



Article

From Emotion to Virality: The Use of Social Media in the Populism of Chega and VOX

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Abstract: This study analyses the digital communication strategies of the radical right parties VOX (Spain) and Chega (Portugal) on the social media platforms X, Instagram, and TikTok during the electoral periods. Using a comparative content analysis with quantitative and qualitative approaches, the research reveals that both parties employ a populist discourse marked by confrontation with the political elite and the use of emotional appeals to mobilize their followers. VOX directs its attacks at the left and the Spanish Prime Minister, while Chega emphasizes criticism of the political system as a whole. The results show that polarization and the evocation of emotions such as indignation, pride, and hope are central strategies in their posts. Furthermore, messages with strong emotional charge and audiovisual elements generate a greater impact, especially on TikTok and Instagram, where virality is significantly higher than on X. The study concludes that the communication strategies of these parties are based on ‘data populism’, where interaction and visibility on social media reinforce their political narratives and consolidate their base of support.



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Keywords: political communication; digital populism; social media; radical right politics; virality

1. Introduction

Radical right parties continue to expand their power across Europe. In 2024, there was a notable increase in the number of supporters of this new party family, which is taking on government roles in seven European Union Member States. This expansion has led traditional parties, such as conservatives, to lose political and ideological space in party systems (Henley 2025). In Portugal, Chega quadrupled its parliamentary representation and elected, for the first time, a European deputy. In Spain, VOX managed to almost double the number of European deputies. In addition to the rise in VOX, in Spain, the Se Acabó la Fiesta party—a populist radical right-wing party whose strategy is insults and disinformation—obtained around 800 thousand votes, guaranteeing three seats in the European Parliament (Rodríguez Gago 2025; Camargo 2024; Maldonado Vasconcelos 2024).

Therefore, as in other European contexts, the electoral results in Spain and Portugal have consolidated the radical right since its entry in 2018 and 2019, respectively. Until then, in the Iberian political scenario, the failure of the populist radical right was considered an exception to the growing advance of these parties in the rest of Europe (Ferreira 2019;

Rubio-Pueyo 2019; Cunha et al. 2022; Carvalho 2023). In fact, until 2019, in Portugal, populist parties and leaders of the left and right had always been unsuccessful, unlike what was seen in Spain, namely with the surprising result obtained by the radical left party, Podemos, in 2014 (Salgado and Stavrakakis 2019).

Thus, the rapid growth of the populist radical right in the Iberian Peninsula has attracted the attention of academic scientists. This is evidenced by the publication of studies that have as their object of study the two parties, Chega and VOX. In the literature, these parties have been comparatively analyzed in terms of ideological attitudes (Manucci 2024; Benitez-Baleato et al. 2024; Mariscal Ríos 2024), and we also find studies that seek an explanation for their success (Mendes and Dennison 2020; Heyne and Manucci 2021a, 2021b). Other studies have compared their political communication on social networks, focusing on Twitter (Biscaia 2024; Ramos Antón and Baptista 2022), neglecting other online platforms.

Our study seeks to fill the gap in studies on comparative analyses of political communication strategies between Chega and VOX on social networks, particularly during election periods, and on three different online platforms, including TikTok. Despite the emergence of several studies similar to ours, it is urgent to comparatively analyze the political action of populist parties in Spain and Portugal on various social media platforms.

2. The Populist Radical Right: Digital Strategies and Narratives

The populist radical right is the new successful party family in Europe, particularly in Portugal and Spain. This type of party is recognizable as radical, mainly due to the language it uses and the way it defends its ideals (Mudde 2007). However, it is also an antisystem party (Ignazi 2003), and the radical right seeks an alternative reality, albeit within the liberal democratic system, unlike the far right. In fact, the literature has focused on this “nominative debate” (López-Ortega 2017), between the radical right and the extreme right. Still, political scientists have been clear in associating the extreme right with the ideals of the old radical right (Marchi 2020), namely due to the anti-constitutional and anti-democratic action that characterizes it. The far-right presents a strategy based on violent and illegal methods, alluding to the ideologies of the first half of the 20th century, such as fascism, Salazarism, or Francoism (Lerín Ibarra 2022). On the other hand, the radical right cultivates the values of the “new right” and is characterized by the defense of a strong leader, the valorization of security and social and political order but also intolerant towards social and sexual minorities (Flanagan 1987; Ignazi 1992; Freire 2009).

Mudde (2007) refers, for example, to ‘protest’ parties, although they have acquired a ‘populist’ tone due to the way they communicate. Within this political field, Lane and Ersson (1999) recognized parties of discontent. In fact, these parties tend to reject the far-right stigma with the aim of normalizing their actions and ideals (Afonso 2021). The so-called populist radical right (Mudde 2007), which includes parties such as Chega and VOX, has essentially had a radical attitude towards the growing flow of migration and ethnic diversity (Akkerman et al. 2016), leading some authors to even name them as antiimmigration parties (Van der Brug et al. 2005). Specifically, in Portugal, the radical right has presented a hostile narrative towards the Roma people (Cunha et al. 2022).

In fact, populism emerges in these parties as a communication strategy and not exactly as an ideology, due to the way these parties blame the ‘corrupt elite’ as the villain of all the evils that condition or affect the lives of the ‘people’ (da Costa Novais and Leite 2024). It is through an anti-elitist or antisystem discourse that populist parties, from the radical right, seek to evoke collective emotions of fear and hatred (Nai 2021) in the face of the threat that politicians, the mainstream media, and ethnic and social minorities represent to ‘us/the people’.

As discursive strategies, both parties, Chega and VOX, seek to provoke, decontextualise information, and generate revolt or indignation toward others (enemies, such as corrupt politicians or immigrants) (see [Baptista et al. 2024](#); [Rodríguez Fernández 2021](#); [Ferreira 2019](#)). In a digital universe, dominated by social networks, these forms of political communication are constantly encouraged. [Baptista et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that radical right-wing neopopulism is a consequence of the digital age, stating that social networks have contributed to the dominance of a superficial, simple, and emotional narrative. In fact, several authors describe populist communication as highly emotional, seeking to trigger strong feelings in people ([Aalberg et al. 2017](#); [Mazzoleni et al. 2003](#); [Hameleers et al. 2017](#)).

Thus, [Salmela and Von Scheve \(2017\)](#) consider socioeconomic factors to be insufficient to justify the rise in the populist radical right, highlighting above all the impact of the emotional processes involved. The so-called ‘losers of globalization’ are enveloped by an emotion of resentment, fueled by fear and insecurity about their identity and the loss of traditional values. In fact, it is this resentment that is fueled by populist discourse, which opportunely exploits distrust, discontent, and the feeling of injustice ([Salmela and Von Scheve 2018](#)). This resentment has political consequences and normalizes narratives around shame, victimization, misogynistic hatred, and envy ([Capelos et al. 2023](#)).

Some studies have shown that the populist narrative is closely related to negativity, that is, the triggering of strong negative feelings such as contempt, anger, or disgust ([Widmann 2021](#); [Fischer and Roseman 2007](#)). On the other hand, in the case of the populist radical right, positive feelings seek to reinforce pre-existing beliefs ([Salmela and Von Scheve 2018](#)). Furthermore, the use of emotion is different between right-wing and left-wing populists, namely in the way they use resentment. Unlike the right, the left presents itself as a victim of a capitalist society and a society governed by neoliberal policies that have neglected the people ([Salmela and Von Scheve 2018](#)).

The literature has also shown that social networks have served to bring populist parties or leaders closer to the people ([Schwemmer 2021](#); [Bianchi 2020](#); [Zamora-Medina et al. 2023](#)), helping political agents understand the ‘desires’ of the people in order to serve as their ‘spokespeople’ ([Engesser et al. 2017](#)). The dynamics of social media itself, based on self-production and virality ([Klinger and Svensson 2015](#)), has motivated new forms of political communication, allowing political leaders to curate news ([Baptista et al. 2024](#)) and allowing political parties, especially the most recent ones, to take advantage of their advantages ([Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021](#)). Social media allow populist parties and leaders to adapt a simpler, more informal, and emotional discourse that brings them closer to society in general ([Aladro Vico and Requeijo Rey 2020](#); [Baptista et al. 2021](#)). Therefore, populist parties have improved their ability to manage their networks in real time, in order to reach large masses, leading to the emergence of ‘data populism’ ([Guerrero-Solé et al. 2020](#)). The focus on social networks by political parties cultivates a context of ‘Pop Politics’ ([Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019](#)) and increases the phenomenon of ‘Politainment’ ([Berrocal Gonzalo et al. 2021](#)), which helps bring politicians closer to a younger generation ([Zamora-Medina et al. 2023](#)).

In political-ideological terms, Chega and VOX share ideals commonly identified in radical right parties ([Mudde 2007](#)). Both employ classic populist rhetoric, which pits the people (‘us’, the natives, the good Portuguese) against them (the enemy, politicians, and the corrupt elite) ([Heyne and Manucci 2021b](#); [Biscaia and Salgado 2023](#)). Chega and VOX are nativist and nationalist parties, although with different targets ([Heyne and Manucci 2021b](#)). Chega is more flexible in its rhetoric, attacking those who receive benefits and the Roma ([Cunha et al. 2022](#)), while VOX takes a more anti-immigration and anti-Muslim stance. Although Chega’s discourse has recently become more radical in the face of the country’s immigration policy ([Baptista et al. 2024](#)), both parties are authoritarian on crime and security

issues and display nationalist, antiglobalisation nostalgia and political dissatisfaction (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés 2020; Heyne and Manucci 2021b; Santos and Roque 2021). Furthermore, Chega and VOX are parties focused on the charismatic personality of their leaders, who have similar political backgrounds (Pappas 2016; Eatwell 2006).

Given that the main objective of this research is studying the digital communication strategies of the Spanish and Portuguese radical right parties during electoral campaigns, it is proposed to answer three research questions:

- RQ1—What are the key structural and stylistic characteristics of Vox's and Chega's digital publications during election campaigns?
- RQ2—What are the dominant issues and strategies that mark the electoral discourse of radical right parties in Spain and Portugal?
- RQ3—Are emotional appeals and attacks the primary polarizing discourse resources used by the radical right in the Iberian Peninsula?
- RQ4—How do digital audiences react to the narratives of these radical right parties?

3. Materials and Methods

Given that the aim of this research is to examine the digital communication strategies of radical right-wing parties in Spain and Portugal during electoral periods, the sample includes all messages published by the official accounts of VOX (Spain) and Chega (Portugal) on the platform X—traditionally linked to modern political communication (Alonso-Muñoz et al. 2017; D'heer and Verdegem 2014)—as well as on TikTok and Instagram, platforms with predominantly younger audiences (Chen 2018; Suárez-Álvarez and García-Jiménez 2021) and which have experienced rapid growth in recent years.

As this is an exploratory (indicative) rather than explanatory (demonstrative) study, all messages published by Vox (in Spanish) and Chega (in Portuguese) during the 15-day campaign periods of the most recent legislative elections in Spain (from 7 July 2023 to 21 July 2023) and Portugal (from 23 January 2024 to 8 February 2024) were manually collected.

To explore the characteristics of the messages published by both parties during the electoral campaigns, a comparative content analysis methodology was applied, combining quantitative (Krippendorff 2012; Berelson 1952) and qualitative-discursive approaches (Silverman 2016; Van Dijk 2015).

The methodological procedure began with the identification and manual extraction of all posts from the three platforms during the defined time frame. As the study includes the entire population of messages, no filtering or sampling was necessary. The final corpus consisted of 609 messages, which were analyzed using a coding manual specifically designed for this study, composed of 13 mutually exclusive variables.

This coding scheme was structured around four major blocks, each corresponding to one of the research questions (see Table 1), allowing for the analysis of formal characteristics, thematic content and strategies, emotional appeals and attacks, and audience engagement metrics.

Specifically, the first block classified posts according to party, social media platform, audiovisual components, message protagonist, and message origin. The second block focused on the use of two major content frames: the Game Frame and the Issue Frame (Aalberg et al. 2011). A thematic classification model with eleven categories was developed to analyze the distribution of topics and identify the agenda-setting priorities of each party. The strategy variable was coded based on seven predefined categories.

In the third block, the presence and type of emotions used in each post were coded using a twelve-category model, previously validated in different studies (Moret Soler et al. 2022). This was complemented by an analysis of the tone (positive, neutral, or negative) and the presence of attacks. Lastly, audience response was measured through message

virality, using the number of shares, likes, and replies, following a formula employed in prior studies (Pérez-Curiel et al. 2022).

Table 1. Variables and categories used in the research in relation to the research questions.

Research Question	Variable	Category
RQ1—What are the key structural and stylistic characteristics of Vox’s and Chega’s digital publications during election campaigns?	Political Party	1. Vox; 2. Chega
	Social Network	1. X; 2. Instagram; 3. TikTok
	Audiovisual Content	0. Text only; 1. Image; 2. Video; 3. Live broadcast; 4. Link; 5. Quoted tweet
	Protagonist	1. Party leader; 2. Other party members; 3. Political opponents; 4. Non-political figures; 5. No identifiable subject (objects, landscapes, etc.)
RQ2—What are the dominant issues and strategies that mark the electoral discourse of radical right parties in Spain and Portugal?	Message Origin	1. Campaign agenda; 2. Media agenda; 3. Electoral debates; 4. Personal life; 5. Courtesy; 6. Other
	Thematic Focus	1. Economy and employment; 2. Health and pensions; 3. Education; 4. Equality and diversity; 5. Science and environment; 6. Culture; 7. State structure; 8. Corruption; 9. Security and immigration; 10. Post-electoral agreements; 11. Other or undefined
	Communication Strategies	1. Policy proposals or campaign promises; 2. Campaign logistics or events; 3. Criticism or attacks; 4. Ideological values; 5. Humor; 6. Call to vote; 7. Other
RQ3—Are emotional appeals and attacks the primary polarizing discourse resources used by the radical right in the Iberian Peninsula?	Emotional Appeals	1. Fear; 2. Joy; 3. Anger; 4. Sadness; 5. Disgust; 6. Guilt; 7. Shame; 8. Pride; 9. Empathy; 10. Gratitude; 11. Hope; 12. Other
	Tone	1. Positive; 2. Neutral; 3. Negative
	Targets of Attacks	1. Media; 2. Multiple parties; 3. Left-wing parties; 4. Right-wing parties; 5. Pro-independence parties; 6. Social groups; 7. Others; 8. No attack
RQ4—How do digital audiences react to the narratives of these radical right parties?	Retweets/Shares	Number of reposts/shares by other users
	Likes	Number of likes or reactions received
	Replies	Number of comments or direct responses

The analysis was conducted between June and July 2024. During this period, the coding of each post was carried out using the previously defined codebook. The coding process was performed by two independent researchers. To ensure the reliability of the data, the dataset (Supplementary Materials) was cleaned, and missing values were checked and eliminated. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff’s Alpha, yielding results between 0.79 and 1, indicating strong consistency. All coded data were then statistically processed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29), from which contingency tables and frequency distributions were generated to support the analysis presented in this study.

4. Results

4.1. Approach to the Digital Discourse of the Extreme Right in Spain and Portugal

The analysis of results begins with an approximation to the sample to determine the main characteristics of the discourse in the network of radical right parties in the Iberian Peninsula. In this sense, the data obtained confirm the relevant use of social platforms

but also show clear differences both between political forces and in the chosen networks. Thus, the metrics show that the VOX party, with an average of 9.31 messages per day and network, makes much more intense use of these platforms, doubling Chega, which has an average of 4.22 publications.

However, if the production routines on each of the platforms studied are taken into account (see Figure 1), it is confirmed that both radical right forces continue to bet on the social network X ahead of emerging Instagram and TikTok. This notorious commitment to the old Twitter is most clearly observed in the case of Spain's VOX, with an average of 18.40 tweets per day, which exceeds 6.13 posts on Instagram and 3.40 on TikTok.

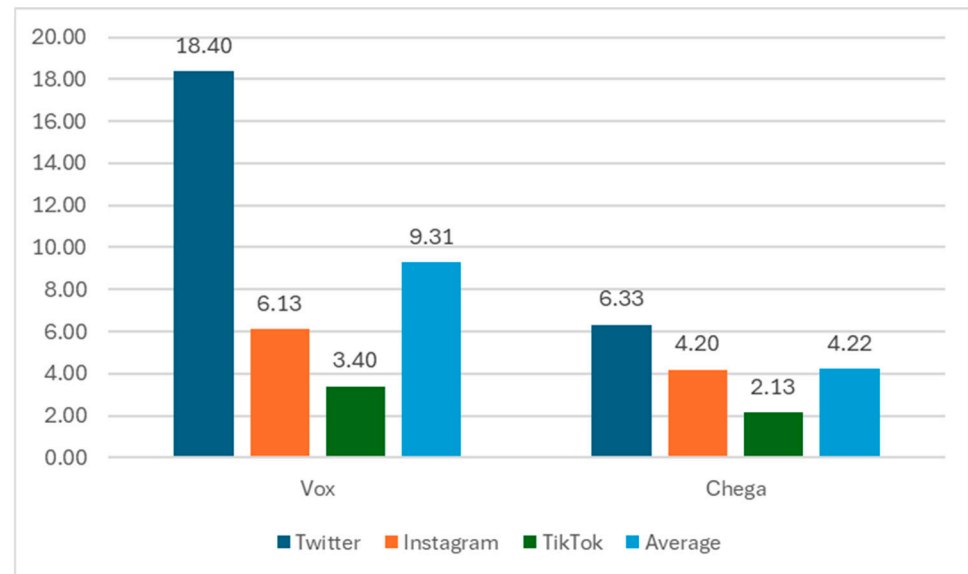


Figure 1. Publication frequency of political parties by social networks. Source: own elaboration.

Another of the variables studied that allows us to determine the formal characteristics of the discourse of the extreme right is the audiovisual content that they incorporate into their messages. In this sense, it is observed that the two parties clearly take advantage of audiovisual resources to reinforce their publications by both forces. In fact, both VOX (71.4%) and Chega (63.7%) are mostly accompanied by videos or photographs (24.6% and 34.7%, respectively). Disaggregating these data by each social network studied, we see practically total use of video in the case of TikTok, while on Instagram (65.8%) and X (65.2%) this possibility is combined with photographs (34.2% and 29.9%, respectively).

However, the metrics also point to the fact that both VOX and Chega continue to have a clear relationship with the traditional agenda. Radical right political forces continue to publish messages that come from their electoral rallies (51.1% for Chega and 33.9% for VOX) or from media coverage of the campaign (34.7% and 28.9%). These lower figures in the case of VOX are explained by a significant weight (14.8%) of messages related to electoral debates, which is not the case with Chega. One of the noteworthy data in this section is the small proportion of messages produced specifically for social networks (20% in the case of VOX and 12.6% in the case of Chega). In addition, it has also been proven that messages based on the personal lives of the candidates or on matters of courtesy are practically non-existent. This trend of betting on more traditional content related to the electoral process itself does not only occur on the social network X but also appears on the most disruptive platforms such as TikTok or Instagram.

The approach to the sample is complemented with the study of the protagonist character of the messages studied, and it is confirmed that in both cases there is a clear tendency to focus exclusively on strengthening the image of the leader (see Figure 2). Thus,

the candidate for the Head of Government is the protagonist of 80% of the publications in the case of Chega and 65.9% in the case of VOX. This last figure is explained by the existence of a notable proportion (17.7%) of messages starring other leaders of the Spanish far-right party such as Iván Espinosa de los Monteros or Ignacio Garriga. However, it should be noted that few messages are sent by political opponents (4.4%) or anonymous characters (4.3%). In addition, it is worth mentioning that there are no significant changes between the different social networks studied, maintaining the trend to focus on the leader also on Instagram and TikTok.

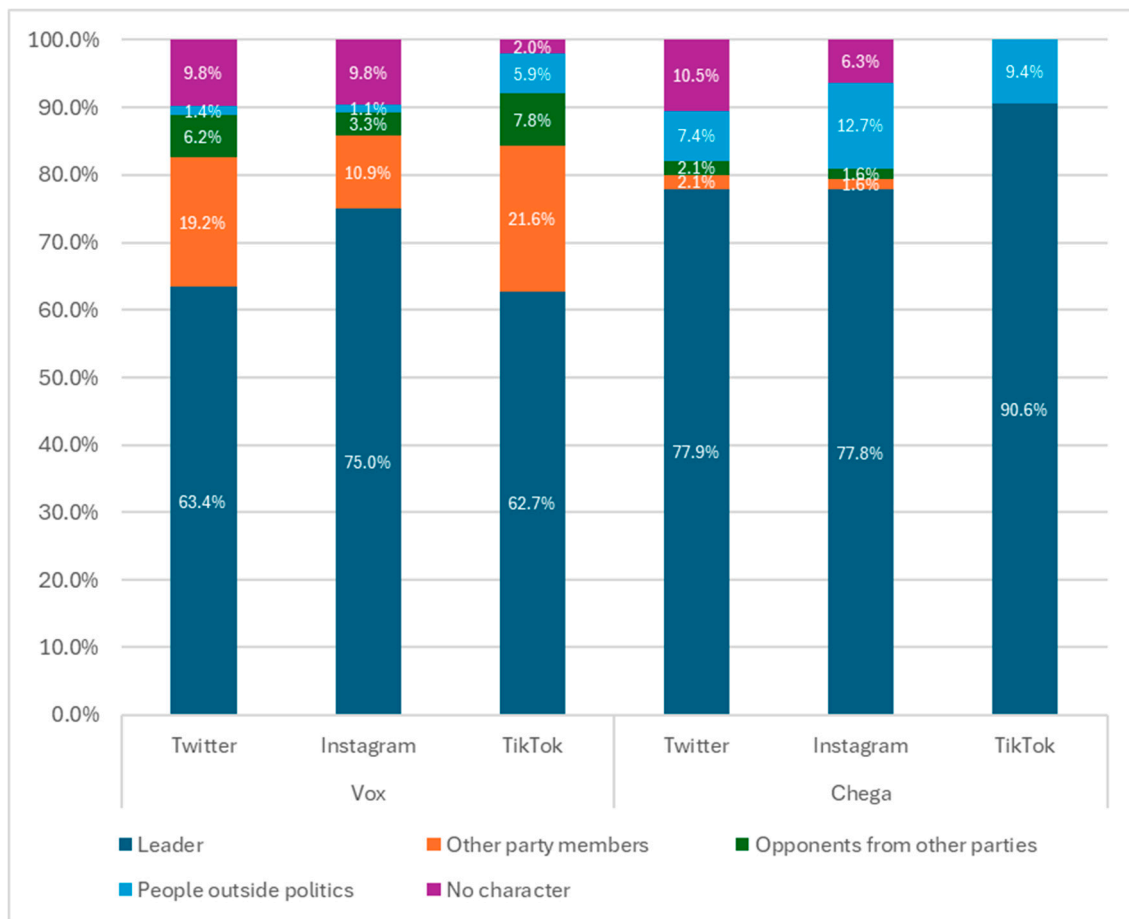


Figure 2. Distribution of political party protagonists across social networks. Source: own elaboration.

4.2. Issues and Strategies of the Extreme Right in the Iberian Peninsula

The digital discourse of the selected right-wing populist parties is marked by ideological communication supported by publications that combine various messages on different topics (issue frame). Both VOX (49.9%) and Chega (47.9%) are the clear majority of this type of publications, which are strategically based on an enumeration of the main pillars of their discourse or others that lack a clear theme. However, some notable differences are observed within clearly thematized and ideologized messages (Figure 3). In Spain (VOX), issues such as the economy (11.5%), equality (8.1%), post-electoral pacts (8.6%), the environment (6%), or the territorial structure of the State (5.5%) were the main topics; while in Portugal (Chega), corruption (28.4%) and security (11.6%) were the focus of the program. On the other hand, traditional issues on the political agenda related to public services, such as health (2.5%) or education (1.5%), hardly marked the narrative of the extreme right.

To further investigate the details of populist communication, the main strategies (game frame) used were studied and a clear tendency to attack the adversary was confirmed in

both VOX (37.2%) and Chega (32.6%). As can be seen in Figure 4, the messages of both radical right forces are also supported by more traditional strategies, such as providing information on campaign events (17.6%), the dissemination of programmatic proposals (14.8%), or the appeal to vote (14.8%), while messages using a strategy based on humor (4.1%) are in the minority. Where differences have been observed is in messages with a clearly ideological purpose, since Spaniards (13.8%) are committed to promoting the cultural battle compared to a lesser commitment of the Portuguese (5.8%).

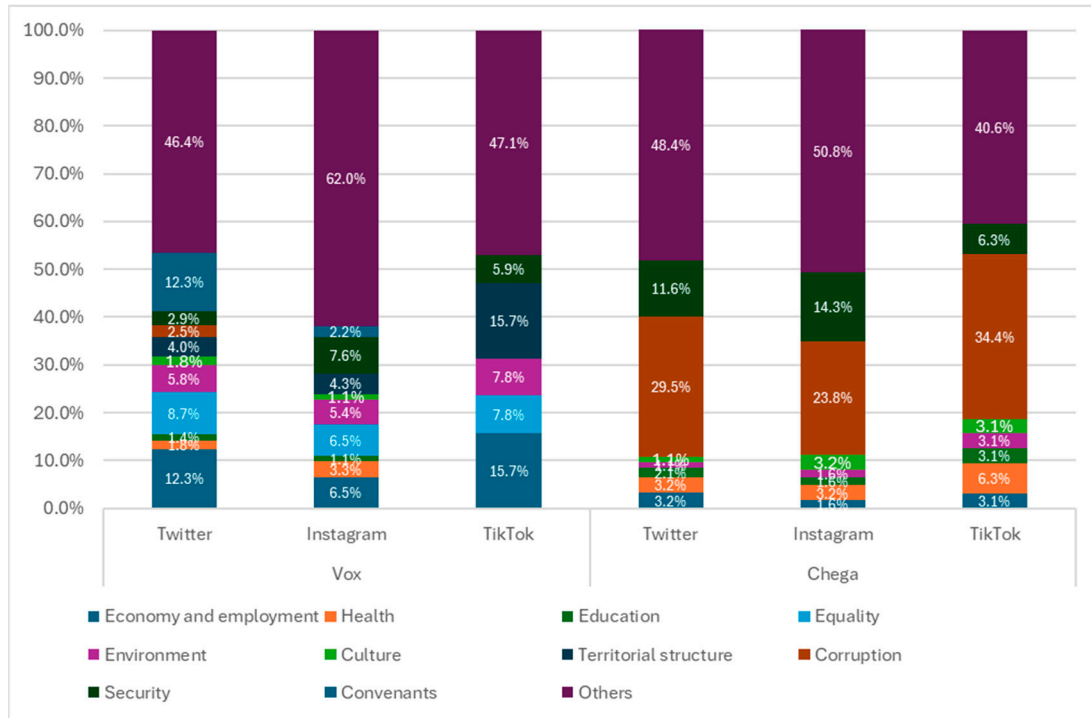


Figure 3. Issues of political party publications on social networks. Source: own elaboration.

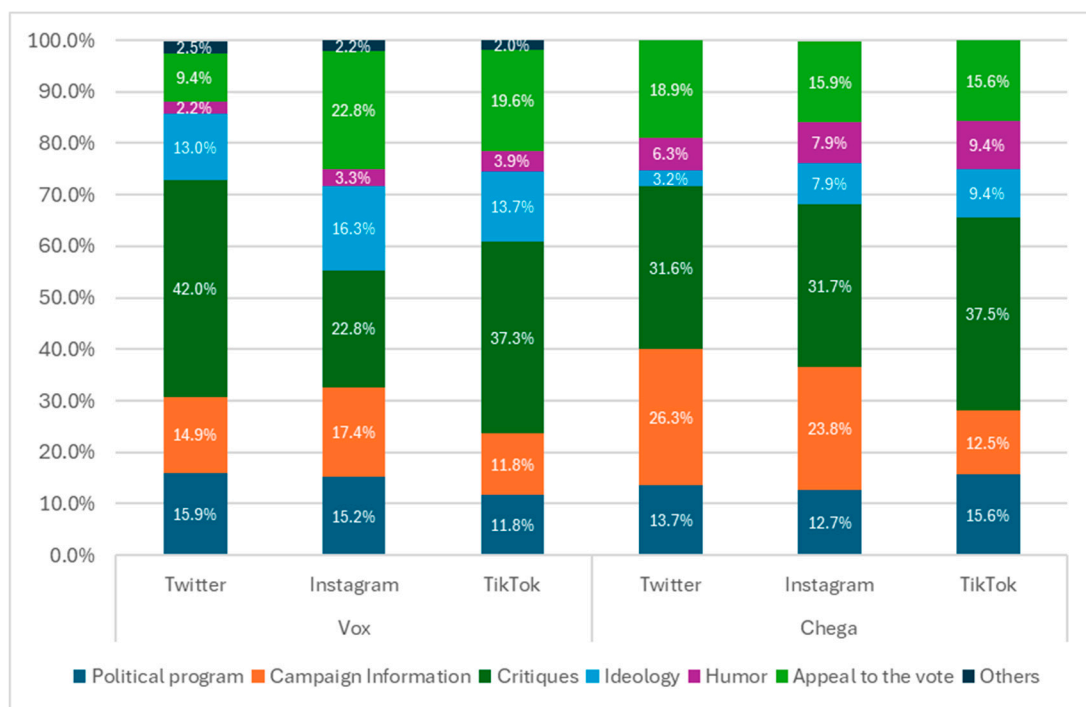


Figure 4. Strategies of political party publications on social networks. Source: own elaboration.

4.3. The Role of Feelings and Attacks in the Message of the Populist Radical Right

Another defining feature of the populist discourse of the radical right in the Iberian political landscape is the use of a highly polarized discourse characterized by strong emotional appeals and attacks. In this sense, the data obtained from the study (see Figure 5) of the publications on X, Instagram, and TikTok point to a diversity of emotions that differ between political parties but share a common Manichean tendency to frame issues in terms of good versus evil. Thus, VOX bases its narrative on expressing rejection or disgust toward the actions or discourse of other parties or groups (31.5%), as well as on demonstrating pride in its own ideology (18.4%) and displaying anger at specific events (12.6%). In the case of Chega, the publications predominantly express hope for electoral victory (30.5%), followed by anger (18.9%) and disgust (17.9%) toward speeches and actions they reject, as well as pride in belonging to the party (16.8%). In both cases, joy at the support received from their followers is also notable (8.1% for VOX and 8.9% for Chega), occasionally accompanied by expressions of gratitude. Conversely, emotions such as sadness (0.8%), fear (1.5%), and empathy (3%) appear less frequently, suggesting that the discourse is primarily built on assertive or confrontational emotions rather than vulnerability or compassion.

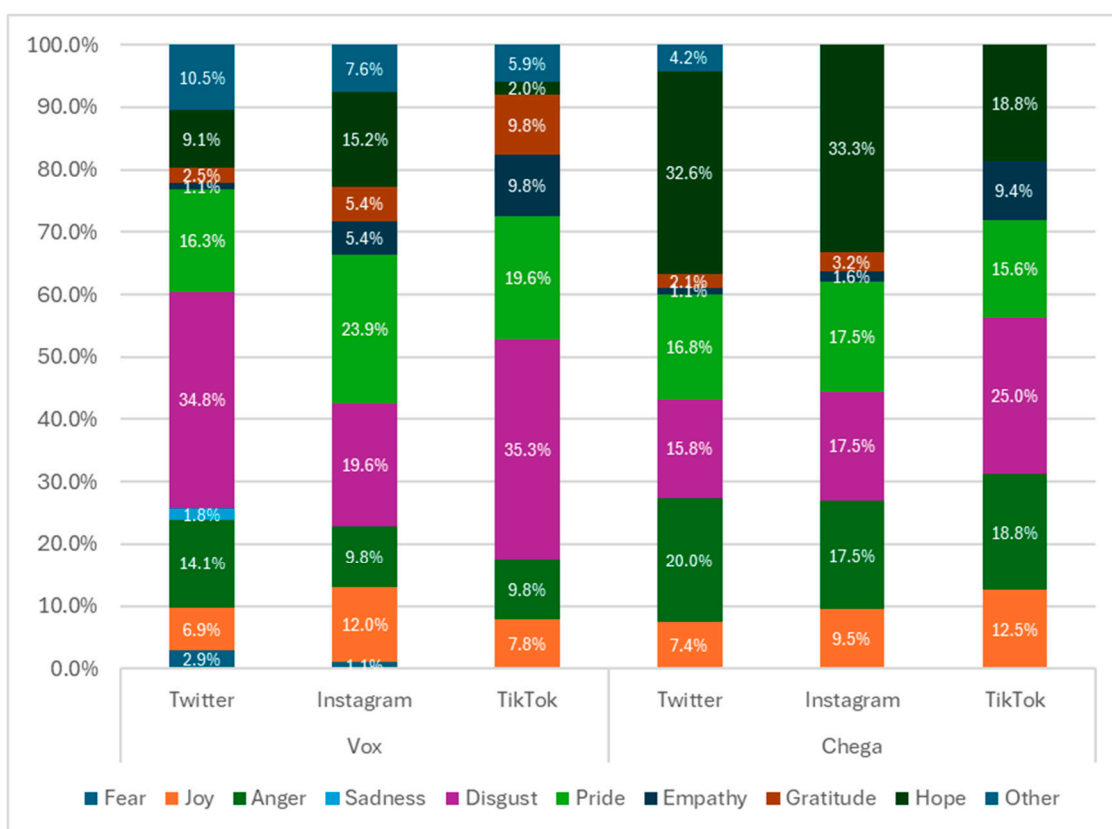


Figure 5. Emotions in political party publications on social networks. Source: own elaboration.

In line with these findings, the analysis of message tone on social media further confirms the polarizing nature of their discourse. In the case of Chega, positive-toned messages (48.9%) are nearly matched by negative ones (46.3%), with neutral content being almost negligible (4.7%). Meanwhile, VOX exhibits a higher proportion of negative messages (47%), followed by positive ones (34.8%), and a greater presence of neutral messages (34.6%), which largely correspond to posts announcing the candidate’s electoral agenda.

This tendency toward polarization is further reinforced by the widespread use of attacks as a rhetorical strategy, as reflected in the fact that almost 70% of both parties’ publications contain some form of attack. VOX primarily targets left-wing parties and,

in particular, President Pedro Sánchez (25.8%), whereas Chega's main opponent is the political system as a whole (23.7%), which it consistently portrays as corrupt. Notably, both parties tend to avoid direct confrontation with other right-wing parties (1.7% for VOX and 3.2% for Chega), opting instead to frame them as part of a broader political establishment that includes the left (13.1% and 13.7%, respectively). In addition to attacking political opponents, both parties extend their offensive discourse to social groups (7.6%) and the media (5.7%), reinforcing their populist narrative of antagonism between "the people" and "the elites".

4.4. *Viralization of Messages and Audience Behavior*

The analysis of the metrics of the publications studied allows us to outline the impact they have on social networks and, therefore, the reaction of digital audiences to them. In this sense, it is found that the Spanish political party VOX has a much longer history on the network, with a viral rate of 11,919 (which translates into an average of 1242 shares, 9111 likes, and 324 responses), compared to lower rates of the Portuguese Chega, with an average impact of 3606 (96 shares, 3270 likes, and 143 comments).

Another finding of this study is that it confirms that the discourse of the extreme right in the new networks has a much greater impact on digital audiences. Thus, the metrics show that both parties have a virality on TikTok of 20,082 (1618 shares, 16,317 likes, and 529 replies), while on Instagram it is 16,614 (15,951 likes, and 546 comments). In contrast to this, the publications of these populist parties on the traditional Twitter network reach considerably lower figures, with an impact rate of 3274 and an average of 766 retweets, 1650 likes, and 93 replies.

From a formal point of view, there is also a greater interaction of users with publications containing videos (10,522) or photos (7232) as well as a greater impact of messages that have their origin in debates (19,409) or in personal life (18,605 of the candidates).

Delving into the impact of the radical right discourse on social networks, the metrics show that the topics that generate the greatest interest among digital audiences are related to ideological issues such as equality (17,377) or to polarizing issues such as territorial structure in the case of Spain (12,723) or to immigration or insecurity in Portuguese (11,813). On the other hand, the topics that generate the least engagement are topics that have generally been associated with political confrontation such as corruption (3575) or postelectoral pacts (3728), as well as issues related to public services such as health (4859), education (5148), or culture (5620).

In terms of strategies, the metrics studied confirm an uneven reaction of the digital audience. Therefore, humor (15,419), followed by ideology (12,247) or appeal to vote (11,780), works much better than criticism (9007). On the other hand, messages related to the traditional use that parties have given to social networks generate much lower engagement rates, as is the case for the dissemination of electoral proposals (6940) or information on campaign events (5715).

The study of the behavior of the digital audiences of radical right parties has also shown a slightly greater reaction to publications with a positive (10,108) or neutral (9854) tone compared to negative ones (8698). According to these results, there is also a greater engagement of positive feelings such as empathy (16,117), joy (13,762), or pride (13,285), ahead of negative emotions such as disgust (9621) or anger (8180).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In the context of a growing influence of the radical right in Europe, the study of its digital communication strategies becomes essential to understand its electoral success and its mobilization capacity. Social media platforms have transformed political communication,

providing these parties with a privileged space to spread their discourse, connect with their bases, and amplify their messages through viral content (Guerrero-Solé et al. 2020; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019). In this sense, the analysis of Vox's and Chega's activity on X, Instagram, and TikTok during electoral periods allows us to identify discursive patterns and strategies that explain their consolidation in Spain and Portugal. This research contributes to a growing body of literature examining the convergence of populism (Gerbaudo 2018), digital media (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016), and political polarization (Fiorina and Abrams 2008) in Southern Europe. Despite important national differences in political tradition and party development, the findings reveal a high degree of convergence in the rhetorical, thematic, and affective resources deployed by both parties. This suggests the emergence of a shared communicative logic among radical right actors in the region—characterized by simplification, antagonism, and emotional intensification.

In relation to the first research question (RQ1), the analysis reveals that both parties rely on a direct, emotionally charged, and visually coherent style. Posts are characterized by brief textual content, bold graphic elements, and a simplified syntax aimed at maximizing impact and virality. This communicative minimalism aligns with previous studies emphasizing the radical right's preference for affective resonance and ideological clarity over programmatic complexity (Engesser et al. 2017; Wodak 2015). Although Chega tends toward more informal, even colloquial expressions, and Vox adopts a slightly more institutional tone, their stylistic convergence supports the hypothesis of a regional digital populist style. These features are optimized for rapid circulation and reinforce partisan identity through symbolic cues.

In response to RQ2, on the predominant issues and strategies in Vox's and Chega's electoral communication, our findings reveal a shared reliance on confrontational discourse, populist rhetoric, and nationalist framings (Mudde 2007; Akkerman et al. 2016). However, key differences emerge in their targeting strategies. VOX focusses mainly on the left and on the figure of the Spanish Prime Minister, reinforcing a polarized political landscape, while Chega adopts a broader antisystem stance, portraying the entire political establishment as corrupt (Ferreira 2019; Heyne and Manucci 2021b). Thematic priorities also diverge, with VOX focusing heavily on themes such as Spanish unity, anti-communism, and anti-feminism, while Chega highlights law and order, anti-system sentiment, and elite discreditation. Both parties operationalize a binary populist logic that opposes a virtuous "people" to corrupt "others"—politicians, migrants, feminists, or international organizations. These results align with previous studies highlighting the centrality of antagonism and identity politics in radical right communication (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés 2020).

Addressing the third research question (RQ3), the analysis confirms that emotional intensity and antagonistic rhetoric are core elements of both parties' digital strategy. Emotional registers such as indignation, pride, and hope dominate their discourse, fostering a strong identity within the group and reinforcing a narrative of "us versus them" (Nai 2021; Aalberg et al. 2017). Although VOX exhibits higher levels of rejection and disgust towards political opponents, Chega's communication is more rooted in hope and anger, particularly regarding its electoral prospects. Furthermore, differences in emotional tone between platforms suggest that TikTok and Instagram prefer more engaging and emotionally charged content, while X maintains a more traditional political communication style (Engesser et al. 2017). These findings support existing research on the role of emotions in populist discourse and their impact on audience engagement. The high prevalence of attacks—directed at political adversaries, institutions, and media—suggests a deliberate polarizing tactic, consistent with the performative nature of radical right discourse as described by Wodak (2015).

Regarding the reaction of digital audiences (RQ4), our study demonstrates that emotionally charged and polarizing messages achieve higher virality, particularly on TikTok and Instagram. The inclusion of audiovisual elements, such as videos and photographs, significantly enhances engagement, reaffirming the visual-centric nature of digital political communication (Schwemmer 2021; Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2021). Furthermore, humor, ideological messaging, and calls to vote generate greater audience interaction than direct criticism or programmatic proposals. In particular, positive emotions such as empathy, joy, and pride elicit greater engagement compared to negative emotions such as anger or disgust. These insights contribute to the broader understanding of “data populism” and the mechanisms that drive the digital success of radical right parties (Guerrero-Solé et al. 2020).

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. Firstly, this study remains exploratory in scope due to limitations related to sample size and temporal framing. The analysis focuses on a limited corpus of messages published during an election campaign of two countries. While the comparative and cross-national design enhances analytical depth, the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than generalizable. Second, our focus on X, Instagram, and TikTok excludes other platforms that may offer additional perspectives on radical right digital strategies. Moreover, while our analysis provides a robust examination of message content and audience interactions, it does not assess the cognitive and behavioral effects of these communications on voters. Future research should explore these dimensions through experimental or longitudinal approaches to better understand the long-term influence of populism driven by social media.

Future studies should extend the temporal dimension of analysis to capture long-term evolutions in radical right digital discourse. Longitudinal studies would help distinguish between strategic adaptations to campaign contexts and structural features of party communication. In addition, new studies could also expand the scope to include emerging platforms and analyze the evolving relationship between radical right leaders and their audiences in digital spaces. Furthermore, investigating the role of artificial intelligence and platform algorithms in amplifying populist discourse presents a promising avenue for further research (Zamora-Medina et al. 2023). Understanding how these technological factors shape political engagement will be crucial in assessing the broader implications of digital populism for democratic processes.

In short, this study advances the field of political communication by highlighting the centrality of polarization and emotionality in the digital strategies of the radical right in Spain and Portugal. The differential use of social media platforms underscores the adaptability of these parties to tailor their messages to different digital environments (Aladro Vico and Requeijo Rey 2020). As social networks continue to shape political discourse, further research is essential to grasp their long-term effects on democratic participation and electoral dynamics.

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