed by the PSD and the right-wing party *Centro Democrático Social—Partido Popular* (CDS-PP) obtained a plural victory after collecting 36.86 per cent of the vote (CNE, 2019a). The right-wing coalition's failure to obtain an absolute majority incentivised the PS to form a minority government with the unprecedented parliamentary support of the extreme left-wing parties (Pequito *et al.*, 2019). For the first time, a coalition between the PSD and CDS-PP did not obtain a parliamentary majority, which indicated the negative incumbency effects from the implementation of the austerity programme spearheaded by Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho (Jalali, 2017). After the PSD's electoral disaster in the 2017 local elections, Rui Rio rose to the PSD's leadership with just 3484 more votes than his challenger (Lusa, 2017). This small margin indicated intense intra-party divisions within the main centre-right party.

Most importantly, Rio discarded the neoliberal programme implemented by the PSD's preceding leadership in favour of a centrist approach on the economy (Pequito *et al.*, 2019). The PSD's stance now encompassed a stronger role for the government's intervention in the economy to the detriment of the free-market approach of the past right-wing coalition government led by Passos Coelho. This shift was clearly captured by the Chapel Hill expert surveys: the PSD's ranking in terms of its ideological stance on economic issues was measured as 7.83 points (0 = extreme left, 10 = extreme right) in 2014 (Polk *et al.*, 2017), with its classification for this political dimension having fallen to 6.5 points in 2019 (Bakker *et al.*, 2020). In September 2019, Rio claimed on the national news that the PSD was a centrist party with ideological inspiration in social democracy and not 'a genuine right-wing party' with the objective of mobilising centrist voters (Lusa, 2019a). As further evidence of the PSD's realignment, the centre-right's 2019 electoral programme stressed the 'brutal degradation of public services' (Fernandes and Magalhães, 2020). Consequently, the PSD's convergence towards the centre on the economy could provide an opportunity for the potential emergence of new competitors, contrary to the intense stability observed in the past (Kitschelt, 2017, 2018).

Confirming the spatial competition theory and the relative open character of the Portuguese electoral system, electoral fragmentation in the 2019 general elections was very intense across the right wing of the political spectrum. Driven by the emergence of two new right-wing competitors: *Iniciativa Liberal* (Liberal Initiative, right-wing party that proposes a libertarian agenda) and *Chega*, the

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<sup>6</sup>Parliamentary elections are carried out according to a proportional electoral system (employing the d'Hondt method), without a minimum election threshold. However, the opportunities for minor parties vary substantially across the 22 available constituencies, because of the high magnitude and low disproportionality observed in Lisbon and Porto compared to the remaining districts (Duarte, 2018).

number of parliamentary parties jumped from six to nine (Fernandes and Magalhães, 2020).<sup>7</sup> In the context of the lowest turnout since 1974 (electoral participation decreased to 48.57 per cent of the electorate), the erosion of electoral support for the established right-wing parties was particularly significant after the loss of 400,000 votes in comparison to 2015 (Fernandes and Magalhães, 2020). Consequently, *Chega*'s emergence into mainstream politics in 2019 coincided with the main centre-right party's convergence towards the centre on the economic dimension, which was overtly assumed by the PSD's leader. This trend suggests a strong level of congruence between the third hypothesis and the patterns of interparty competition observed in the Portuguese party system (H3).

### 10. The ideology and political strategy of *Chega* in the late 2010s

In April 2019, the Portuguese extreme right observed the formal recognition of a new competitor with the formalisation of *Chega* by the Constitutional Court. This party's declaration of principles included: 'the defence of a minimal state, the rejection of multiculturalism (...), a migration policy based on assimilation of the Portuguese culture' (*Chega*, 2018). This ERP's cultural xenophobia was initially reflected in the defence of immigrants' assimilation of Portuguese culture and the rejection of multiculturalism. Thereby, *Chega*'s xenophobic discourse would be based on cultural differences and the supposition that cultural mixing undermines the distinct identity of each group rather than on racial grounds (Carter, 2018). Regarding the economy, *Chega*'s support for a minimal version of the state indicated a preference for a neoliberal project to the detriment of protectionist approaches characteristic of authoritarian xenophobic ERPs. This stance distanced *Chega* from other European ERPs that adopted centrist approaches on the economy in favour of protectionism and state intervention from the 1990s onwards (De Lange, 2017).

At the party's presentation to the media, *Chega*'s leader—André Ventura publicly recognised the anti-constitutional character of his party's proposals but denied any fascist linkages to detach himself from the Portuguese authoritarian past and the far-right competitor—PNR. Ventura, a PhD in Law, had been a lead PSD candidate in the 2017 local elections who became renowned for claiming that 'certain groups (...) live exclusively off public subsidies' and accusing the Portuguese Roma community of 'living with impunity' (Público, 2017). This xenophobic discourse was not publicly condemned by the PSD's leadership, whilst public polls indicated that 67.8 per cent of the respondents agreed with Ventura's statements (Jornal Económico, 2017). Thereby, Ventura's cultural xenophobia towards the Portuguese Roma community resonated with the electorate and

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<sup>7</sup>On the left-wing of the political spectrum, a left-wing party named *Livre* (Free) obtained parliamentary representation for the first time in 2019.

failed to enhance *Chega*'s public stigmatisation. In addition, his former membership of the PSD until 2018 provided an important level of political capital at the time of *Chega*'s foundation .

Public recognition of *Chega*'s leader was strongly bolstered by extensive media and innocuous exposure as a football pundit on private television channels, initially at Benfica TV (a football club's private channel) since 2014, and then at CMTV (a national news broadcaster) from 2018 onwards. The weekly appearances in the national media enhanced Ventura's telegenic skills and were particularly important during this ERP's take-off stage, which is characterised by a lack of internal resources to reverse the party's potential stigmatisation (Kitschelt, 2018). Furthermore, the PNR's deep hostility towards liberal democracy and its dissemination of conspiracy theories enhanced the public perception of *Chega* as a radical-right party and diminished its association with right-wing extremism . Consequently, surveys conducted in July 2019 indicated a higher level of public rejection of the leaders of the Portuguese Communist Party and the CDS-PP than of Ventura (Anselmo, 2019).<sup>8</sup> The lack of stigmatisation of *Chega*'s leader among public opinion was thus evident a month after the elections for the European Parliament.

In contrast with the PNR's political insulation since its creation (Marchi, 2018), *Chega* created an electoral coalition with other minor right-wing parties for the 2019 EP elections<sup>9</sup> named *Basta* (meaning Enough).<sup>10</sup> This coalition's electoral manifesto accused the EU of promoting an irresponsible 'globalist worldview' and imposing migration flows that undermined the 'foundations of Western Civilization' (Basta, 2019). During the electoral campaign, Ventura welcomed the Catholic Patriarchate's endorsement of the *Basta* coalition for its support of pro-life stances and the rejection of euthanasia (Lusa, 2019b). *Chega*'s leadership also included prominent members of Evangelical Christian groups, while Ventura presents himself as a devout Catholic. Consequently, Ventura's ultraconservative positions were intensively disseminated on social media through Evangelical Christian networks (Carvalho, 2020). In short, *Chega* displayed important linkages in the Portuguese society during the take-off stage rather than being isolated in the extreme-right fringe, which helped overcome the lack of endogenous party resources (Kitschelt, 2018). At the ballot box, the *Basta*

<sup>8</sup>The rate of rejection of the PCP leader—Jerónimo de Sousa among respondents was 73 per cent, followed by Cristas, who scored 70 per cent. In contrast, 63 per cent of respondents indicated that they would never vote for *Chega*'s leader (Anselmo, 2019).

<sup>9</sup>Elections for the EP use a proportional electoral system (employing the d'Hondt method) and a single national plurinominal constituency.

<sup>10</sup>This coalition included the minor parties: *Democracia 21* (Democracy 21); *Partido Cidadania e Democracia Cristã* (Party of Citizenship and Christian Democracy); and the *Partido Popular Monárquico* (Popular Party of Monarchism).

coalition obtained 49,496 votes nationwide (CNE, 2019a) but failed to obtain representation in the EP (CNE, 2019a).

Notwithstanding the moderate success of *Basta* in the EP election, future coalitions for the 2019 general elections were side-lined at *Chega*'s first party convention. In preparation for this national ballot, *Chega* presented its first electoral manifesto under the authorship of Diogo Pacheco Amorim.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the political system, *Chega*'s manifesto envisaged the replacement of the Third Republic with a presidential system that included a minimal 100-member parliament, which evidenced its anti-constitutional character (CNE, 2019). The subsequent concentration of executive powers alongside the weakening of democratic representation within the legislature demonstrated *Chega*'s authoritarianism and hostility towards democratic pluralism (Carter, 2018). The constitutional rights granted to trade unions were also denounced as bizarre in *Chega*'s manifesto (CNE, 2019). In parallel, *Chega*'s political project distanced itself from the rejection of liberal democracy or the political system established after the 1974 revolution, contrasting with the antidemocratic discourse adopted by its far-right competitor PNR (Marchi, 2018).

With regard to the economy, *Chega* proposed the reduction of state interventionism and the suppression of the progressive income tax, while the fiscal burden was characterised as 'extortion'. According to *Chega*'s manifesto: 'it is not a state's responsibility to produce and distribute goods and services, including education and health services' (2019a, p. 45). The supposed privatisation of these public services suggests the defence of a minimal version of the state with anti-democratic features (Carter, 2017). Thus, *Chega* adopted a deep neoliberal programme alongside an authoritarian stance regarding liberal democracy, the 'winning ideological formula' employed by ERPs during the 1980s (Kitschelt, 2018). This anti-statist approach was more likely to resonate with the public (De Lange, 2017) because the Portuguese public administration is characterised by neopatrimonialism based on clientelism and patronage (Magone, 2014).

A protectionist economic approach would only entrench the strong clientelist/paternalist relationships observed in the society and diminish the appeal of *Chega*'s anti-corruption discourse. On immigration, *Chega* demanded the reversal of the 'suicidal Pact for Migrations' promoted by the United Nations (the membership of which would be re-evaluated), as well as the concession of Portuguese nationality according to the '*ius sanguinis*' principle exclusively. Cultural xenophobia was also evident in *Chega*'s defence of the European civilisation and the hostility towards Islam, which highlighted the prevalent Islamophobia and the subjacent denial of human equality on cultural grounds

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<sup>11</sup>A former member of right-wing terrorist organizations associated with Salazarism after the 1974 revolution. The electoral manifesto contained vast similarities with a proposal presented in 2003 by another right-wing party named *Partido da Nova Democracia* because Amorim wrote both documents.

(*Chega*, 2019). Contrastingly, *Chega* assumed the unequivocal defence of Israel and distanced itself from anti-Semitism (*Chega*, 2019). In short, *Chega* adopted the model outlook of a cultural xenophobic neoliberal ERP (*Carter*, 2017). The electoral manifesto excluded references to ethnic minorities or the Roma community. However, Ventura spoke in several TV interviews about the existence of a nationwide problem (child marriage, welfare dependence and crime) based on a civilisational conflict with the Portuguese Roma community, claiming the state failed to tackle it in order to prevent accusations of racism (*Ventura*, 2019). In the context of low politicisation of immigration, the Roma community constituted the main outgroup in this ERP's discourse (*Afonso*, 2021).<sup>12</sup>

*Chega's* electoral campaign for the 2019 general elections focused on two additional topics: the reform of the political system and law and order issues. First, Ventura demanded the suppression of state pensions paid out to former holders of public office who had been convicted of criminal offenses (two former MPs were, at the time, in prison and receiving their public pensions). *Chega* sought to capitalise on public support for a populist anti-politics approach and the public alienation caused by the entitlements granted to former members of the political establishment. Secondly, *Chega* campaigned on the introduction of a harsher penal system to tackle criminal practices. Thereby, Ventura pledged to introduce life sentences for those convicted of homicide or terrorism, as well as the chemical castration of sexual offenders, to exploit the public outrage associated with these crimes (*Fernandes and Magalhães*, 2020). In contrast, *Chega's* opposition to immigration was absent from this electoral campaign because, according to Ventura, this was a topic to tackle at the European level (*Botelho*, 2019).

At the ballot box, *Chega* collected 67,826 votes (1.29 per cent of the vote) and was the seventh most voted party nationwide. Ventura was elected to parliament through the Lisbon electoral district, where the party obtained 22,053 votes (*CNE*, 2019a). In short, *Chega's* moderate level of electoral success was magnified by the low turnout at the 2019 general elections, which enhanced this ERP's ascension into the national parliament. From an Iberian perspective, *Chega's* electoral accomplishment in its first contested general election largely surpassed the electoral support for its Spanish counterpart *Vox* in the 2015 Spanish parliamentary elections, when that ERP was going through a similar take-off stage (*Turnbull-Dugarte*, 2019).<sup>13</sup> Within this context, *Chega's* electoral breakthrough

<sup>12</sup>Recent research employing local electoral results from the 2021 presidential elections found positive statistical relationships between the *Chega* vote and the share of social assistance benefit recipients and the dimension of the population belonging to the national Roma minority (*Afonso*, 2021).

<sup>13</sup>*Vox* obtained 0.23 per cent of the vote in the 2015 parliamentary elections in Spain. Remarkably, *Vox's* emergence into national politics only occurred in the 2019 parliamentary elections, when this ERP collected 10.26 per cent of the vote.

into mainstream politics in its first contested national ballot was remarkable. According to the geographical distribution of the vote in 2019, *Chega* obtained its best results in the south of Portugal, while the highest score at the parish level was obtained in Póvoa de São Miguel (city of Moura, Alentejo) with 15.43 per cent of a total of 311 votes (Marktest, 2019).

A broad statistical analysis of the electoral results suggested that *Chega*'s electoral support at the municipal level was higher in areas characterised by lower purchasing power, less access to health services and lower levels of crime than the national average (Lusa, 2019c). A broad poll analysis suggested that one-fifth of *Chega*'s electorate possessed higher education and one-third had completed secondary school. This ERP's support was mainly drawn from white collar workers, while only 10 per cent of the manual workers seemed to support *Chega* (Magalhães, 2020a). Additional exploratory research based on electoral polls indicated that *Chega*'s electorate in the 2019 parliamentary elections was distinct from the remaining electorate due to its intense association of the political class with corruption. Similarly, an overwhelming majority of *Chega*'s voters agreed with the assimilation of minorities according to Portuguese traditions, but here there was little difference when compared to the general electorate (Magalhães, 2020b).

Surprisingly, immigration was perceived as a benefit for the economy by a large majority of this ERP's voters. In contrast, the association between this social phenomenon and a cultural threat or crime rates was supported by a minority of those voters (Magalhães, 2020b). Further panel analysis is required to evaluate the social basis of this ERP's electoral support. From a broad perspective, *Chega*'s accomplishment suggests that ERPs that employ a neoliberal political formula can be successful at the polls, especially in countries characterised by strong clientelism and intense public perception of corruption like Portugal (De Lange, 2017). Lastly, a strong level of congruence is observed between *Chega*'s electoral breakthrough in the late 2010s and this ERP's adoption of a cultural xenophobic neoliberal outlook, as proposed by the theory of internal supply factors (H4).

## 11. Conclusions

This investigation discussed different explanations for *Chega*'s electoral breakthrough into the Portuguese party system in the 2019 general elections and evaluated the congruence of its theoretical predictions. The overall decline of the acute political disaffection observed among the electorate throughout the second half of the 2010s seemed to diminish the level of congruence between the theory of protest voting and *Chega*'s electoral success in 2019. Notwithstanding the observation of a significant segment of disaffected voters by the end of the 2010s, it seems unlikely that *Chega*'s electoral breakthrough was the outcome of the random preference of disgruntled voters for a minor party positioned at the margins of the political

establishment. Otherwise, the electoral breakthrough of a Portuguese ERP would more likely have been observed in the early 2010s rather than by the end of the decade. In parallel, the lack of congruence between *Chega's* electoral success and the absence of public concern with immigration undermines recent suggestions that ERP electoral breakthroughs can be predicted by the salience of this topic.

In contrast, a high level of congruence was identified between the theory of spatial competition and the end of Portuguese immunity to the far right in 2019. The convergence of the main centre-right party (PSD) regarding the economic cleavage in the late 2010s displayed a strong level of consistency with *Chega's* ascension into the national parliament. The two latter trends seem to challenge past suggestions that issue salience can be more fundamental in accounting for the success of ERPs than spatial approaches. A strong level of congruence was also found between *Chega's* emergence into mainstream politics and this ERP's adoption of a cultural xenophobic neoliberal model. Furthermore, the Portuguese case study suggests that ERPs' electoral breakthroughs are possible during the take-off stage: when these parties' leaders are deprived of intense public stigmatisation; and if they possess allies throughout society, that can help to compensate for the lack of party resources. In short, *Chega's* electoral breakthrough in the late 2010s was most likely related to the interaction between spatial competition between mainstream parties and internal supply factors. This in-depth study suggests that the theories focused on supply-side factors seem to hold greater strength to help to understand an ERP's emergence into national politics than demand-side explanations.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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