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Explaining the emergence of the radical right in Spain and Portugal: salience, stigma and supply

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ABSTRACT
Spain and Portugal have long been considered exceptions when it comes to the electoral success of radical right-wing parties in Europe. This scenario changed for both countries in 2019, with the extraordinary rise of Vox in Spain and the comparatively more modest election of one representative of Chega in Portugal. Their emergence – and the stark difference in the extents of their success – provides researchers with an ideal ‘edge-case’ and can be explained via a theoretical model that builds on and fuses previous explanatory models for radical right success. The Iberian cases demonstrate that radical right parties succeed when they (i) avoid the stigma of extremism, (ii) benefit from a gap in political supply on the right and (iii) cater to an unsatisfied demand of voters on a salient sociocultural issue. While both countries had long been home to marginal far-right political forces, the stigma of extremism prevented them from being considered credible political alternatives. The appearance of new parties that emerged as a result of splits from the mainstream centre-right, in both cases reflecting a beleaguered political supply, gave the radical right an opportunity to avoid stigma, as we demonstrate through a news content analysis. However, whereas in Spain Vox could profit from both the Catalan independence challenge and the uptick in salience of immigration, which had previously been anomalously low in Iberia, Chega has not (yet) benefited from a similarly ripe political opportunity structure in Portugal.

KEYWORDS Radical right; Spain; Portugal; Vox; Chega; stigma; issue salience

This study contributes to explanations for the rise of radical right parties in Europe and their varying levels of success across countries, focusing on the cases of Spain and Portugal. As Mudde (2019) points out, no country is immune to either nativism – the idea that non-native people are a threat to a nation-state that should be homogenous – nor authoritarianism – the belief in a strictly ordered society in which non-conformity...
should be punished. This is all the more so if these two are coupled with populism, a rhetorical tool or ideology that homogenises and separates the ‘pure people’ from the ‘corrupt elite’, capitalising on anti-establishment sentiment. Nonetheless, its breeding ground is not equally fertile everywhere, varying across time and space.

Portugal and Spain had long been considered among the few exceptions in Europe, given the anomalous lack of a radical right party with parliamentary representation until 2019 (Alonso and Kaltwasser 2015). That year saw dramatic change, with the sudden rise of Vox in Spain and the appearance of Chega (Enough) in Portugal. But while the latter is still a negligible political force, having elected only one representative (from 1.3 per cent of the vote) in the October national elections in Portugal, Vox quickly became the third largest political force in Spain, with 15 per cent of the votes cast in the November 2019 general elections. Formed in December 2013, the party first obtained political representation in the Andalusian regional elections of December 2018, winning twelve seats in the regional parliament. Vox was then catapulted to the national parliament in the April 2019 general elections (with more than 10 per cent of the vote), the first of two snap elections that took place in Spain that year.

Both Vox and Chega have been classified as ‘populist’ and ‘far right’ in recent party classifications (Rooduijn et al. 2019). As Ferreira (2019) develops, Vox falls indeed neatly into the definition of a radical right party. Nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism are the central features of its ideology, together with defence of traditional values. Even though the author is sceptical about including ‘populism’ in this list, in part because Vox’s populist rhetoric is often subordinated and attached to its nationalist message, Vox is unmistakably populist in its use of ‘us vs. them’ rhetoric as well as in its challenge to some of the basic arrangements of political life (Zulianello 2020). The opposition against internal enemies (separatists) and external ones (illegal immigrants, in particular Muslims, and, to a lesser extent, ‘globalists’) is relentless and goes together with the defence of severe punishment for the ‘enemies of Spain’ (‘la Antiespaña’). In as far as populism is the antithesis of ‘liberal pluralism’ (which includes values such as tolerance of social diversity and respect for minority rights), Vox is unambiguously populist (Norris 2020). Vox is similar to Chega in the emphasis and strict defence of ‘law and order’. However, compared to Vox, Chega puts less emphasis on nativism than on its anti-establishment message and ‘crime and security’ agenda (Marchi 2019). Nonetheless, its electoral programme is strikingly similar to Vox’s on themes like immigration and Islam. Chega recurrently presents itself as the ‘voice of the people’, in opposition to a corrupt elite, captured by ‘political correctness’ (Marchi 2019).
The emergence of these two parties at this point in time, and the significant difference in their level of success, speak directly to the theoretical conditions that favour or constrain the rise of radical right parties. Building on and fusing existing theoretical models for radical right success, we propose an explanatory framework that combines supply-side factors – namely (1) the ability of the radical right party to present an unstigmatised image and (2) the ‘credibility’ of mainstream centre-right parties in the eyes of right-wing voters – and (3) increased demand resulting from changes in the salience of issues that are typically appropriated by the radical right. We consider how well this theoretical framework explains the erstwhile case of ‘Iberian exceptionalism’, the recent end of it, and the current differences in the success of the Spanish and Portuguese radical right.

In line with previous studies, we argue that far right parties have greater chances of success when they are able to avoid the stigma of extremism and are taken by the media as ‘normal’ parties. Based on an extensive media analysis, we demonstrate that this is part of the reason why far right forces that have long existed in Portugal and Spain have never managed to pass the parliamentary threshold of significance. In contrast, Vox and Chega benefited from a significantly less stigmatised image and greater visibility. This is, at least in part, because both parties emerged as splinters from a mainstream center-right party, rather than being a product of extreme right-wing fringe movements.

However, their success is also contingent on existing political opportunities, namely the parties’ capacity to cater to an unsatiated demand of voters on an issue(s) they see as highly salient. This is evidently the case of Vox, which took the most restrictive position on the highly salient centre-periphery cleavage in Spain – following the Catalan independence challenge and the nationalist backlash it provoked – and profited from the increasing salience of other cultural issues – most notably immigration – to put forward a staunchly nativist agenda. Crucially also, Vox benefited from the weariness of the incumbent mainstream right-wing party at the time (the Partido Popular - PP), whose image was tarnished by incumbency, corruption scandals and a perceived inability to prevent the Catalan crisis.

The convulsed political situation in Spain contrasts with the one in Portugal, where sociocultural cleavages remain of low salience and where the political debate continues to revolve around the socioeconomic dimension of conflict. Even though Chega benefited from some degree of political opportunity on the right (as the mainstream right grapples with an internal crisis over leadership and ideological future course), it entered the political scene at a time in which the positive economic performance
of the country and the absence of tensions over sociocultural matters – notably in terms of the strikingly low salience of immigration – do not (yet) provide a fertile breeding ground for its growth.

**Situating the study**

There is a rich literature seeking to explain the electoral success of radical right parties as well as national-level variation, both between countries and across time. This is partially distinct from the even larger literature explaining individual-level variation in voting, which tends to rely on temporally and spatially stable indicators such as socio-demographics and policy attitudes. Though these individual-level studies have produced robust findings, they are unlikely to explain national-level variation given their stability, in contrast to the fluctuations in radical right parties success between countries and over time within countries (van der Brug 2005).

Explanations for the rise of radical right parties of the populist type tend to fall into two camps (Inglehart and Norris 2016). The first of these sees their rise as the effect of economic grievances resulting from globalisation, labour market transformations, growing wealth inequality, declining real incomes and shrinking safety-nets, as well as the more acute effects of the financial crisis and austerity regimes (Colantone and Stanig 2018; Magalhães 2014). The second theory sees the rise of such parties as the result of consolidated opposition against the broad cultural changes in western democracies since the 1970s, in particular a decline in traditional values and increased ethnic heterogeneity (Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Within both of these theories it is plausible that opposition to immigration and international integration are the policy attitudes that bind supporters of radical right parties together. Indeed, Arzheimer (2018: 147) and others have emphasized that anti-immigrant sentiment is the single most important driver of the radical right vote. Arzheimer (2018) shows, in line with the aforementioned divide, how different theories of group conflict vary in the emphasis they put on material grievances (or feelings of material threat) or cultural/identity-based grievances. Furthermore, scholars (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2006) have argued that Europe’s party systems are being transformed with an ‘integration-demarcation’ axis increasingly defining electoral competition alongside the longstanding economic and social axes.

Finally, a third ‘political demography’ theoretical strand pinpoints the reason for the rise of radical right parties squarely on the high immigration rates in the late twentieth and, especially, early twenty-first centuries,
arguing that throughout history such changes have always been greeted with opposition (Kaufmann 2014; Newman 2013).

Even though all these explanations provide valuable insights, they point to slow structural changes that are insufficient in accounting for the sudden shifts in the fortunes of the radical right in the Iberia peninsula. As such, we focus on the combination of actor-centred theories of success and expanding opportunities resulting from changes in issue salience.

**Stigma**

Among the various supply-side factors mentioned in the literature, attention has often been placed on the capacity of the radical right party itself to be perceived as a ‘normal party’ – i.e. democratic and nonviolent – with them only being able to profit from favourable opportunities when avoiding the label of neo-fascist (Golder 2003; van der Brug et al. 2005). If ‘voters see the anti-immigrant party as undemocratic or abject, some voters will consider it unattractive even though they see the party as close in policy terms (van der Brug et al. 2005: 541). Only after passing the extremism test, can these parties be evaluated on their, often popular, policy positions. Indeed, van Spanje and Azrout (2019) show that stigmatisation lowers support for radical right parties amongst voters with existing anti-immigration attitudes.

Harteveld (2016: 22) defines social stigma as a ‘cue that voters derive from their social context that parties are not an acceptable option’. Stigma has been used to explain the erstwhile lack of radical right parties in countries such as Germany, the UK and Sweden (e.g. van der Brug et al. 2005: 564), usually with some reference to the Second World War and/or the fascist past. Spain and Portugal’s own dictatorial experiences, the mainstream rejection of authoritarianism and the widespread support for the democratic transition – with democratic values thereafter becoming the paradigm of desirability – are usually considered part of the reason why political forces resembling the pre-transition ideologies have been widely delegitimised (González-Enríquez 2017; Mourão da Costa 2011). This is not to say that there is not a sizeable share of the population that retrospectively hold apologetic or ambivalent attitudes to the dictatorships; however, this has typically coexisted with widespread support for contemporary democracy and concomitant rejection of extremisms (Torcal 2008).

Stigma is, however, not a static variable and one needs to ask not just where there is social stigma but also when and under what conditions it can be overcome. One way to explain cross-time, as well as cross-party, variation in the fortunes of radical right parties is through their ability to
deflect social stigma and create a ‘reputational shield’ so as to avoid claims of anti-democratic or racist extremism. One way of doing so, according to Rydgren (2004, 2005), is with the adoption of new master frames that are different from those of the old extreme right, combining anti-establishment populism (anti-liberal rather than anti-democratic) and ethno-nationalist xenophobia, justified in cultural rather than biological terms.

Moreover, these parties’ chances of avoiding stigmatisation are greater if they are capable of attracting ideological moderate, high-status activists soon after inception (Art 2011) and are able to mobilise voters on salient issues besides immigration, thus deflecting accusations of xenophobia. Ivarsflaten and Gudrandsen (2014) offer the examples of tax protests in Norway and Denmark, agrarian interests in the Switzerland and Finland, and regional empowerment in Flanders and northern Italy, with parallels regarding opposition to Euro and EU membership offering legitimisation in Germany and the UK, respectively.

Importantly, the capacity to avoid stigmatisation is not only dependent on the party itself, but also on media coverage. New or marginal parties are obviously dependent on media visibility first and, secondly, on how they are portrayed. As Ellinas (2018: 273) points out, ‘the media have an additional effect in political competition by granting or denying new players validation, momentum and legitimacy’.

It is therefore plausible that one of the reasons why no radical right party had crossed the threshold of significance in Iberia until recently is that the existing supply had not succeeded in avoiding the stigma of extremism. Parties such as Democracia Nacional or España 2000 in Spain (among others) and Partido Nacional Renovador in Portugal failed to portray a relatively moderate image and, thus, were not evaluated on their policies. Their obvious connections to extremist groups (associated with violence) and the absence of high-profile members contributed to their stigmatisation and relatively low visibility, even if they tried to adopt a modern ideological profile.

This is particularly evident when contrasting them with the cases of Vox and Chega. If our assumptions are correct, these parties are likely to have benefited both from greater media visibility and from less stigmatisation. We test this by quantitively and qualitatively analysing news coverage of the different radical right parties. Although it is also noteworthy that Vox and Chega had the advantage of emerging in a post-crisis, multiparty system age – in which the media have greater experience and incentives covering challenger parties, their greater coverage is also likely to be because both party organisations emerged as splinters from the mainstream right and could not be faulted for such close connections to extremist groups.
**Political supply & issue salience**

Although a relatively unstigmatised image is an important condition for the emergence of a successful radical right party, it is not a sufficient one. Various authors have used the composite notion of ‘political opportunity structures’ to refer to the exogenous conditions that favour or hinder party success. Among them, party system competition and the existence of electoral niches have been highlighted (Kitschelt 1995; van der Brug 2005). However, electoral niches do not necessarily result from the positional convergence of mainstream parties, but may also result from supply failures that are the outcome of the unpopularity of the mainstream party or its failure to credibly deal with issues that are important to voters. This is in line with ‘issue voting’ or ‘salience theory’, which posits that vote preferences depend on the importance given to an issue (Carmines and Stimson 1993). Accordingly, Rydgren (2005: 419) notes, ‘the probability of the emergence of niches is particularly great if the salience of a new or earlier weak cleavage dimension, or a specific issue connected to such a cleavage dimension that the established parties have been unable or unwilling to deal with, suddenly increases at the expense of the old, established cleavage dimension’.

Krosnick (1990: 60) defined issue salience as ‘the degree to which a person is passionately concerned about and personally invested in an attitude’. Although the salience given to issues and cleavages by parties has been utilised in some explanations for radical right success (Arzheimer 2009; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Kriesi et al. 2006), such explanations have given relatively little attention to public issue salience. Recently, Dennison (2019) shows that the public salience of immigration positively affects radical right party support over time in Western Europe, at both the national and individual levels.

Because there are endogeneity concerns in this regard – whereby the salience of issues could be driven by the success of the party or media coverage of its emergence –, the temporal ordering of (1) the increase in the salience of relevant issues and (2) the success of the party will be considered. Moreover, if it is true that media coverage of a party can lead to an increased exposure of its ideas and greater public support (Murphy and Devine 2018), it is also the case that exogenous ‘real-world’ conditions affect issue salience, both via the positive effect they have on news coverage and directly. For example, Singer (2011) shows that economic outcomes affect the salience of the economy while Dennison (2019) shows that the public salience of immigration is partially a function of immigration rates. In Spain there has been a historic relationship between the, exogenous, irregular arrivals by sea and the public salience of immigration (Dennison and Mendes 2019: 13), while it seems implausible to suggest...
that the salience of the Catalan crisis resulted from the establishment of Vox (even if the party further contributed to inflame the issue). Therefore, we suppose that public issue salience affects voting for the radical right, and that this is at least partially exogenous, notwithstanding its partial mediation by media coverage.

In line with this, we postulate that part of the reason why Portugal and Spain had no successful radical right party up until recently is that the nativist agenda was of limited salience amongst the electorates and that changes in this regard in Spain precede and explain the increase in popularity of Vox, unlike in Portugal.

**Empirical analysis**

**Stigma**

If our theoretical expectations regarding stigma are correct, Vox and Chega benefited from greater and less negative coverage, unlike previous far right parties.

The greatest difficulty with studying radical right manifestations in Spain lies with their high level of fragmentation. A division can nonetheless be made between traditional parties openly nostalgic of Franco (e.g. those claiming the Falange heritage) and those that have attempted to adopt a more modern set of master frames, mobilising primarily on ultranationalist discourses, anti-immigrant sentiment and anti-elitism. Even if it is true, as Rodríguez Jiménez (2012: 233) points out, that the extreme right in Spain took a long time to renovate its programme – i.e., to detach it from neo-francoism and neo-fascism, there were attempts at doing so. Among them, those considered most relevant at the national level are usually Democracia Nacional, founded in 1995, and España 2000, created in 2002 (Alonso and Kaltwasser 2015: 23). In Portugal, instead, supply has been relatively unified since 2000, when the Partido Nacional Renovador (PNR) was created out of several minor parties and extreme right movements, which included neo-fascists and individuals nostalgic of Salazar. Since then, the party has worked towards presenting a more modern face, with an agenda that revolves around anti-immigration, anti-elitism, anti-globalisation, and the opposition to the decline of tradition and morality (Zúquete 2007). Nonetheless, in contrast to Vox and to a lesser extent Chega, none of the abovementioned parties have been taken as credible political alternatives by the Spanish and Portuguese electorates. We suggest that this is, in large part, because of their low visibility and highly negative press coverage.

Our news content analysis, taken from Jornal de Notícias in Portugal and El País in Spain, confirms indeed that these parties have been
portrayed in highly negative terms and that the same does not apply to Vox and Chega, which have also a much greater degree of coverage prior to their respective election. We choose these two newspapers in order to ensure relative consistency across both countries: although El País is more obviously centre-left than Jornal de Notícias, both are a preeminent, establishment, widely-read broadsheet newspaper in each country. Using the news aggregator Factiva, we analysed all pieces of news between the early 2000s and the end of 2015 that made references to España 2000 and Democracia Nacional for Spain and to Partido Nacional Renovador (PNR) for Portugal. We go as far back as the early 2000s in order to ensure that the parties’ early years are captured.\(^1\) The time coverage is obviously different for the cases of Vox and Chega, corresponding to the period in which these parties were created up until the moment they were first elected.\(^2\) No news pieces were considered after their first electoral achievement, as this obviously affects media coverage. Given the large number of pieces in which the parties are only briefly mentioned but not a relevant subject, we excluded all news pieces in which the parties were only mentioned once.

We classified each piece according to whether it made obviously negative references to the party, portraying it as ‘extremist’, rather than as a ‘normal party’. With the aim of capturing all pieces with unequivocal negative connotations, we proceeded inductively, first coding all news pieces with explicit negative references, followed by their categorization in accordance with the negative issues/labels that were explicitly referred to. The categories inductively built were the following: (1) violence, (2) forms of harassment, (3) criminality, imprisonments or judicial proceedings, (4) references to nazism or fascism, and (5) xenophobia and racism. Note that several of these categories coincide with the labels used by van Spanje and Azrout (2019: 294) to capture what they call ‘demonizing labels’ which, in their own words, clearly delegitimize and potentially damage a party, across the board.

Figure 1 displays the yearly average of news pieces per party in El País (for Vox, Democracia Nacional and España 2000) and Jornal de Notícias (for Chega and PNR), confirming our assumption that, prior to their election, Chega and Vox received a much greater deal of media attention than previous radical right parties. Even if it is true that both parties made much use of social media to build and strengthen their bases of support, traditional media outlets also granted them a good degree of visibility. Note that Figure 1 conceals significant variation in media coverage over time. While this is irrelevant for Chega, formed in 2019, it is pertinent in the case of Vox given that the party saw media attention spike in October and November 2018 (prior to the December elections in
Andalusia), following a large gathering in Madrid in early October. As Olalla et al. (2019) show, Vox received a much greater degree of media attention prior to the Andalucian elections compared to other equally small parties. Note, however, that the party had already attracted a fair level of media attention at the time of its emergence, in 2014, which suggests that, by itself, media coverage is not a sufficient variable to understand success.

Figure 1 also displays the results of our media content analysis, which largely confirms our assumption that the ‘old’ radical right parties in Spain and Portugal, besides receiving little coverage, are newsworthy mostly for negative reasons. They fall neatly into the category of parties that, because of their low visibility and perceived extremism, fail to be considered as political alternatives. Even though Vox and Chega naturally have detractors, the fact is that they have managed to stay away from the scandals and ill-famed grassroots connections that have tainted the image of other radical right manifestations.

Part of the reason for this has to do with the fact that both parties emerged as splinters from the mainstream center-right party and were founded or supported by high-profile individuals. In the case of Chega, it was created and led by a man whose political career had been put under the media spotlight when, still as a PSD representative running in the 2017 municipal elections, he accused Roma people of living on state benefits. This was interpreted by political pundits as an attempt of importing to Portugal the xenophobic discourse mushrooming elsewhere in Europe, something that caught attention because it was coming from a

![Figure 1. Percentage of news pieces with negative references & average annual number of news pieces.](image-url)
representative of the second largest party (the centre-right Partido Social Democrata). The fact that Chega’s leader, André Ventura, is a well-known football TV commentator adds to his visibility. Preliminary research suggests that, like Ventura, Chega’s founding fathers had stronger preceding links to mainstream parties than to the traditional extreme right (Marchi 2019).

As for Vox, it was established at the end of 2013 by a group of political figures that included disgruntled members of the Partido Popular, including Alejo Vidal-Quadras (former PP president in Catalonia and former vice-president of the European Parliament), José Antonio Ortega Lara (known for having been kidnapped by ETA) and Vox’s current president Santiago Abascal (former PP representative in the Basque Parliament). Looking at the profile of its founders and representatives, the previous links to the PP are numerous and explicit. Similar to Chega, Vox has tried to play down its links to extremist groups, visible in the expulsion/withdrawal of members whose extremist past was put under the media spotlight. Among the reasons stated for the formation of Vox, discontentment over territorial politics and the handling of separatist efforts were amidst the most prominent.

Supply

In addition to the presence (or lack) of issue opportunities – developed below – it ought to be mentioned that both Chega and Vox benefited from some degree of political opportunity on the right-wing space, as the mainstream right in both countries grappled with different types of crises.

In Portugal this was mostly an internal crisis over the direction the right should take while in opposition, accentuated by what was one of the worst results of its history in 2019. As Fernandes and Magalhães (2020) describe, the right-wing opposition was in convulsion during the Socialists’ tenure in office starting in 2015, facing a difficult conundrum – opposing a government that had delivered both in terms of relaxing or reversing ‘austerity’ measures while at the same time keeping the budgetary discipline the right had long championed, entirely avoiding the scenarios of economic failure the right had erroneously prophesized and leaving the opposition with little on the agenda. The PSD’s change in leadership in early 2018 also exposed the internal fractures of the party, as the new leader seemed set on bringing the party back to a more centrist position, sparking much criticism from sectors defending a clearer alternative (Fernandes et al. 2018: 518). In addition, it is noteworthy that polling data revealed that right-wing voters were not satisfied with the
Though of a different nature, the crisis of the PP in Spain appears even more severe, judging at least by the serious corruption scandals engulfing the party, the fatigue associated to an incumbency period dominated by the Catalan crisis, as well as strong electoral competition on its side of the ideological spectrum.

As shown in Figure 2, the PP suffered long-term declines in popularity during the 2016–2019 parliamentary term, well before the electoral rise of Vox. The liberal, unionist Ciudadanos – initially formed to opposed Catalan independence – was the primary beneficiary of the PP’s decline, particularly after the Catalan referendum challenge. However, Ciudadanos’ ideological ambiguity and oscillations – including an eventual confidence and supply arrangement with the governing PSOE, as well as being in a relatively squeezed position between the mainstream left and the mainstream right – have recently proved disastrous. Nonetheless, its previously positive electoral performance was already a solid indicator of the fragmentation of the right-wing space.

The PP’s initial decline from late 2016 onwards was, first of all, typical of a governing party. The PP was also in power throughout the peak of the Catalan crisis in autumn of 2017, during which time it was perceived
by certain sectors as unable to effectively handle the crisis. Moreover, the image of the party was tarnished by serious corruption scandals, which turned into a concrete judicial sentence in May 2018, the basis of the no confidence parliamentary vote that ousted the PP from power in June, ending its seven-year long incumbency and seeing the party reach a nadir in the polls. Whereas evidence for the electoral punishment of corruption is still modest, the unequivocally serious corruption scandals in which the PP was involved certainly added to the discontentment surrounding the party.

Various surveys indicate that Vox has disproportionally taken votes from 2016 PP voters and individual-level data unsurprisingly confirms that Vox’s vote is strongly anchored ideologically on the right (Torcal 2019). As the PP had thus far been able to absorb the most conservative vote, it is beyond reasonable doubt to conclude that the opportunity structure for a radical right party was also expanded by the PP’s incumbency and associated scandals and fatigue, as well as Ciudadanos’s potential support for a PSOE-led government.

**Salience**

Before late 2018, Vox’s best result had been 1.57 per cent of the vote in the European elections of 2014, followed by more meagre scores in the general elections of 2015 and 2016. The surprising 11 per cent of the December 2018 Andalusian elections and the subsequent double-digit scores in the general elections – compared to the 1.3 per cent of a like-minded and equally newsworthy party in Portugal – cannot be dissociated from a widening opportunity structure in Spain. This is not due to any significant changes in the ideological, political space – as the perceived distance between the two main mainstream parties continues to be large, but rather to the increased salience of topics that tap into Vox’s ultranationalist agenda well.

It is noteworthy that Vox is the first party in parliament to defend a complete recentralisation of the state, in a scenario where Spaniards appear divided over the preferred model of territorial organisation. Even though a plurality supports the current model (about 40 per cent), there is a significant constituency that coincides with Vox in the preference for a centralised state with no regional autonomies – a percentage that has oscillated between fourteen per cent in 2010 and twenty per cent in 2018.3 In this sense, Vox has filled a spatial gap in political representation. Whilst earlier the mainstream right had been largely successful in attracting voters with the most restrictive positions on territorial devolution, the Catalan challenge has heightened the salience of such feelings and made
them more consequential at the voting booth. Post-electoral surveys con-
firm that one in every four voters admitted that the Catalan conflict had
an influence over their vote in the April general elections and that, with
the exception of pro-independence parties, Vox was the party that bene-
fited most from this: about sixty per cent of its voters declared that the
Catalan issue influenced their choice.⁴

To be sure, the territorial cleavage is far from being a new structuring
dimension of the Spanish political space. This cleavage has long been a
relevant one in understanding both the form and content of party compe-
tition, namely in terms of conflicts over the degree of territorial devolu-
tion. The recent escalation of the Catalan conflict has, however, taken this
conflict to another level, instigating what is possibly the most serious cri-
sis of Spanish democracy. This, naturally, is one important dimension
that sets the Spanish case apart from the Portuguese one.

If one looks at recent trends in the topics that most concern Spanish
people, it is observable that, even though socioeconomic issues continue
to be dominant, there has been a growing concern with issues that have
been the centrepiece of Vox’s agenda, in particular Catalan independ-
ence and immigration, as shown in Figure 3. Concern over ‘politicians,
parties and politics’ has recently peaked too, but the sharpest growth
has occurred already after Vox’s emergence. In turn, concerns over
Catalan independence and regional nationalism peaked around October
2017 – at the same time that the Catalan government unilaterally
declared independence – while concerns over immigration registered a
sudden uptick in the summer of 2018, both observably before Vox’s
increase in support in October and first election in December (Figure
3). These were two topics that were of almost no salience in preceding
years, but that now consistently appear as a top concern for ten to fif-
teen per cent of people. This is still far from the percentages registered
by what are typically three top concerns – unemployment, economic
issues and corruption – but it is noteworthy that two of these have
been decreasing (Figure 4).

To begin with, it is undeniable that the Catalan conflict has played a
major role in fuelling the Spanish nationalist backlash that boosted Vox’s
attractiveness. The Catalan government’s declaration of independence, fol-
lowing a controversial referendum, turned the Catalan issue into the
major source of political conflict since then. This has obviously benefited
Vox given that the party has the most restrictive stance on the issue,
advocating for the suspension of Catalan’s autonomy, the criminalisation
of separatist parties and organisations, and severe prison sentences for
their leaders. Analysing the individual-level determinants of Vox’s success
that nationalist concerns over devolution have indeed the most substantive effect on voting for Vox. Note also that the November 2019 uptick in the salience of the Catalan issue occurred following a month of (sometimes violent) protests in Catalonia, in reaction to the jail sentences of nine separatist politicians for their involvement in the independence referendum. This might well be part of the reason why Vox improved its score in the November elections.

Nevertheless, regional separatism is not the only issue that Vox takes dividends from. As shown above, its emergence followed an uptick in the salience of immigration in the summer of 2018. This was because – in contrast to previous years where Spain had stayed somewhat at the margins of the so-called European ‘refugee crisis’ – Italy’s decision to close its ports turned the strait between Morocco and Spain into a preferred migratory sea route. As a consequence, Spain registered a sharp increase in the number of irregular arrivals by sea, with more than 55,000 migrants arriving that year alone. Spain’s apparently friendly migration stance made headlines worldwide when the government of Pedro Sánchez

![Figure 3. Issue salience of Catalan independence, immigration & parties and politicians (2014–2019).](image-url)
reacted to Italy’s decision to turn away the Aquarius vessel and welcomed it in the port of Valencia in June 2018.

It is significant that, in a postelection survey conducted for El País (N = 1,514), more than 40 per cent of Vox voters mentioned immigration as one of the reasons for voting for Vox in the Andalucian elections (with issues related to the center-periphery cleavage also ranking high) (El País 2018). Various analyses made with municipal-level data also show a strong correlation between the percentage of foreigners in a said municipality and Vox voting (Aparicio 2019; Toshkov 2018). Even when controlling for other variables, the correlation remains a significant one (Andrino et al. 2019). Relying on panel data, Torcal (2019) shows that an increase in the perception of immigration as a problem leads to a higher probability of voting for Vox, an effect that is even larger than the one registered for the perception of the Catalan situation. That being said, Turnbull-Dugarte (2019) found that the positive effect of seeing immigration as one of the two most pressing issues for the regional government of Andalucía on voting for Vox was not statistically significant in the December 2018 regional election.

It is thus safe to conclude that Vox has indeed benefited from a growing opportunity structure in the last two years, largely as a result of the transformation in the salience of topics that have led to an ‘activation’ of nationalist sentiment. After all, both the center-periphery conflict and the
conflict over immigration are, for many, interpreted through the same national lenses. Note also that, similarly to what happened to other successful radical right parties in Europe, Vox mobilised voters on another (more) salient issue besides immigration – even if opposition to immigration is what unites all successful radical right parties in Europe (Ivarsflaten 2008). This might well constitute one of the reasons why such parties are able to deflect accusations of xenophobia and build a ‘reputational shield’ during their ‘emergence stage’.

The existence of various axes of political competition in Spain contrasts with what is still largely a unidimensional political space in Portugal. Content-wise, political competition in Portugal has revolved largely around socioeconomic issues, a tendency that was actually reinforced during the last few electoral contests, when the 2011–14 bailout program and the means of overcoming ‘austerity’ policies overshadowed other issues. Ferreira da Silva and Mendes (2019) demonstrate this through an extensive media analysis of electoral campaigns. Non-material issues have only been brought to the agenda sporadically, while the cornerstone of political conflict has overwhelmingly revolved around economic issues. Surveys of the main concerns of the Portuguese electorate confirm that socioeconomic issues have overshadowed non-material issues.

Because Portugal does not have a public opinion barometer similar to the one of CIS in Spain, we recur to Eurobarometer data (with the caveat that the latter has fewer response categories and asks only for the two main problems). It is nonetheless instructive to see that only socioeconomic concerns appear as relevant and that Portugal consistently ranks as the EU country that is the least concerned about immigration. Figure 5 shows the evolution of the main concerns of the Portuguese since 2010 (all those that obtained over than 10 per cent at least twice were included). Issues that fall neatly into the agenda of radical right parties and that are included in the Eurobarometer survey – such as immigration, crime and terrorism – do not appear. Indeed, when it comes to immigration –the dominant issue par excellence for radical right parties (Ivarsflaten 2008), it has concerned on average only two per cent of the Portuguese in the past decade. This is in great contrast to the EU-28 average and, more recently, to Spain, as Figure 6 illustrates. It must be kept in mind that, due to its peripheral geographical and economic position, Portugal has simply not registered irregular immigration or refugee flows comparable to other West European countries, being in fact the country in Western Europe with the least number of asylum applications.5

What this means for our purposes is that the radical right in Portugal has not benefited from an opportunity structure similar to the one of Vox in Spain. Whereas in Spain there are several salient sociocultural issues
that Vox has profited from, the same is not true for its neighbour. Though this article has only focused on the two most important issues for Vox, it ought to be mentioned that there are other relevant sociocultural conflicts in Spain that Vox has successfully mobilised on, namely anti-feminism (contest the conspicuous Spanish gender-violence law) as well as opposition to Spain’s efforts to deal with its problematic past (through the so-called Law on Historical Memory and the contested exhumation of Franco’s remains).

The complete absence or low salience of any of these sociocultural issues in Portugal goes a long way in explaining why the radical right is still marginal in Portugal, when compared to Spain. However, this does not mean either that it will stay so forever or that only sociocultural issues matter. Diffuse anti-elite sentiment is widespread among the Portuguese, meaning that populist attitudes are only waiting to be activated (Magalhães 2019). Furthermore, there are additional issues that might fuel a party of this type and that have the potential to be successfully mobilised – corruption being the most obvious. In fact, pre-electoral surveys in 2019 already showed that corruption was a salient concern.
among the Portuguese. Chega seemed to be well aware of this, judging by the disproportionate attention the party paid to corruption and to anti-establishment messages, something that surely helps account for its modest electoral breakthrough. The year of the party’s emergence was probably not the most auspicious for its success – as the positive economic performance of the country contributed to the re-election of the incumbent and to increase the general levels of satisfaction – but further opportunities will surely arise.

**Discussion**

In this article we proposed a simple theoretical framework to understand the emergence and success of radical right parties, building on and fusing prior work to offer a comprehensive but parsimonious explanation of the conditions under which such parties succeed. Rather than focusing on structural explanations of the cultural, economic or demographic type, we argued that sudden shifts in the fortunes of the radical right are better understood through actor-centred theories of success together with expanding opportunities as a result of changes in issue salience and, partially consequent, gaps in political supply.
On the one hand, the presence of non-stigmatized sources of supply matter. We demonstrate through a media content analysis that previous parties with a radical right agenda in both Portugal and Spain had been greeted with little visibility and negative media coverage, being unable to present themselves as credible political alternatives, while the very same media outlets treated Vox and Chega differently. We attribute this, in part, to their off-shoot of PP and PSD beginnings, as well as to their campaigning on other salient issues besides those that could most easily associate them with xenophobia, most obviously immigration.

On the other hand, parties are better able to succeed when faced with favourable opportunity structures, most notably when they can cater to an unsatiated demand of voters on a salient issue or cleavage. We demonstrate that changes in issue salience precede and go a long way to explaining the timing of the rise of the Vox as well as the absence of a similarly successful case in Portugal. Moreover, opportunity structures are further enhanced by problems of political supply, namely in terms of the general credibility and popularity of mainstream parties at a given moment in time.

A number of further points of discussion arise from our findings. First, it is plausible that – while the increase in radical right support following an increase in the salience of the specific issue of immigration is common across Europe, radical right parties are better able to initially succeed when mobilising on country-specific issues. Secondly, even though both Vox and Chega emerged at a time of crisis on the right-wing space, the divergence in electoral results between the two suggests that issue salience plays a greater role in accounting for success than spatial gaps in supply. Third, our theoretical approach based on ‘salience, stigma and supply’ is likely to hold explanatory potential beyond Iberia. As shown in Figure 6, Ireland is the only other outlier in Western Europe demonstrating no recent uptick in the salience of immigration. According to our theory, should there be such an uptick, as well as a discredited mainstream centre-right, we should expect an un-stigmatised radical right party to succeed. Conversely it is worth noting that, given that the rise of radical right parties is contingent on volatile metrics such as issue salience and the credibility of centre-right parties, their recent rise across Europe could quite easily be followed by an equally rapid fall, should their political opportunity structure change, or they decide to move towards a more extremist position (all of which happened to UKIP in the UK, for example, which has now disappeared almost entirely). Overall, therefore, we suggest that our theoretical framework has the potential to account for variation in radical right success both in terms of their absence, their emergence and success and, ultimately, their failure.
Notes

1. PNR was created in 2000, which is why the news content analysis of Jornal de Noticias starts then. Due to data availability issues, the starting date for El País is the year 2001, which captures the early years of España 2000 (created in 2002), but unfortunately does not include the starting days of Democracia Nacional (founded in 1995).

2. Time period of news content analysis: Vox – January 2014 to November 2018 (prior to the Andalusian elections in December 2018); Chega – January 2019 to September 2019 (prior to the October 2019 general elections). Although Chega was only made official by the Supreme Court in April, its creation had already been announced in late 2018.

3. CIS Barometers.


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