

Discursive strategies and partisan agenda-building: a discourse-historical analysis of VOX and Chega's facebook communication

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Abstract

This study draws from the concepts of partisan agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and agenda-building (Lang and Lang, 2016) to examine how far-right populist parties Chega (Portugal) and VOX (Spain) craft partisan narratives by strategically framing and assigning salience to selected topics. Using Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical approach of critical discourse analysis, this study analyzes posts from both parties' official Facebook accounts from January to March 2024 to identify the interdiscursive practices and discursive strategies that unveil ideological patterns embedded within partisan discourse. The results indicate that the issues driving VOX's agenda-building efforts during this period were immigration, separatism, and anti-environmental rhetoric, while Chega's agenda primarily focused on corruption and anti-system discourses. Law and order discourses similarly emerged as a key priority for both parties. This study contributes to understanding how far-right agenda-building practices are discursively operationalized, highlighting how these processes contribute to public discourse on the aforementioned topics, as well as to the reinforcement of antagonistic frames through the articulation of specific societal concerns and grievances.

Keywords: partisan agenda-building, far-right populism, discourse-historical approach, Chega, VOX

1. Introduction: From emergence to parliamentary representation

As far-right political parties have experienced a significant resurgence across Europe, a new revival wave, often described as a form of "new nationalism," emerged across the continent (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). Portugal and Spain, however, remained unaffected by this trend, with both countries being characterized as the "Iberian Exception" (Alonso & Kaltwasser, 2015), as far-right populist movements only managed to obtain residual support among the electorate.

In Portugal's case, Silva and Salgado (2018) considered the country to be a negative case of populism, since the traditional populist framework of the "people" versus the "elites" failed to resonate with the electorate, as this divisive rhetoric did not generate the expected social conflict among Portuguese citizens or provoke a public debate about who, within the populist discursive framework, is considered deserving of being part of "the people". Similarly, Lisi and Borghetto (2018) point out several factors that resulted in this perceived "populist immunity" in the country: firstly, both the government's parties and mainstream opposition did not become radicalized during the harsh economic crisis that affected the country between 2010-2014. This non-polarization of mainstream politics contributed to providing the country with the necessary political stability during an already precarious time. Secondly, the Portuguese electorate didn't respond well to the populist rhetoric being employed by left-wing opposition parties at the time. Lastly, the Portuguese electoral system remained resilient and averse to new political parties that often arise during such times, which helped to preserve a somewhat similar parliamentary landscape.

The economic recovery that followed seemed to ensure that this anti-populist stance would endure, and Portugal continued to be referred to as an abnormal exception within the realm of far-right parliamentary representation in the context of European politics (Boros *et al.* 2018). Additionally, a combination of lack of organization and fragile leadership, coupled with ineffectual political programs, have also been signaled as one of the reasons the far-right was unable to accomplish electoral gains (Marchi, 2013).

In Spain's case, despite facing a similarly strenuous financial situation during the same period, where public debt and unemployment soared, far-right political parties remained marginal and with a token support base (Zapata-Barrero & Burchianti, 2013), which didn't translate into national or regional representation, and whose electoral success was limited to the election of a few county seats in peripheral municipalities (Ben-David & Metamoras-Fernandez, 2016). Moreover, Alonso and Kaltwasser (2015) have argued that two key factors have historically impeded the growth of the far-right in the country. First, Spain's structure as 17 autonomous regions, each with its own parliament and varying degrees of autonomy from the central government, has played a significant role. Regions such as Catalonia and the Basque Country have long been separatist strongholds, while others, like Galicia and the Valencian Community, have regional parties advocating for increased autonomy from the central government.

This complex interplay between national and regional identities has hindered the formation of a cohesive national identity, which limits the effectiveness of nativist appeals typical of far-right parties. Secondly, the *Partido Popular* (PP), a mainstream right-wing party, absorbed a significant portion of the far-right electorate, thereby stifling the emergence of stronger far-right contenders. This paradigm was broken in 2019 when VOX and Chega secured parliamentary representation for the first time. In Chega's case, it can be described as an instant hit. Founded in April 2019 by André Ventura, a dissident of the right-wing social democrat party (PSD), Chega was able to elect Ventura as its sole MP only months after its foundation in the October 2019 election. Consecutive electoral successes culminated in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Amid political turmoil marked by two consecutive collapsing left-wing governments led by the Socialist Party (PS), Chega scored 18.07% of the votes, translating into 50 MPs (SGMAI, 2024)—the best result by any party other than PS and PSD since the country's democratic transition in 1974.

VOX, contrary to Chega, experienced a prolonged period of political irrelevance. Founded in December 2013 and led by Santiago Abascal, a former member of Spain's right-wing Partido Popular (PP), the party initially failed to secure any parliamentary seats. However, in the April 2019 general election, VOX gained 10.26% of the vote and elected 24 MPs, followed by 15.08% and 52 MPs later that year, solidifying its position as Spain's third-largest political force (Gobierno de España – Ministerio del Interior, 2024). Although VOX's support declined in the 2023 general elections (12.39%), the party retained its status as Spain's third political force.

According to Mendes and Dennison (2021), a key factor in VOX's rise was the 2017 Catalan constitutional crisis, which sparked a wave of nationalist sentiment across Spain. Most Spaniards opposed Catalonia's potential secession, regardless of regional loyalties. VOX capitalized on the issue by positioning itself as the strongest opponent of Catalan independence, advocating for prison sentences for separatist leaders, the temporary suspension of Catalan autonomy, and the criminalization of separatist parties and movements.

Another significant event highlighted by Mendes and Dennison (2021) was the 2018 European refugee crisis. While Italy closed its ports to migrant boats, Spain's left-wing prime minister Pedro Sánchez kept Spanish

ports open, redirecting over 55,000 migrants to Spain that year. This fueled anti-immigration sentiment, which VOX effectively leveraged, driving another surge in its support.

In Chega's case, it has been argued that the media played a pivotal role in the party's growth, largely due to André Ventura's polarizing rhetoric and tabloid-style, vulgar discursive approach (Braz, 2023). Ventura's extensive media presence as a political figure, football pundit, legal analyst, and columnist for the tabloid *Correio da Manhã* boosted both his popularity and the parties', aided by media complicity that contributed to Chega's rapid rise (Serrano, 2020).

Mendes and Dennison (2021) highlight Chega's heavy focus on fighting corruption as pivotal to its success in a country grappling with recent corruption scandals that have undermined trust in politicians and institutions. Braz (2023), draws on Rydgren's (2007) demand and supply side conceptual approach to contend that Chega benefited from the PSD's ideological shift to the center and the erosion of right-wing conservative *Centro Democrático Social* (CDS), which resulted in a supply void of right-wing political parties, which Chega successfully exploited by filling the existing gap in the Portuguese political landscape.

While previous research has examined both parties in terms of political ideology and electoral performance, less attention has been given to their comparative communication strategies, particularly within the context of partisan agenda-building on social media. In this sense, Facebook constitutes a particularly relevant platform for analysis, mainly due to its central role in partisan digital communication, which allows political actors to deliver direct messages to their followers by bypassing traditional media gatekeeping. This lack of conventional content curation and moderation practices allows social media platforms to be perceived as more authentic communication channels. Moreover, the integration of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) of critical discourse analysis remains relatively underdeveloped within agenda-building research. This study addresses this gap by combining DHA with a comparative analysis of partisan agenda-building to examine how far-right actors discursively construct and prioritize political issues in the Iberian context. Despite their emergence in distinct political contexts, both parties share common ideological, electoral, and communicative traits, which, coupled with Portugal and Spain's shared historical, geographical, and socio-economic background, make them suitable cases for comparative analysis.

2. Theoretical Framework: Partisan Agenda-building

The theoretical standpoint for this study draws from the theory of agenda-setting. As proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), media and political actors influence the public agenda by selecting which topics are given prominence. As particular topics are highlighted and consequently given more coverage when compared to others, these mediatization processes contribute to shaping the issues that are perceived as relevant by the public.

Within this realm, Van Aelst et al. (2014) recognize the reciprocal relationship between media and political actors. While politicians tend to adopt issues that have been mediatized, they also exert influence on the issues covered by the media, as it is part of the media's role to cover politically relevant topics. Building on this, it is important to take the phenomenon of partisan agenda-setting into account, which occurs when political parties leverage media and communication platforms to highlight issues that align with their

agendas, shaping both public debate and voter concerns. By strategically crafting narratives, partisan actors emphasize issues that advance their political objectives (Hopmann et al., 2010; Brandenburg, 2004).

Lang and Lang (2016), however, argue that agenda-setting processes cannot be solely understood through a linear media-effects perspective that analyzes the transfer of issue salience to public perception. As this study does not focus on audience data, it draws from Lang and Lang's (2016) concept of agenda-building to examine the broader communicative processes through which political actors engage in the process of constructing, promoting, and foregrounding public issues. As the authors suggest, issues do not emerge organically within public consciousness, but are instead strategically articulated, highlighted, and continuously reinforced through communicative practices. Therefore, the agenda-building process not only concerns which issues are accentuated, but also how they are discursively constructed and linked to broader political narratives and symbolic frameworks.

Furthermore, as Entman (1993) argues, political issues are not simply made more salient, but are also strategically framed through the selection and emphasis of particular aspects of a perceived reality. In this sense, framing involves promoting specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. Consequently, frames play a central role in the discursive construction of political issues, allowing political actors not only to foreground particular topics, but also to strategically shape their meaning and political significance within broader discursive contexts.

In a media environment that reinforces specific issues within strategic frames, this high salience is amplified when comparing opposing views between different media outlets and their respective audiences (Stroud, 2008; 2010). As Walgrave and De Swert (2007) suggest, issue ownership theory argues that voters tend to identify political parties with specific issues, establishing a correlation between party and issue. This can be achieved either by creating a large volume of institutional party communication about said issue or through relevant media coverage linking the issue and the political party. When this is accomplished, voters will tend to assume that the party in question is the most suited to solve the aforementioned issue. As the concept of agenda-building suggests, this study does not seek to attribute issue ownership to either political party, as that would require a media-effects oriented research design. Instead, it aims to examine how issue salience is discursively operationalized, and how salient topics are presented within strategic frames that aim at mediatizing topics presented by both parties as problematic, while similarly offering solutions to address them, therefore examining how both parties attempt to position themselves as authoritative actors in relation to specific issues through partisan agenda-building efforts.

To address how issue salience is discursively constructed, this study employs Ruth Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) of Critical Discourse Analysis. The DHA provides a methodological bridge between agenda-setting scholarship and discourse analysis, enabling the examination not only of which issues are emphasized, but also how they are constructed and embedded within broader ideological narratives. This approach links macro-level social and historical contexts with micro-level discourse analysis, providing a valuable framework to analyze how different far-right populist discourses are leveraged within agenda-building processes.

This theoretical argumentation is applied to the social media realm, more specifically to the official Facebook accounts of VOX and Chega, which function as party-controlled digital communication channels (Levendusky, 2013), aimed at legitimizing party views through emphasizing topic salience and selecting strategic frames that align with partisan interests to better serve their narrative. These platforms function

as strategic arenas from which parties seek to shape broader political agendas by promoting specific issues and narratives.

3. Methodology

As stated in the previous chapter, this qualitative exploratory-comparative study utilizes Ruth Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a discourse-analytical approach for examining how discourses construct, sustain, and legitimize social inequalities (Mullet, 2018). DHA's focus on context, historical background, ideology, and language meaning offers a detailed framework for analyzing how political parties prioritize and frame issues, making it particularly useful for studying partisan agenda-building. By analyzing how discourses prioritize and frame issues, DHA provides critical insights into how certain topics gain prominence and influence public and political agendas. Its application has proven effective in previous research on racism, far-right populism, Islamophobia, and nationalism, highlighting its relevance and validity for understanding how discourses shape and reflect agenda-building processes (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017).

Wodak (2001) asserts that the Discourse-Historical Approach is problem-oriented, multidisciplinary, and deeply rooted in historical contextualization to interpret discourse. The approach introduces the concept of interdiscursivity, where a single text, speech, or semiotic representation integrates multiple overlapping discourses. This enables the identification of the underlying ideologies embedded within discursive practices, which work to uphold and sustain societal power structures. Furthermore, the DHA approach introduces a set of five discursive strategies that serve to shape discourse meaning, frame topics, support narratives, hold and shift these power structures, and construct identities (Wodak, 2015).

Table 1 - DHA's discursive strategies

Strategy	Objectives
Referential/Nomination	Discursive construction of social actors, objects/phenomena/events and processes/actions
Predication	Discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events/ processes and actions (more or less positively or negatively)
Argumentation	Justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness
Perspectivization, framing or discourse representation	Positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance
Intensification, mitigation	Modifying (intensifying or mitigating) the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances

Source: Reisigl & Wodak (2017), adapted

Therefore, this study asks the following research questions:

RQ1 – What do VOX and Chega’s discursive and interdiscursive practices unveil about the salience both parties attribute to different issues?

RQ2 – How are discursive strategies operationalized in the discursive process of partisan agenda-building?

The dataset comprises a total of 871 posts: 494 from Chega and 377 from VOX’s official Facebook accounts, spanning the period from January to March 2024. All posts published during this period were collected and included in the dataset. All retrieved posts were systematically examined. Themes were subsequently assigned to posts containing content relevant to the analytical focus of this study. Data were extracted through the Apify web scraping tool, which was used to retrieve all the publicly available posts within the selected timeframe, including post text, publication date, and all associated media content. Extracted data was then exported into a spreadsheet format and subsequently cleaned and structured, retaining variables relevant to the study’s analytical focus (publication date, post text, hashtags, and all relevant media content included in the post: images, videos, and hyperlinks).

Once the data cleansing stage was completed, the spreadsheet was then imported into the NVivo software, with coding following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic coding framework. The analysis focused on the textual elements of the posts, while accompanying elements (videos, images, hyperlinks, hashtags) were considered as contextual information during interpretation, following the DHA emphasis on context and historical background as a means of interpreting discourse. The coding process followed a primarily inductive approach, beginning with familiarization with the dataset. Themes emerged through iterative engagement with the data, with initial codes subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories (e.g., corruption, ethnic minorities) and refined through repeated review. Coding was conducted by a single researcher, ensuring consistency in the application of thematic categories throughout the dataset.

In addition, the analysis was theoretically informed by both the DHA approach and by contemporary far-right literature and populist theory. While coding was performed at a thematic level, selected excerpts were interpreted through DHA’s aforementioned discursive strategies to examine how both parties leveraged different strategies within this process. Discursive strategies were not systematically coded across the dataset but were applied analytically to selected excerpts to illustrate broader thematic patterns, reflecting the study’s focus on issue salience and discursive framing rather than exhaustive micro-level linguistic analysis. The unit of analysis consists of posts as a whole, as coding was conducted at the level of the individual post. Therefore, each coding reference corresponds to a single post, and reported frequencies reflect the number of posts assigned to each thematic category. Whenever applicable, multiple themes could be assigned to the same post, as the coding process aimed to capture the interdiscursive articulation of themes within partisan discourse. No single dominant theme was privileged, and all themes considered substantively relevant to the overall communicative content of the post were coded. Interdiscursivity occurs when two or more themes are assigned to a single post. The thematic coding framework, including operational definitions and inclusion/exclusion criteria, is presented in Appendix A.

The selected timeframe (January–March 2024) was defined in order to provide an appropriate and manageable volume of data, while simultaneously capturing a substantial period of party activity, in order to draw robust empirical insights regarding the proposed aims of this study. The sample coincided with a period of heightened political activity in both countries. In Portugal’s case, Socialist Prime Minister António Costa resigned from office in November 2023 due to a corruption scandal involving members of his cabinet, leading to a snap election in March 2024, where the Democratic Alliance (AD), a right-wing coalition between

the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the CDS – People’s Party (CDS-PP), emerged victorious in one of the most contested elections of the post-Carnation Revolution era. Chega obtained its best electoral result up to that point, with 18.07% of the vote, increasing its number of MPs from 12 to 50.

In Spain, this period overlapped with the February 2024 Galician regional elections, a relevant electoral contest for VOX, as it was the only regional parliament in which the party had no representation. However, VOX was ultimately unsuccessful and did not achieve an electoral breakthrough. As emphasized within the DHA framework, discursive frequencies and thematic salience must be interpreted in relation to the specific political, historical, and temporal contexts from which the data were collected.

4. Results

The following section outlines the most prevalent discourse topics of both parties in the sample, outlining the salience Chega and VOX place on different issues. The selected excerpts are representative of broader discursive patterns found in the dataset.

Table 2 - Chega and VOX's discourse topics

VOX		CHEGA	
Discourse	Frequency	Discourse	Frequency
Anti-system	14	Anti-system	38
"VOX stands out as the only frontal opposition to this illegal, illegitimate government"		PS and PSD have dominated the system and lived off it for the past 50 years. Enough! It's time for a change and that change is coming!	
Corruption	37	Corruption	88
"Yes the socialist party is prone to corruption, is prone to commit crimes against the state, is prone to treason".		"Is CHEGA extremist? Yes, against corruption and vested interests in Portugal!"	
Media	18	Media	19
"ETA didn't scare me, I'm not going to get scared by the owner of a newspaper and by the owners of all newspapers financed by the political establishment"		"The Portuguese are no longer fooled by fake polls and by what the regime's commentators say. The Portuguese know who we are and what we stand for. And that is the most important thing."	
Ethnic minority	79	Ethnic minority	26
"35% of Catalans (and growing) don't approve immigration because immigrants "don't accept the customs". The left and separatism are on their way to convert Cataluña in an Islamic caliphate due to their policy of open borders and permissiveness with Islam. More than ever, VOX is indispensable in Catalonia and the whole Spain"		"We are creating a time bomb in Portugal with disorderly and uncontrolled immigration. One day they will prove us right...and it will be too late!"	
Nation	38	Nation	16
"Only VOX defends Spanish people against ruin, division, treason and the attack on our		"Everyone is against us, but in the end we will win for Portugal and the Portuguese."	

VOX		CHEGA	
Discourse	Frequency	Discourse	Frequency
freedoms. The future is ours, the future belongs to the patriots!"			
Environmental	51	Environmental	3
"The progressives and globalists want to destroy our primary sector. But our rural workers will resist. With VOX, they can count on our firm promise to revoke the 2030 Agenda that leads us to ruin and misery."		"Defending the environment also means defending farmers and agriculture, which is exactly the opposite of what PAN does. Farmers know they can count on CHEGA, always."	
Feminist, LGBTQIA+	15	Feminist, LGBTQIA+	6
"Homosexual people feel safer with VOX than with those who promote a type of immigration that degrades and attacks them. Defending our borders also means protecting our freedom."		"A promise to keep: not a single penny more for gender ideology, for nonsense associations and observatories, but to support the sectors that truly need it. Portugal needs a clean-up!"	
Law and order	69	Law and order	59
"More than 3,000 illegal African immigrants have arrived on the islands in the first 15 days of 2024, 700% more than in 2023. An invasion that is impossible to accept and will have a serious impact on our security, coexistence and the loss of our culture and identity. VOX proposed an immediate immigration blockade in Congress."		"We will make Portugal safe! We will be tough with criminals. To us, criminals belong in prison"	
Separatism	70		
"The meetings with a putschist, separatist and corrupt party like Junts, responsible for Catalonia's impoverishment and insecurity are inadmissible. Defrauding and lying to the Spanish people is unforgivable. !! There can be no reconciliation with those who have attacked Spain and intend to do so again."			

Source: Own elaboration

4.1. Anti-system discourses

The considerable amount of references outlines the importance of anti-system themes in Chega's discursive rhetoric. The "system", as Chega labels it, is composed of the ruling political class, which comprises mainstream parties PS and PSD, as well as other smaller political forces which the party accuses of supporting and being complicit with their policies. The "system" refers to the *status quo* of the country, its political and judicial system whose inefficacies and inadequacies are leading the country to collapse. This "system" is driven by personal interests and incompetence, which are manifested through serial, widespread corruption that has penetrated all layers of public administration, alongside mismanagement and misuse of public funds that are responsible for Portugal's stagnation and decline. The anti-elitist sentiment is prevalent, as the "system" is the natural enemy of common working class people the party claims to represent.

In VOX's case, anti-system discourses did not constitute a central topic within the analyzed period, as the party didn't place a dominant salience on the issue. They are, however, noteworthy, and aid the understanding of VOX's political positioning in the Spanish political spectrum.

Most of these discourses do not revolve around VOX's anti-system views, but instead on the attacks on the Spanish political system undertaken by separatist movements and mainstream parties. Constitutional reforms proposed by PSOE with the connivance of PP, which are deemed as illegal by VOX, are the main sources of data. The party openly criticizes the political establishment, but claims to defend the attacks on Spanish political and legal institutions, as well as the constitution.

4.2. Corruption

Corruption undoubtedly played a central role in Chega's Facebook communication strategy during this period, with the party framing it as the primary obstacle to Portugal's economic and social development. The 2024 Portuguese legislative election period partly explains this focus. The elections followed the resignation of Socialist Prime Minister António Costa after a corruption scandal involving members of his cabinet. Nevertheless, corruption is a cornerstone of Chega's populist discourse. The party advocates for judicial reforms to combat corruption and limit political interference, though some proposals, like forcing politicians to disclose all financial assets, are unrealistic and unconstitutional. A major theme in Chega's narrative is "cleaning" Portugal of clientelist and nepotist practices. Using vulgarism and oversimplification, the party often labels political adversaries suspected of corruption as "bandits" or "criminals."

For VOX, corruption discourses target Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, PSOE, and its government, referencing cases like the Koldo scandal involving embezzlement of European funds during the COVID-19 pandemic. VOX criticizes PSOE's coalitions with separatist parties, describing them as illegal and corrupt attempts to maintain power. These alliances are framed as a "political heist," and VOX delegitimizes the government by highlighting its unconstitutional practices. VOX also condemns political impunity, privileges of the political class, and PSOE's consolidation of power, which it claims leads to institutional decay and democratic backsliding. This criticism extends to Spain's media conglomerates, accused of partisanship and lack of pluralism.

4.3. Media discourses

Firstly, it is important to note that media discourses became a more salient topic for Chega due to the parliamentary elections of March 2024. Many of its antagonistic media narratives revolve around the election campaign and the perceived mistreatment of the party by mainstream media outlets. Chega hints at censorship practices within Portuguese media, promoting its official newspaper, *Folha Nacional*, as an uncensored alternative to the status quo. It also opposes legislative measures aimed at regulating social media, claiming these are problematic for mainstream parties due to their inability to control narratives on these platforms, unlike in the ideologically aligned mass media. Chega frequently accuses the media of being subservient to the "system," referring to the bipartisan dominance of PS and PSD since the 1974 democratic transition. In the aftermath of televised political debates, Chega accused analysts of bias, claiming they distorted narratives and unfairly rated Ventura's performances poorly.

Similarly, VOX's media discourses, though not central to its discursive framework, are frequent enough to highlight its adversarial stance. The party labels mainstream media as subservient to PP and PSOE, promoting progressive ideals and acting as political propaganda tools. It accuses the media of spreading fake news about the party, and gatekeeping topics such as Catalan separatism, the "migratory invasion," and VOX's activities. This adversarial approach is evident in its reliance on its media outlet, *Gaceta de la Iberosfera*, as a counter to so-called "media intoxicators." During the Galician regional elections, VOX was

excluded from debates on TV Galicia, a regional government-owned channel. In response, the party denounced the station's censorship and petitioned unsuccessfully for inclusion.

4.4. Ethnic Minorities

Chega's ethnic minority discourses focus on immigrants and the Portuguese Roma community. The party opposes the alleged prioritization of immigrants over citizens in welfare, education, and healthcare, claiming government policies unfairly favor immigrants. Chega labels immigration policy a "mess" that allows uncontrolled entry without proper security checks. While acknowledging immigration's necessity, the party advocates for quotas and stricter screening. It also opposes immigrants receiving welfare subsidies before paying taxes for five years, arguing resources should prioritize Portuguese citizens. Limited content on immigrant crime was shared, demanding deportation of offenders. Chega emphasizes the importance of attracting emigrants back to Portugal rather than "importing the worst that there is." Discourses on the Portuguese Roma advocated for further integration, framing the Roma as outsiders responsible for their own exclusion, while linking the community to violence, impunity, and welfare dependency. The party dismissed a study showing Roma were more likely to be shot by police, claiming officers faced greater threats from Roma citizens.

VOX's focus, by contrast, is entirely on immigrants, particularly those from African Muslim countries, making ethnic minority discourses its most salient topic. This radicalized "migratory invasion", as the party describes it, leads to soaring crime rates, particularly violent sexual crimes against women, a widespread sense of insecurity among the local population, and the loss of Spain's homogenous cultural identity. Within this realm, the party frequently shares news and images on the topic of immigrant crime. VOX frequently criticizes government immigration policies, sharing images of migrant boats arriving on Spanish shores and accusing Sánchez's government of facilitating crime and cultural erosion through its open-border policies. Immigrants are also targeted with welfare ethnocentrism, as VOX denounces the subsidies allocated to them.

VOX's rhetoric emphasizes the need to strengthen border controls, construct walls in Ceuta and Melilla, deport illegal immigrants, and increase funds allocated to security forces in order to combat the perceived immigration crisis. Islamophobia underpins its narrative, portraying Islam as violent, backward, and incompatible with Spanish values. In addition, this narrative is also expressed through VOX's legislative proposals to close "radicalized" mosques and deport its respective religious leaders.

4.5. Nation discourses

Nation discourses play a pivotal role in shaping Chega's nationalist and patriotic image, becoming integral to its broader party branding. Chega frequently promised to "fight for Portugal" and restore national pride and dignity by conducting the "cleanup" the country so desperately needs, a clear reference to corrupt politicians and mismanagement of public funds. These discourses are imbued with a paternalist sentiment, portraying Chega's victory as essential not for its own ambitions but for the people and the nation, emphasizing its selfless patriotic commitment. The party claims to represent ordinary citizens, giving them a voice they wouldn't otherwise have.

VOX's nation discourses are intrinsically tied to nationalist statements and patriotic evocations, celebrating Spain's identity, culture, and values. This rhetoric includes frequent odes to Spain's historical heritage, such

as the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula and the taking of Granada from the Moors. Christianity, as a core trait of Spain's identity, and calls for unity against separatism or sovereignty risks, are integral to VOX's narrative. Additional features include celebrating sports achievements and using electoral and political propaganda rants.

4.6. Environmental discourses

As the data indicates, Chega's environmental discourses are minimal, and primarily focus on condemning environmental protests, labeled as mere vandalism, and criticizing the punitive ecologist ideology for harming farmers and other primary sector workers. In contrast, VOX assigns significant salience to environmental issues. Its discursive practices revolve around a relentless defense of the rural world, and all the workers in primary sector industries such as fishermen, farmers, cattle breeders, among others. The party is a vocal opponent of the 2030 agenda, claiming it will lead the country to economic stagnation, unemployment, poverty and the loss of energy sovereignty and food self-sufficiency. The European Union's green policies are deemed to be a part of a radical, progressive environmentalism, a dominant narrative being disseminated by the elites and of which the party is a fierce challenger. VOX criticizes EU's agricultural subsidies to other countries such as Morocco, claiming the country is subsidized to compete with European farmers without having to abide by the environmental guidelines enforced through EU's policies.

4.7. Feminist and LGBTQIA+ discourses

Feminist and LGBTQIA+ discourses were not a major focus for Chega during the analyzed period. The party's attention was largely confined to gender issues, positioning itself as a vocal opponent of what it terms "gender ideology." Chega is a vocal opponent of gender studies in the realm of sexual education in public schools, displaying its normative views on gender determination and accusing progressives of indoctrinating children. It criticized public subsidies to institutions and NGOs promoting "gender ideology" as wasteful, advocating instead for reallocating these funds to benefit the general population. VOX addressed these themes more frequently, framing them as part of its broader opposition to leftist policies. It argued that radical feminist agendas foster gender inequality against men and accused the left of "demonizing men," corrupting children, and neglecting traditional family values. The party protested against the lack of protection against violent and sexual crime that the government and its "woke" feminist policies offer to Spanish women and accused the government of not providing the ideal conditions to motherhood, blaming Sánchez policymaking for the subsequent drop in birthrates. The party criticized PSOE's "delirious gender laws," the Ministry of Equality, and the trans law enabling gender self-determination.

4.8. Law and order discourses

Law and order discourses undoubtedly occupy a pivotal role in both parties' discursive framework. In Chega's case, it is pertinent to note that during this period, a significant wave of police protests emerged across the whole country, with security forces taking to the streets to demand better working conditions and a pay raise. The party asserts that security forces have lost their authority, are inadequately supported by the state, and lack protection from politicians and the judiciary. Conversely, Chega argues that the judicial system is excessively lenient towards criminals. In other circumstances, the party recurs to the law and order rhetoric to share crime-related news pieces and videos, arguing that criminality is on the rise and measures must be taken, and to advocate for harsher prison sentences and ridiculing cases where the

judicial system acted in an inadequate manner. Finally, Chega also extends its law and order discourses to address the political system's intrinsic corruption and to warn about the dangers of uncontrolled immigration.

VOX differs in the very strong correlation the party tries to establish between immigration and crime, violence, and public disorder. VOX systematically shares news pieces and images of immigrants committing crimes, perceiving immigration as the number one threat to Spain's security. Similarly to Chega, VOX advocates for judicial reforms, harsher sentences, and better-funded security forces to combat crime. Besides the connotation with immigration, law and order discourses also apply to other crimes, particularly violent crime, such as sexual assault and drug trafficking. Within the political spectrum, VOX utilizes this discursive approach to oppose the unconstitutional acts and widespread corruption of PSOE's government, in addition to the reactionary, secessionist nature of separatism, which poses a threat to Spain's peace and political stability.

4.9. Separatism Discourses

Besides its discourses regarding ethnic migrant communities, separatism proved to be the discursive topic on which VOX placed the most salience. Within the sample, VOX's rhetoric revolved around its relentless opposition to separatist politics in Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galician autonomous regions. VOX denounced the constitutional illegality of separatism and the radicalized behavior of separatist parties. PSOE's government, and to a lesser extent, PP, were blamed for forming coalition pacts and collaborating with separatist parties. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez is labeled a traitor for allying with separatist putschists and secessionists to hold on to power.

The party also blamed separatist parties and their immigration policies for the migrant crisis in Basque and Catalan strongholds and attacked language policies in some regions, describing them as discriminatory against Spanish. The high salience of separatism as a discourse topic during January-March 2024 was influenced by debates on an amnesty law for the 2017 Catalan constitutional crisis, Galician regional elections, and pre-election periods in Catalonia and the Basque Country, further boosting its prominence within VOX's framework.

4.10. Interdiscursivity

The following subchapter outlines the interdiscursive practices of both Chega and VOX as identified in this study.

4.10.1. Chega

Table 3 - Interdiscursive relationships in Chega' Facebook posts (Jan–Mar 2024)

Discourses	Media	Anti-System	Environment	Corruption	Feminism-LGBTQIA+	Law and order	Nation	Ethnic Minorities
Media	19	3	0	3	0	0	0	0
Anti-system	3	38	0	17	0	2	1	0
Environment	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	0
Corruption	3	17	0	88	2	4	1	2
Feminism-LGBTQIA+	0	0	0	0	6	2	0	0
Law and order	0	2	1	4	2	59	0	9
Nation	0	1	0	1	0	0	16	0
Ethnic Minorities	0	0	0	2	0	9	0	26

Note: Values represent interdiscursivity occurrence at the post level

Source: Own elaboration

As shown in table 3, Chega's most prominent interdiscursive practices consist of the discursive link between anti-system and corruption discourses, as well as the connection of ethnic minority and law and order discourses. The first revolves around the intrinsic bond between corruptive practices and the rotten "system", which is populated with incompetent, dishonest politicians, while the latter is explained by Chega's animosity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities which is anchored in the argument that criminality rates are high among these groups.

4.10.2. VOX

Table 4 - Interdiscursive relationships in VOX's Facebook posts (Jan–Mar 2024)

Discourses	Media	Anti-system	Environmental	Corruption	Ethnic Minorities	Feminism-LGBTQIA+	Law and order	Nation	Separatism
Media	18	2	0	8	5	1	3	0	2
Anti-system	2	14	0	5	1	2	1	1	7
Environmental	0	0	51	0	8	2	3	3	3
Corruption	8	5	0	37	2	0	5	5	16
Ethnic Minorities	5	1	8	2	79	6	47	8	12
Feminism-LGBTQIA+	1	2	2	0	6	15	5	1	2
Law and Order	3	1	3	5	47	5	69	5	6
Nation	0	1	3	5	8	1	5	38	15
Separatism	2	7	3	16	12	2	6	15	70

Note: Values represent interdiscursivity occurrence at the post level

Source: Own elaboration

In what concerns VOX's interdiscursive practices, the data suggests several noteworthy discursive relationships. The strong intersection of ethnic minorities and law and order discourses displays VOX's

antagonization of immigrants, portraying them as invaders and criminals, and the biggest threat to the country alongside separatism, whose discourses have an evident overlap with nation discourses. The dichotomous positioning of both these discourses frequently places them in an ideological clash between unity (nation) and division (separatism). The same can be said to describe the link between corruption and separatism, with the party recurrently condemning the illegality of separatism, its corrupt and putschist nature, of which mainstream parties are accomplices. Unsurprisingly, the link between media and corruption discourses also unveils VOX's adversarial views towards Spanish mainstream media and the hostile relationship between both parties.

4.11. Discursive Strategies

4.11.1. Chega

Table 5 - Chega's discursive strategies – Illustrative Excerpts

Discursive Strategy	Excerpts
Referential/Nomination	• "Watch the debate today between our president and PSD's leader. André Ventura's victory is certain, but the system's commentators will say he lost." • "All PS wants is to give political sinecures and nominations to their boys with partisan cards. Screw the average Portuguese!" • Addressing the rest of the political spectrum: "The Portuguese are no longer fooled by the parties of the system and know that CHEGA is the only alternative."
Predication	• "What an epic speech from our president. We are ready for the fight, we are ready to win the elections and to govern Portugal" • "The Socialist Party has been lying to the Portuguese for the past 10 years" • "Most politicians are useless. They are not good for anything."
Argumentation	Topoi: • Fear "We are creating a time-bomb with the disorganized and uncontrolled immigration in Portugal. One day we will be proved right... and then it will be too late!" • Misrepresentation "It's always the same talk... extreme-right, radicalism, etc. Nowadays, being against corruption and in favor of ordinary people is being radical, almost fascist!" • Injustice "It takes courage to fight against welfare dependency, but Chega will do it, even if it costs votes, because it's not fair that some have to work for others who don't want to do anything!" • Freedom "They want to control and restrict social media because they do not control it, because it has put an end to their dominance over public opinion. We must defend our freedom"
Perspectivization, Framing, or Discourse Representation	• Regarding Portugal's immigration laws: "We have always said that the law was poorly designed and dangerous, not only for immigrants themselves, who are left at the mercy of these criminal groups, but especially for the Portuguese, who see their country being invaded by mass immigration. We warned you." • "Portugal's problem is not a lack of money. The problem is the incompetents who manage our money." • Regarding the electoral debate with IL (Liberal Initiative): "A clear victory, say internet users. But of course, for commentators, CHEGA always loses. Even if we debated alone!"
Intensification/Mitigation	• "What PS has done to our National Health Service is unforgivable." • Addressing a case of mismanagement of public funds in which a Chega member was involved: "CHEGA does not have double standards! We are, and will always be, against schemes that misuse the money taxpayers pay every month through great effort."

Source: Own elaboration

Chega applies strategic labeling and referencing to define groups, issues, and institutions in a way that supports its discursive narrative. Negative labels are frequently used to characterize adversaries or social groups, such as referring to political analysts and commentators as the “system’s commentators”, addressing members of the Socialist Party as “boys with partisan cards”, and describing the broader political spectrum as “the system”. A similar pattern is evident in its predication strategies, through which the party attributes positive qualities to itself (e.g., referring to its President’s “epic” speech) and to groups portrayed as part of the “average Portuguese” (security forces, working-class citizens, pensioners, or army veterans), while assigning negative attributes to groups constructed as threats (immigrants, the Roma, politicians, and the media). These strategies delimit the discursive field within which political issues are interpreted, thereby contributing to Chega’s partisan agenda-building by privileging certain actors, problems, and evaluations.

Chega’s argumentation strategies further support this process by justifying its political positions through the use of different topoi: common-sense reasoning patterns that link a premise to its conclusion (“if X, then Y”). For instance, considering the first topos displayed in Table 5, if uncontrolled and disorganized immigration creates insecurity and a loss of cultural identity, then stricter immigration control measures become justified. Therefore, topoi frame specific issues in ways that present the proposed political solutions as logical, reasonable, and defensible.

Discourse representation and perspectivization reinforce this positioning by presenting the party as a legitimate and authoritative actor, often aligned with the “right side of history,” and supported by external or collective voices. Framing strategies construct the Portuguese political and judicial system as corrupt and ineffective, while positioning Chega as the only viable reformer capable of restoring institutional integrity. For instance, the claim that “Portugal’s problem is not a lack of money” but the incompetence of those who manage it frames budgetary problems as the result of political incompetence. More broadly, Portugal is portrayed as a country in need of a “cleanup”, while issues such as immigration (framed as an “invasion”), corruption (as a systemic and pathological condition), and insecurity are presented as systemic crises.

Finally, intensification and mitigation strategies are used to amplify negative evaluations of opponents and key issues, often through strong and uncompromising language (e.g., describing the management of the National Health Service as “unforgivable”), while downplaying or mitigating criticism directed at the party itself. Additionally, multiple selected excerpts presented in the table above combine different discursive strategies that overlap within the same sentence. For instance, statements such as when the party claims Portugal is “...being invaded by mass immigration. We warned you...” The full excerpt displayed in table 5 simultaneously combines nomination, predication, argumentation and perspectivization strategies. This illustrates how strategies operate together as part of a natural and mutually reinforcing discursive process.

4.11.2. VOX

Table 6 - VOX's discursive strategies – Illustrative excerpts

Discursive Strategy	Excerpts
Referential/Nomination	- Addressing the UN's 2030 Agenda: "This is the latest scheme by the elites against citizens and the automotive sector." - Addressing Pedro Sánchez's coalition partners: "Pedro Sánchez seeks to legitimize his government by allying himself with coup plotters, terrorists, and communists." "We do not want a Spain for criminals. We want a Spain for honest Spaniards."
Predication	"Yes, the Socialist Party is a party susceptible to corruption. It is susceptible to state crimes. It is susceptible to betrayal." "Islamism is a threat to our civilization." - Video of Abascal speaking against Galician's media omission of VOX in the context of the 2024 Galician elections: "Two minutes are enough for Santiago Abascal to dismantle the corrupt media and their manipulation against VOX."
Argumentation	Topoi: - Fear "Mass and uncontrolled immigration is linked to an increase in crime." - Burden "Thousands of illegal immigrants receive unemployment benefits and live off social assistance." - Injustice "In Spain, there are millions of young people unemployed. Meanwhile, thousands of illegal immigrants receive unemployment benefits and live off social assistance, crime, or labor dumping. It is time to put an end to this injustice." - Responsibility "The government is directly responsible for sending our public servants to the slaughter."
Perspectivization, Framing, or Discourse Representation	"We are clear about this: loyalty to Spain and absolute distance from Pedro Sánchez and all his coup-plotting allies." - Regarding the Immigration wave: "STOP THE INVASION!" "My daughter cannot go out alone." The residents of Alcalá de Henares are fed up with the insecurity caused by the illegal immigrant center set up by Pedro Sánchez."
Intensification/Mitigation	- Regarding the perceived lack of resources of Spain's security forces to combat drug traffickers along Spain's Mediterranean coast: "The most unworthy government in history." "The majority of Spaniards are against the #migratoryinvasion".

Source: Own elaboration

VOX employs strategic nomination and referential strategies to address individual actors, social groups, and institutions in a way that reinforces a highly polarized discursive narrative. Political adversaries are frequently addressed using harsh and vulgar language (Pedro Sánchez's coalition partners are referred to as "coup plotters" and "terrorists,") while institutions such as the UN and other environmentalists are directly addressed to as "elites". Within the populist discursive framework, the in-group is constructed as "honest Spaniards", who are aligned with national values, interests and culture, while "criminals", "traitors", and "progressive elites" are clear references to immigrants, political opponents, mainstream media, environmentalists and feminist and "gender ideology" groups, which are positioned as threats to core Spaniards.

This dichotomous construction is further reinforced through predication strategies, which attribute corruption, danger, and moral decay to political opponents and minority groups, while presenting VOX as a defender of national integrity, security, and social order. VOX's argumentation strategies operationalize this process with the aid of different topoi that simultaneously sustain the party's reasoning and demand calls

for political action. The selected excerpts illustrate how the party mobilizes topoi of fear, burden, injustice, and responsibility. Immigration is consistently linked to crime and insecurity (topos of fear). Injustice topoi justify the call to stop financial aid to migrants and refugees, while responsibility is attributed directly to the government for endangering citizens and public servants.

Discourse representation, perspectivization, and framing strategies reinforce this narrative by positioning VOX as a clear, principled, and uncompromising actor ("we are clear about this"), in contrast to a corrupt and threatening political establishment. Framing strategies are particularly salient, with immigration constructed as an "invasion", separatism as "treason", and insecurity depicted through personal and localized experiences, thereby amplifying perceptions of threat and urgency. Finally, intensification and mitigation strategies are used to strengthen these claims, with strong evaluative language (e.g., "the most unworthy government in history") amplifying criticism of political actors, while generalized statements (e.g., "the majority of Spaniards") are used to legitimize the party's positions as widely supported and moderate.

5. Discussion

As stated in the methodological chapter, this study proposed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 – What do VOX and Chega's discursive and interdiscursive practices unveil about the salience both parties attribute to different issues?

This study found separatism, immigration, and law and order discourses to be VOX's most salient discursive topics. The party places the most salience in what it describes as the "migratory invasion", framing it as the biggest current threat to the country, resulting in increased crime rates, loss of cultural identity and welfare ethnocentrism. Unsurprisingly, VOX displays a nativist, ethnocentric stance of identity politics (Muller, 2017) in its discursive framework (Gemignani & Jiménez Carrasco, 2023). Furthermore, the growing polarization of immigration views in the country after VOX's 2019 electoral breakout, which became increasingly tied to ideological stance and political affiliation (González Enríquez & Rinken, 2021), helps contextualize the increasing salience of immigration within Spanish political discourse and the centrality of the issue in VOX's communicative strategy.

Additionally, the party positions the separatist issue in Catalonia and the Basque Country as a grave danger to Spain's sovereignty and territorial integrity. While VOX aims at raising awareness and taking a central role in the public debate over this matter, it also attempts at mediatizing separatism as a topic, as it is expressed by the high volume of anti-separatist rhetoric in the sample.

It is also important to highlight the prominence the party places on its opposition to what it frames as radical environmental policies. In line with its partisan agenda-building strategy, VOX argues that these measures impose unfair taxes and restrictions on Spanish citizens and rural workers, threatening Spain's primary sector and pushing radical environmentalism onto the Spanish population. In what concerns law and order discourses, these are transversal to both parties' discursive framework, a paradigm that goes back to their electoral breakout in 2019 (Manucci, 2019). Both parties' interdiscursive practices reveal that these rhetorical approaches are deeply rooted in immigration discourse, which constitutes a significant portion of their focus. Wodak (2015) describes this right-wing populist phenomenon as the "politics of fear," where exclusionary

narratives label immigrants, particularly those from different ethnic backgrounds, as radical, intolerant, and criminals. These portrayals not only delegitimize pro-immigration discourses but also advocate for bolstering the authority of security forces and implementing a broader range of aligned legislative policies. The remaining law and order narratives target general crime and revolve around demands for harsher penalties and a sense of perceived insecurity that both parties try to promote, as well as political crime in the form of corruption practices, which hold the argument for judicial and political reforms.

In Chega's case, it applies a strategic focus on corruption discourses to discredit political opposition and presenting itself as the only reliable alternative in the Portuguese political spectrum. As time proved, this was not a temporary feature of Chega's discursive framework (Prior, 2022), as the party continues to devote a disproportionate focus to corruption themes. As Portuguese citizens demonstrate high levels of corruption perception, the party seizes this opportunity by consistently positioning itself as an anti-corruption crusader (Pina, 2023). Chega regularly claims that corruption is ingrained in "the system," another pivotal discourse topic for the party. These anti-system discourses round out the set of key topics on which the party places the most salience. Alongside law and order and corruption, they serve as the foundation of its agenda-building practices. Chega underscores narratives of failure and discredit, targeting not only the political system but also the judiciary and broader public administration.

Despite a substantially lower salience, we should not disregard both parties' media and feminist, LGBTQIA+ discourses as a relevant component of their populist discursive framework. Both parties have shown to be aligned with the "anti-media populism" (Fawn & Krämer, 2021) positioning. This strenuous relationship with the media is characterized on one hand, by a demand for coverage and publicity to achieve a status of media legitimization (Stewart et. al. 2003), and on the other hand, by recurrent attacks on the media's credibility and ideological stance, as a way of downplaying and discrediting negative coverage (Mazzoleni, 2008). Regarding feminist, LGBTQIA+ discourses, Chega and VOX display anti-feminist and self-proclaimed anti "gender ideology" views, defending what both perceive to be attacks on the normative family structure, with each party being accused of employing conservative sexist narratives on the topic (Cabezas, 2022; Martins & Cabrera, 2023).

RQ2 – How are discursive strategies operationalized in the discursive process of partisan agenda-building?

Chega's discursive strategies reveal a clear effort to construct a populist narrative in which the party presents itself as an advocate of the common people against a corrupt and failing system. Through nomination and referential strategies, Chega delineates who belongs to the "corrupt system," reinforcing its opposition to mainstream political actors. By labeling political opponents as corrupt and incompetent and describing mainstream media as biased, Chega strengthens its portrayal as the only viable solution to systemic corruption and national degradation. The party's reliance on predication, attributing negative qualities to marginalized groups and political actors alike, is central to its rhetoric. Argumentation plays a significant role in Chega's strategy. By employing simplified reasoning patterns through the usage of a diversified set of topoi (fear, injustice, freedom, misrepresentation), the party mobilizes its support base by presenting its proposals as clear solutions to current problems.

Moreover, the party frames itself as a reformer capable of restoring institutional integrity. This framing further reinforces Chega's role as a political actor that stands apart from the perceived failures of mainstream

politics. Finally, intensification strategies are used to heighten perceptions of social and political threats, while mitigation is used to downplay external criticism.

Turning to VOX, the party employs discursive strategies to construct a compelling narrative that supports its partisan agenda. Referential and nomination strategies seek to delegitimize opposing groups, framing them as threats to Spain's national unity and security. Through predication, the party attributes negative qualities to groups it opposes, while self-inflating itself and its support base. Multiple argumentative topoi are employed to justify antagonistic views towards adversaries and policy proposals. Historical references and current events are frequently utilized to legitimize these claims.

Perspectivization is used to present the party as a moderate political entity that possesses the common sense that is lacking in mainstream politics, while discourse representation validates partisan claims through the usage of external sources. Framing strategies structure political reality by reducing complex social dynamics into simplified antagonistic conflicts, thereby legitimizing specific policy responses and reinforcing issue salience. Intensification and mitigation allow VOX to amplify issues such as corruption and immigration threats, while portraying their own solutions as moderate and reasonable. This dual approach enables the party to maintain a strong oppositional stance while positioning itself as a reliable alternative.

6. Conclusion

In summary, given that both VOX and Chega's electoral success is relatively new, the Iberian far-right populist context remains a somewhat under-explored area within the broader field of populism studies, particularly when compared to its European counterparts. This study seeks to address that gap. By conducting a comparative analysis specifically focused on the concept of partisan agenda-building, and examining interdiscursiveness and the operationalization of Wodak's (2001) discursive strategies, this research is not limited to identifying both parties' most salient agenda-building issues, but also unveils how VOX and Chega strategically frame key topics, events, and groups through a set of diversified discursive strategies with the intent to ultimately achieve issue ownership and narrative control in relatively unmoderated digital spaces, a process which significantly contributes to the discursive construction and public salience of issues such as immigration and corruption.

The exclusionary construction of in-groups and out-groups to strategically position issues from a sociological perspective intensifies antagonistic boundaries between opposing groups (Tajfel, 1974), effectively placing these narratives within a broader "people vs elites" discursive framework (Mudde, 2004; Brubaker, 2017). As a result, both parties' discursive practices display traits of what Laclau (2005) has classified as "empty signifiers", ambiguous linguistic structures that serve the purpose of mobilizing support and unifying different social groups and electoral demands under the populist ideological void. As Laclau suggests, different social groups will naturally have different political demands. Therefore, there is a logic of difference between these demands. When operated separately, these demands will crystallize into disintegrated political groups, each exerting political agency to favor its own cause. When a political actor, through the process of articulation, manages to bring together these heterogeneous demands into a political group, the logic of difference turns into a logic of equivalence. This process is conducted through the construction of an external antagonist, a common adversary held responsible for unmet demands. The people thus emerge as a chain of equivalences: heterogeneous demands brought together. Some concrete examples are, for instance,

Chega's discursive construction of "the system", references to a much needed "cleanup", and the numerous patriotic rants in which the party promises to "fight for Portugal". In VOX's case, similar dynamics can be observed in the mobilization of terms such as "Spain", "freedom", and the framing of immigration as an "invasion", which function as empty signifiers articulating a collective identity opposed to political elites, immigrants, and separatist actors.

As the data suggests, while the far-right populist ideologies of VOX and Chega share common stances, their expressions differ in ways that reflect their distinct national and political landscapes. This comparative focus advances our understanding of how local political dynamics contribute to the construction of strategic political frames that resonate with voters. In doing so, it enhances both our theoretical and empirical understanding of how far-right populist parties leverage discursive power to construct political narratives and contribute to public discourse, while offering insights for the development of counter-narratives aimed at challenging populist discourses.

This study contributes to the existing agenda-setting research by illustrating how issue salience in partisan communication is not only reflected by thematic discursive frequency, but also discursively constructed through the articulation of interconnected themes that reveal ideological frameworks embedded in the discursive process. The DHA approach allows for micro-level discourse analysis, unveiling how distinct partisan agenda-building processes are operationalized through linguistic structures. Overall, these findings suggest that partisan actors do not merely prioritize issues, but actively construct political reality through discursive strategies that redefine social divisions, consolidate collective identities, and structure the terrain of political conflict in digital environments. Both Chega and VOX further reinforce their agenda-building efforts through shared antagonistic positioning towards mainstream media, delegitimizing perceived criticism by questioning journalistic credibility while simultaneously presenting their own communication channels as more trustworthy sources of information.

This study is also subject to several limitations. The absence of audience reception and engagement metrics limits conclusions regarding agenda-setting effects, as the analysis focuses on how political actors discursively construct and prioritize issues within partisan social media channels. Furthermore, as the analysis is restricted to Facebook, these results may not fully capture other platform dynamics. Additionally, the focus on the Iberian context may limit the generalizability of the findings to other political settings. While some thematic patterns proved to be context-dependent, others suggest the presence of broader discursive logics within the European context. Finally, as partisan agendas shift over time, these results may be influenced by the specific temporal and contextual settings in which the data was collected. As a prospect for future research, it would be valuable to examine how different argumentation topoi are discursively articulated across wider European far-right contexts.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of scientific research and did not require additional ethics committee approval.

Declaration of AI usage

No generative AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request.

Author contributions

The author is solely responsible for the conception, research, writing, and revision of this manuscript.

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Appendix A – Thematic codebook

Theme	Operational Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Anti-system	Discourses portraying political, judicial, and state institutions, mainstream parties, elites, or the broader political system as corrupt, illegitimate, or disconnected from ordinary citizens. Highlighting systemic failure and institutional distrust.	References to “the system,” political elites, regime criticism, anti-establishment rhetoric.	Generic criticism of individual politicians without broader anti-system framing.
Corruption	Discourses related to political, judicial, and state corruption, bribing, embezzlement, nepotism, bid rigging, misuse of public funds, clientelism, institutional dishonesty, or judicial impunity.	Mentions of corruption scandals, dishonest politicians or other public servants, misuse of taxpayers’ money.	General anti-system criticism without explicit corruption references.
Media	Discourses targeting mainstream or alternative media, journalists, editors, commentators, media institutions, media coverage, articles or polls.	All discourses targeting these groups/variables	Mentioning of social media platforms unrelated to journalism/media institutions.
Ethnic Minorities	Discourses concerning immigrants, migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities.	All discourses targeting these groups/variables	National identity discourse without explicit minority references.
Nation	Discourses emphasizing patriotism, national sovereignty, heritage,	References to “Portugal,” “Spain,” patriotism,	Separatism discourse coded separately unless directly connected to

Theme	Operational Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
	historical achievements, cultural identity, or national unity.	nationalism, nativism, sovereignty, national pride, cultural heritage, and identity.	nationalist rhetoric. Mentions of the country (Portugal, Spain) without nationalist or patriotic rhetoric.
Feminist/LGBTQIA+	Discourses related to feminism, feminists, gender ideology, LGBTQIA+ people, LGBTQIA+ rights, LGBTQIA+ and feminist policies, traditional family values.	All discourses targeting these groups/variables	General cultural criticism unrelated to gender or sexuality.
Law and Order	Discourses emphasizing crime, public insecurity, policing, punishment, prisons, judicial reform, or security threats.	Crime reports and statistics, media coverage of crime, judicial system, advocating against criticism of security forces, police support, violence, insecurity.	Corruption references without security/crime framing.
Separatism	Discourses related to Catalan, Basque, or other regional separatist movements. Events, policies and threats to territorial unity and sovereignty.	Secessionism, separatist parties, constitutional unity, territorial fragmentation.	General nationalism without separatist references.
Environmental	Discourses concerning climate policy, environmental regulation, rural workers, agriculture, or anti-environmentalist rhetoric.	Criticism of the 2030 Agenda, green policies, environmental restrictions.	Rural/economic discourse without environmental references.