

**Portuguese populism: People, parties, and politics.** This special issue explores the emergence and evolution of populism in Portugal, challenging the notion of “Portuguese exceptionalism”. By examining political parties, the role of the media, and individual attitudes, the articles in this special issue reveal that populist attitudes and discourses have long existed in Portugal, albeit without electoral success until the radical right party Chega entered parliament in 2019. The contributions analyse historical populist figures, the intersection of populism with religious sentiments, and the impact of recent crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, on populist rhetoric. Despite being under-researched, the Portuguese case offers critical insights into the interplay of demand- and supply-side factors in the rise of populism. While more research is needed on specific aspects, this special issue paves the way for future studies on populism in Portugal and comparative analyses.

**KEYWORDS:** Portugal; populism; attitudes; media; history; parties.

**O populismo português: pessoas, partidos e política.** Este número especial explora o aparecimento e a evolução do populismo em Portugal, desafiando a noção do “excecionalismo português”. Através da análise dos partidos políticos, do papel dos média e das atitudes individuais, os artigos deste número especial revelam que as atitudes e os discursos populistas existem há muito tempo em Portugal, embora sem sucesso eleitoral até ao momento da entrada do partido de direita radical Chega no parlamento, em 2019. Os contributos analisam figuras populistas históricas, a interseção do populismo com a religião e o impacto de crises recentes, como a pandemia da Covid-19, na retórica populista. Apesar de o caso português ter sido pouco estudado, oferece uma perspetiva crítica sobre a interação dos fatores da oferta e da procura na ascensão do populismo. Embora seja necessária mais investigação sobre determinados aspetos específicos, este número especial abre o caminho a futuros estudos sobre o populismo em Portugal e, também, a análises comparativas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Portugal; populismo; atitudes; média; história; partidos.

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## Portuguese populism: People, parties, and politics

### POPULISM IN PORTUGAL

For a long time after the Carnation Revolution (1974) and the ensuing democratic transition, Portugal was considered an exception in Europe due to the electoral irrelevance of populism.<sup>1</sup> The so-called “Portuguese exceptionalism” ended in 2019 with the entry of Chega into parliament but, as this special issue shows, there are good reasons to believe that Portugal was never truly exceptional. By examining political parties, media influence, and individual attitudes – thereby covering macro, meso, and micro factors in the spread of populism – this special issue serves as a crucial reference for the study of Portuguese populism. Besides, it also provides valuable lessons for those interested in populism far beyond the Iberian peninsula.

Bringing together some of the best scholars in the field, this special issue explores – among other topics – the history of Portuguese populism, its evolution over time, including the role of the pandemic, its connection to religion, as well as the relationship between populist and protest attitudes. From an exceptional case to a country where populism is rapidly becoming a crucial factor in understanding the political landscape, one of the least studied cases may finally become the key to providing fundamental answers and interpretations to understand the role of populism in contemporary societies across Europe.

Indeed, Portugal remains an under-researched case, with few comparative studies including the country and even fewer studies focusing exclusively on

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Portugal. Even compared to Spain, another Iberian country that until recently was supposedly immune to the populist radical right, Portugal has received less attention. In the case of Spain, studies on both left-wing and right-wing populism are abundant, with a burgeoning literature studying populist parties such as Podemos (Custodi, 2021; Gomez and Ramiro, 2019), Ciudadanos (Orriols and Cordero, 2016), and VOX (Marcos-Marne, Plaza-Colodro and O’Flynn, 2021; Rama et al., 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte, Rama and Santana, 2020). At the time of writing this introduction, nothing remotely comparable has been produced on Portuguese populism. This special issue aims to (begin to) fill this gap.

Culturally and geographically, Portugal is smaller and more peripheral than Spain. Nonetheless, as this special issue illustrates, Portugal presents a fascinating case that offers valuable lessons for studying populism across Europe and beyond. In just five years, the Portuguese political system has undergone profound changes: the end of bipartisanship, the normalisation of the populist radical right, the struggle of radical left parties, and the challenges faced by mainstream parties between corruption scandals and growing competition, among others. The first six months of 2024 have already seen early elections in March, the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution in April, and the European elections in June. New parties are trying to emerge, while old ones are trying to stay relevant.

The political landscape that emerged from the Carnation Revolution fifty years ago, so stable for so many decades (Jalali, 2018), no longer exists. Populism is now a key component of Portuguese political life and public debate, and it is here to stay. In a context of increasing electoral volatility, low voter turnout, lack of trust in political parties, and high levels of democratic dissatisfaction, populism can find a fertile ground and shape the Portuguese political system. The eight articles in this special issue aim to answer key questions: How did we get here? What will happen in the future? And what can we learn from the end of the so-called Portuguese exceptionalism?

#### THE END OF PORTUGUESE EXCEPTIONALISM?

This special issue, entitled “Populism in Portugal: The end of exceptionalism?”, offers an overview of the state of the art of populism studies in Portugal and clearly shows that Portugal is a country with widespread populist attitudes among the population, where several political actors have articulated populist discourses over time. Hence, it seems that Portugal was never completely exceptional after all. What it has lacked, compared to most European countries, is the electoral breakthrough of populist radical right parties, but this

is probably due to the lack of a credible supply. With Chega's entry into the Assembleia de República in 2019, even this last exceptional feature has disappeared, and Portugal entered a new political phase that brings it into line with the rest of the continent.

This "exceptional situation" was probably the result of long-lasting legacies of the authoritarian past rather than the absence of populism (Manucci, 2020; Mendes and Dennison, 2021). Previous studies suggest that populism existed before Chega, both as an individual attitude (Santana-Pereira and Cancela, 2021) and as a political discourse, especially on the radical left side of the political spectrum (Lisi and Borghetto, 2018; Carreira da Silva, Manucci and Veloso Larraz, 2022). The article by Gonçalves (2024) included in this collection, confirms that since the Portuguese First Republic (1910-1926), several movements and charismatic leaderships can be characterised as populist. Three stand out. Sidónio Pais, President of the Republic (1917-1918), was dubbed "the father of the poor" and relied on a gendered notion of charisma. Similarly, Humberto Delgado's presidential candidacy in 1958 as the leader of the democratic opposition to Salazar's *Estado Novo* was characterised by military machismo and appeals to the masses. Finally, the post-revolutionary movements led by Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho and Ramalho Eanes in the aftermath of the 1976 presidential election claimed to put the interests of the people before their own, running to defend both national identity and the conquests of the Revolution. Interestingly, these three Portuguese (proto-)populists inspired each other and made more or less explicit reference to those who came before them in this path of populist politics that steered away from radical right policies, perhaps creating the myth of Portuguese exceptionalism.

Once again, Portugal is hardly an exception when it comes to religious populism. Religious populism draws on the emotions of the individuals and the manipulation of the masses on two dimensions: modernophobia (reaction to secular modernity) and Islamophobia (Muslim immigrants are portrayed as a threat to the idealised homogeneity of the native, Christian group). In their contribution, Botelho Moniz and Brissos-Lino (2024) show that religious populism was present in Portugal long before 2019. For example, CDS – People's Party took a populist turn under the leadership of Manuel Monteiro (1992-1998) and has since articulated a "modernophobic" version of religious populism. Chega, on the other hand, together with modernophobia, shows clear aspects of an Islamophobic approach. Interestingly, the authors identify a schism in religious populism in Portugal when, in 2017, Chega's leader André Ventura – then a CDS candidate – made remarks about the Roma community that led CDS to withdraw its support for his candidacy. Since then, religious populism in Portugal has taken two different paths. The authors argue that

political-religious imaginary is generally a matter of faith for CDS, while Chega exploits it to advance a nationalist and identitarian agenda. Crucially, Chega's erratic and inconsistent approach to issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and LGBT+ rights, could tie up some important knots and lead to a delicate choice: Either alienating the more devout fringe or, conversely, distancing itself from the more secular part of its electorate.

The study by Gaio and Silva and Marinha (2024) confirms that populism was present in the Portuguese political debate long before 2019, analysing how the Portuguese media talked about this phenomenon in the period 2012-2021 and showing that the President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, is often referred to as having populist elements due to his closeness to Portuguese citizens. Moreover, they observe that the concept of populism has gained prominence in the press during the 2010s, mainly through international references and a negative connotation, often intertwined with far-right politics. Chega and Ventura are the Portuguese actors that are most often labelled as populist in the Portuguese context, but they are not the only ones. Interestingly, however, populism has a slightly different connotation in the Portuguese than in its academic definitions. Indeed, it is often associated with demagoguery, down-to-earth rhetoric or irresponsible policymaking. For this reason, the Portuguese media label as populist several political actors who are not considered populists in the academic literature, such as the aforementioned Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, but also Rui Moreira (the CDS mayor of Porto), or the Socialist Party.

Finally, João Moniz and colleagues (2024) studied the diffusion of populist discourses after the Covid-19 pandemic. The assumption is that moments of crisis provide an opportunity for populism to flourish and that the pandemic could therefore have led to an increase in the level of populism in the public debate. Yet, the Covid-19 is a different crisis, an exogenous shock that cannot be manufactured for political purposes. The authors carried out a content analysis of populist discourses in the Portuguese parliament and found that during the first year of the pandemic, there was a significant *decrease* in populism in parliamentary debates, especially in anti-elitism. A possible explanation for this finding could be the prevalence of a *rally around the flag* effect.

## POPULIST ATTITUDES IN PORTUGAL

Moving from the supply-side to the demand-side, or from the macro and meso dimensions of populism to the micro, populist attitudes in Portugal seem to be in line with the broader European context, with some interesting findings that speak to the general literature. Plaza-Colodro and Lisi (2024) show that

citizens with populist attitudes share several characteristics with abstentionists: dissatisfaction with the democratic system, anti-immigration sentiments, and Euroscepticism. However, while abstentionists have low levels of political interest and income, Chega's voters do not. Thus, we can confirm that "populist" citizens are quite different from those who are not interested in politics (Hauwaert and Kessel, 2018). While the "populists" express their protest by voting for anti-system parties such as Chega, abstentionists simply do not express a preference at the ballot, therefore embodying an apathetic attitude. Crucially, however, some abstainers do so for strategic reasons, not because they do not consider exercising their right to vote. Among these strategic abstainers, populist parties such as Chega can find a significant share of their electorate (Lobo, Heyne and Manucci, 2024). These findings confirm that populist success lies at the intersection of supply and demand (Heyne and Manucci, 2021; Manucci, 2024).

Santana-Pereira (2024) delves deeper into the effects of populist attitudes in Portugal, observing whether they matter more for first- or second-order elections. Presidential elections, considered as second-order, should mobilise a more sincere and less strategic vote compared to legislative elections. Indeed, the results of this study show that populist attitudes were strong predictors of voting for the populist candidate André Ventura, increasing the likelihood of voting for him in the 2021 presidential elections. At the same time, a vote for Ventura was linked not only to populist attitudes but also, to a large extent, to a lack of trust in the incumbent, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. This was not the case in the legislative elections. In fact, (lack of) trust in the government was the most important predictor of voting for Chega: The less the respondents trusted the government, the more likely they were to vote for Ventura's party. Similarly, populist attitudes did not reach statistical significance, either alone or in interaction with left-right self-placement.

Soares, Silva and Moniz (2024) analysed the personality traits of Portuguese with populist attitudes. They tested the correlation between the "Big Five Personality Traits" (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) and the levels of these traits in "populist" citizens. They find that populist attitudes are associated with extroverted, conscientious, and neurotic individuals, while openness to experience is negatively correlated with populist attitudes. This means that Portuguese citizens with populist attitudes are hard-working people who are not open to new experiences but rather dogmatic and conservative. They also tend to be less politically efficacious, male, older, and often less educated. They conclude that populist citizens seek political participation to reduce perceived risks which, in turn, often leads to a preference for quick, simple solutions over complex problem

solving. Overall, the authors argue that citizens with populist attitudes prioritise quick solutions to problems in order to feel safer, even if this means overlooking potential harm to others. Therefore, when they feel unsafe in their daily lives, populist citizens promote stricter rules, driven by a fear of loss of social status and a desire for maximum control to increase their sense of security.

Finally, Marchi and Zúquete (2024) conducted an extensive online survey of Chega party members in order to observe the characteristics of the party's militant base. Specifically, they surveyed more than 3,000 Chega party members, asking questions about sociographic characteristics, political and democratic attitudes, values, and the European Union. It turns out that Chega members are mostly religious men from the Lisbon metropolitan area who describe themselves as middle class. They are also interested in politics, confirming the findings of Plaza-Colodro and Lisi (2024) on the country's populist electorate. In line with previous studies on Chega's electorate (Lobo, Heyne and Manucci, 2024), most of the party members never had a party affiliation before Chega. They also tend to be populist, with strong anti-political sentiments, as they do not trust parties or politicians. Moreover, like Chega's voters, they are heavily dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Portugal. They are not necessarily against democracy, although almost 30% of them do not think it is the best form of government. Unsurprisingly, they have an idea of national identity in line with other populist radical right parties across Europe, seeing migrants as a threat and believing that they should adapt to the local customs and traditions. Finally, almost 90% of them believe that some cultures are more civilised than others, and over 70% believe that some races or ethnic groups are inherently more hardworking than others.

#### PORTUGAL IS (NOT) A SMALL COUNTRY

Nearly half a century of right-wing authoritarian dictatorship, the longest in Europe in the 20th century, was succeeded by an unusual and nearly bloodless revolution. Since then, Portugal has gone its own way, watching Europe from the sidelines while keeping an eye on the vast ocean that was once its natural terrain for expansion. The long dictatorship seemed to have "inoculated" the country against the populist radical right tendencies that are increasingly making their presence felt in the rest of Europe. As the recent success of Chega shows, Portuguese citizens have never stopped looking to their past, at their lost empire, and the good old days (Manucci and Hauwaert, 2024). A popular map during the *Estado Novo* showed all of Portugal's colonies superimposed on a map of Europe to show that "Portugal is not a small country". Salazar's dictatorship may have ended fifty years ago, but the imperial past has



not disappeared, and the demand for populism has only simmered under the ashes. Portugal may be, culturally speaking, an island. But it is more connected than ever to the rest of Europe.

The studies included here cannot explain why Portugal has suddenly become a “normal” country, with the populist radical right party Chega in third place. However, they provide ample evidence that populism existed in Portugal long before 2019. Moreover, this special issue shows that we can learn valuable lessons from the Portuguese case. First, when trying to make sense of the electoral performance of populist parties, it is essential to look at the combination of demand- and supply-side factors. Indeed, the lack of a credible supply, even in the presence of a strong demand, may determine the apparent absence of populism. Second, it may very well be the case that the impact of populist attitudes is much greater in second-order elections, which are still understudied in this area of research. Third, citizens who vote for populist parties are not just protesting against a system they dislike: they are also proposing an alternative to the *status quo*, rather than simply abstaining and withdrawing from the political debate altogether. The fact that they are dissatisfied with the way democracy works does not mean that they are not trying to change things. Fourth, it is important to study not only the electoral programmes of populist parties, the reasons why people vote for them, or the characteristics of party leaders, but also the characteristics of party members. The features of party members and how these activists see themselves should not be neglected in order to provide a more complete assessment of populist parties. Fifth, populism is not necessarily a threat to democracy (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), but a response to a diffuse dissatisfaction with the political system and its representatives. If liberal democracy is to survive, it cannot ignore the challenges posed by populism.

This special issue cannot fill all the gaps on populism in Portugal, but it can trace lines for future research in the hope that more researchers will focus on Portugal when studying populism. For example, left-wing populism in Portugal is alive and well (Lisi and Borghetto, 2018; Carreira da Silva, Manucci and Veloso Larraz, 2022) and deserves much more attention. Indeed, focusing exclusively on radical right variants of populism may contribute to their normalisation. Moreover, we need to better understand what has happened to those authoritarian legacies that supposedly “inoculated” Portugal against the populist radical right. Are they fading away? If so, is it due to generational replacement or are there other causes? Much remains to be understood about populism in general and Portuguese populism in particular but this special issue aims to be a stepping stone for the study of these questions in Portugal and internationally.



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