

Who votes for the populist radical right in Portugal and Spain?

*In 2019, the radical right parties Chega and Vox made headlines by winning representation in the national parliaments of Portugal and Spain. Drawing on new research, **Lea Heyne** and **Luca Manucci** shed light on the voters who backed the two parties.*

Until recently, populist radical right parties were widely assumed to be fringe actors in Portuguese and Spanish politics. This 'Iberian exceptionalism' was rooted in the idea that such parties would be unable to break from the stigma associated with the authoritarian regimes of António de Oliveira Salazar and Francisco Franco. Portugal and Spain's experiences with authoritarianism effectively gave them a form of ['immunity'](#) against the radical right that did not exist in other European states.

This argument has since collapsed in light of the rise of Chega, which became the first radical right party to obtain a seat in the Portuguese parliament in October 2019, and Vox, which became the third most popular party in the Spanish general election held just a month later in November 2019. The emergence of Chega and Vox has ensured that both Iberian countries now have populist radical right representation in their national parliaments for the first time since their transition to democracy in the 1970s.

But who are the citizens that support these two parties? Do they correspond to the classic profile of populist radical right voters that we are familiar with from other European countries? If not, what are the distinct characteristics of radical right voters in Portugal and Spain? In a [new study](#), we attempt to answer these questions.

The electorates of Chega and Vox

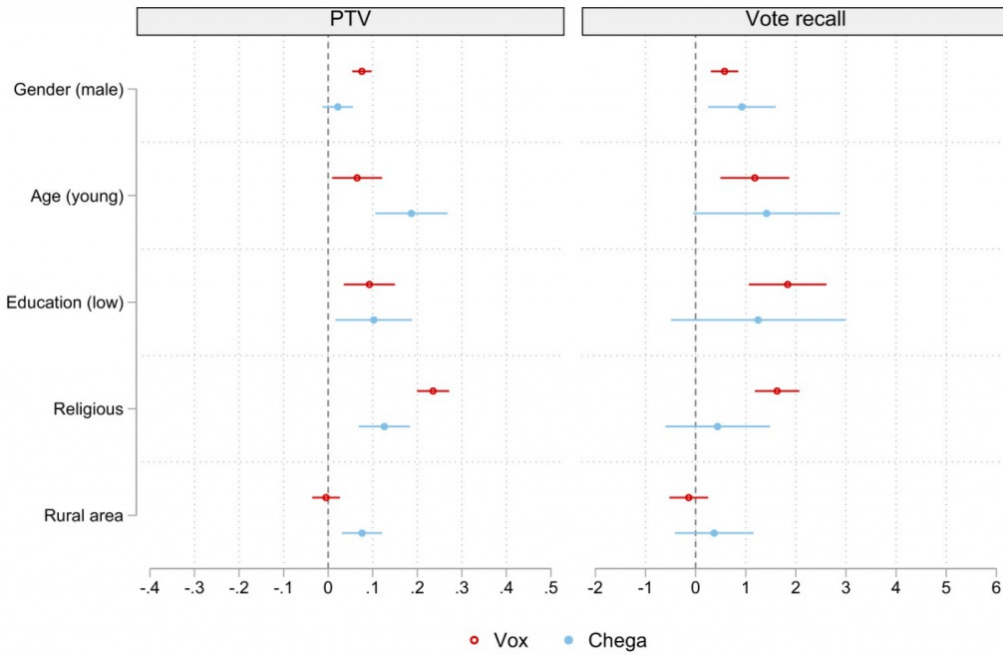
The demand for populist radical right parties is considered to be a reaction to phenomena such as [modernisation](#) and [globalisation](#): citizens who feel left behind, or who believe that their social status is [threatened](#) by these processes, are often found to be among the most likely to turn to the radical right.

Moreover, voting for populist radical right parties is also considered to be an expression of democratic [discontent](#) derived from distrust towards the political elite, dissatisfaction with the way democracy works, and disenchantment with traditional parties. Finally, we know that citizens who support populist radical right parties tend to be more likely to get their political information from tabloid newspapers and [social media](#).

In our analysis, we examine the sociodemographic, political, economic and attitudinal characteristics of citizens that vote for Chega and Vox. We do so by testing the effect of different factors on self-reported probabilities of voting for the two parties as well as the effect of these factors on actual voting decisions, as recalled by respondents in surveys.

[Previous research](#) has found that those who vote for Vox tend to be right-leaning men who are unhappy with the functioning of democracy. Our study confirms these findings, but also points to an interesting distinction: that both Chega and Vox attract young, rather than older citizens, as Figure 1 illustrates. This suggests that Iberian populist radical right supporters are not older people who are nostalgic about the authoritarian regimes of the past, but are instead predominantly a new generation of people attracted by the radical right. We also find that Chega and Vox voters tend to be less well-educated and more religious than average, and that Chega voters tend to live in rural rather than urban areas.

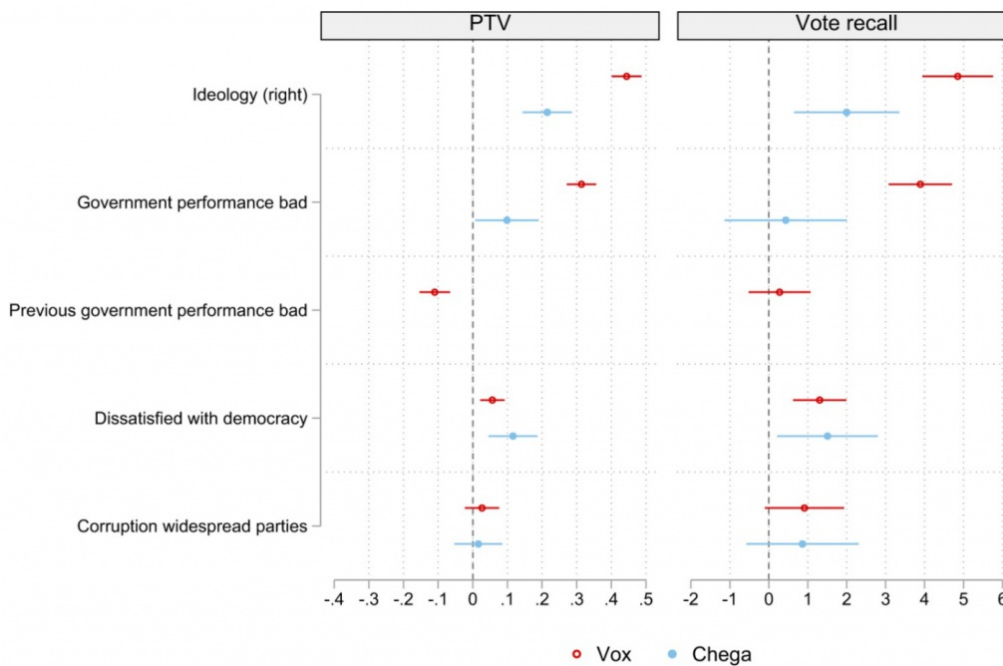
Figure 1: Impact of sociodemographic factors on the likelihood of voting for Chega and Vox



Note: The chart shows how different factors affect respondents' general 'probability to vote' (PTV) as well as actual vote choice in the previous elections (Vote recall) for Chega and Vox (both self-reported).

In line with [previous studies](#), we find that both parties attract citizens that reject mainstream politics, are dissatisfied with how democracy works, and are generally disenchanting with the party system and the political establishment, as Figure 2 shows. Interestingly, however, Vox voters appear broadly satisfied with the work of the previous PP (*Partido Popular*) government in Spain, implying that many former PP voters now sympathise with Vox. This suggests that Vox voters may return to the PP if they are convinced the party is serious about key issues they care about, such as limiting the autonomy of Catalonia.

Figure 2: Impact of political factors on the likelihood of voting for Chega and Vox



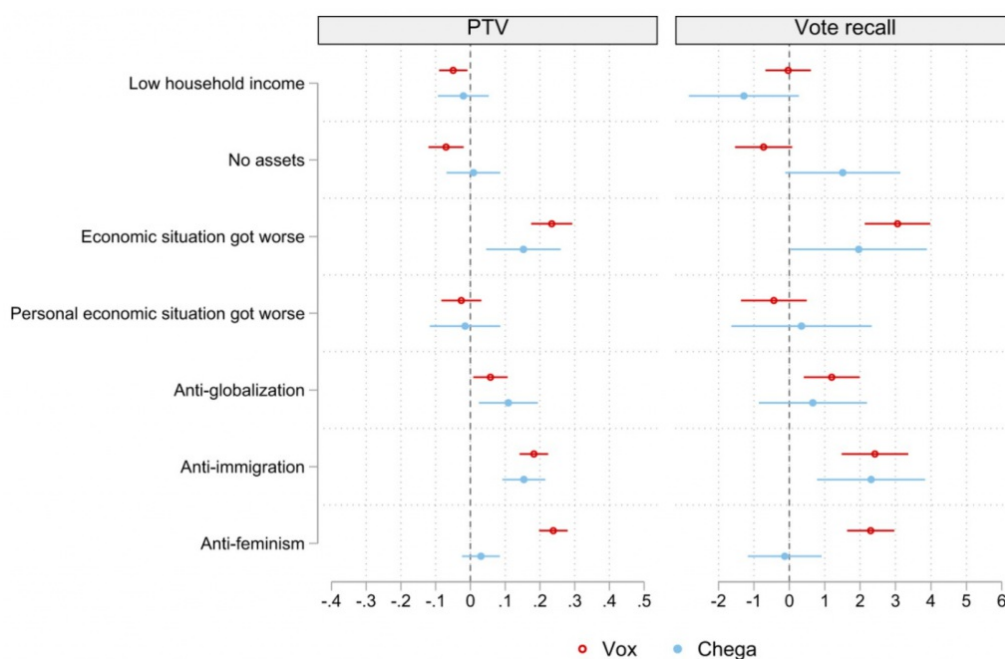
Note: The chart shows how different factors affect respondents' general 'probability to vote' (PTV) as well as actual vote choice in the previous elections (Vote recall)

for Chega and Vox (both self-reported).

Next, we looked at a common hypothesis in the literature on populist radical right parties, which claims that voters of these parties are the so-called ‘losers of globalisation’. Manufacturing and low skilled workers who are increasingly economically vulnerable are supposed to feel marginalised and impoverished, and their resentment is allegedly captured by populist radical right parties. Beyond economic motivations, the ‘losers of globalisation’ are also said to oppose processes of social change such as multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and feminism, which they perceive as a threat. These citizens therefore vote for populist radical right parties because they are attracted by claims of opposing ‘progressive elites’ and defending traditional values.

The results of our analysis are ambivalent, as Figure 3 shows. On the one hand, we do find ample evidence that both Chega and Vox voters perceive themselves as losers from ‘cultural globalisation’ – they strongly oppose globalisation, migration, and feminism, and feel like the economy is performing poorly. On the other hand, we cannot confirm that they are economically vulnerable. To the contrary, Vox voters even tend to have a higher income and more assets than voters of other parties, while Chega voters have average income and asset levels. Hence, support for the two parties is not driven by the economically ‘left behind’ or the ‘disenchanted’ working class.

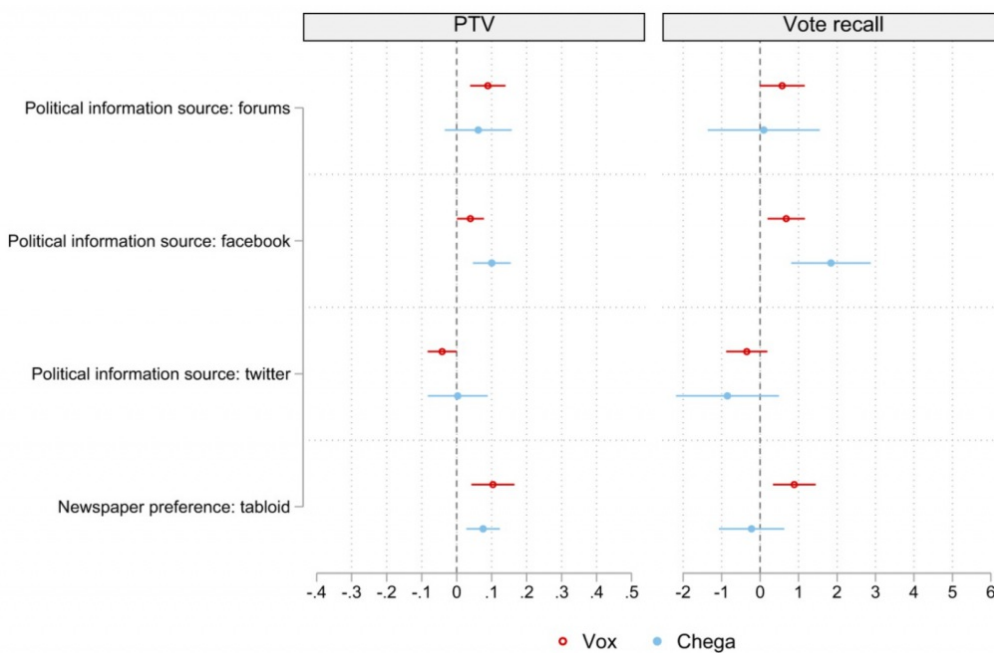
Figure 3: Impact of factors associated with globalisation on the likelihood of voting for Chega and Vox



Note: The chart shows how different factors affect respondents’ general ‘probability to vote’ (PTV) as well as actual vote choice in the previous elections (Vote recall) for Chega and Vox (both self-reported).

Another factor that we investigate is the ‘media diet’ of Chega and Vox voters. In line with our expectations, we find that voters for the two parties tend to use Facebook and (in the case of Vox) internet forums as a source of political information. They are also more likely to read tabloid newspapers rather than other newspapers, as shown in Figure 4.

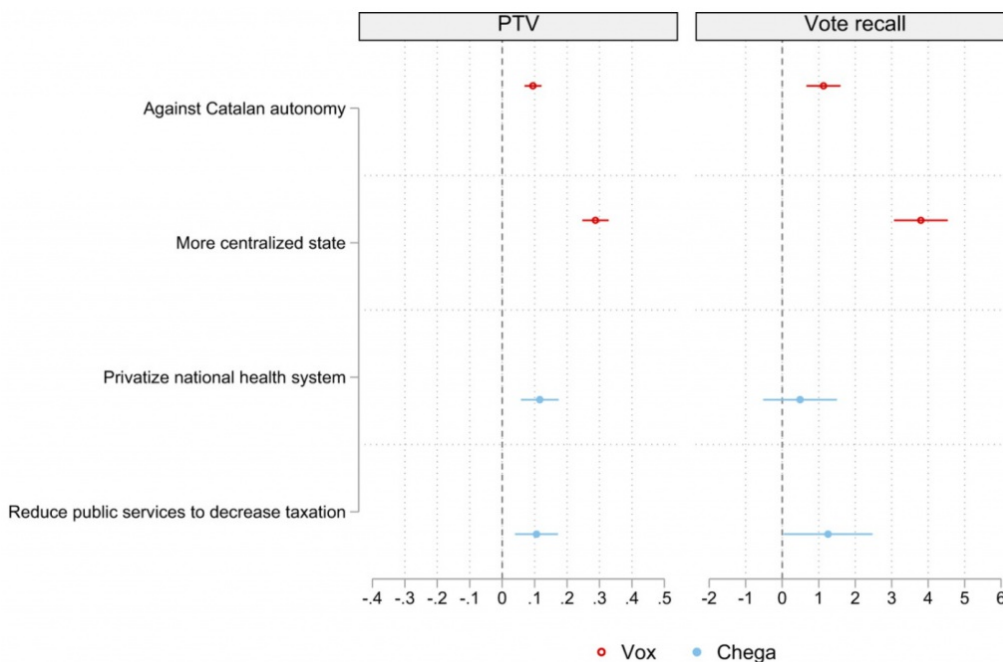
Figure 4: Impact of sources of political information on the likelihood of voting for Chega and Vox



Note: The chart shows how different factors affect respondents' general 'probability to vote' (PTV) as well as actual vote choice in the previous elections (Vote recall) for Chega and Vox (both self-reported).

Finally, we look at country-specific issues that were particularly salient at the time of the 2019 elections and find that they help to understand the electoral breakthrough of the populist radical right, as shown in Figure 5. In Spain, as already shown by [previous studies](#), citizens that reject Catalan autonomy and support a centralised state are substantially more likely to vote for Vox. In Portugal, citizens that support a privatised health system and a reduction in public services are more likely to vote for Chega, although to a lesser extent than with the Catalan issue in Spain.

Figure 5: Impact of political views on the likelihood of voting for Chega and Vox



Note: The chart shows how different political affect respondents' general 'probability to vote' (PTV) as well as actual vote choice in the previous elections (Vote recall) for Chega and Vox (both self-reported).

What do these findings tell us about the future of Portuguese and Spanish politics? Are populist radical right parties like Chega and Vox [here to stay](#)? On the one hand, there is evidence that both parties' electorates follow patterns that are in line with the existing literature on populist radical right parties. This suggests Portugal and Spain may follow the path of many other European countries, where populist radical right parties have become a stable feature of the political landscape.

On the other hand, our research also underlines the importance of country-specific topics for the electoral performance of these parties. In contrast to Vox, which has exploited the issue of national unity in Spain, Chega has yet to find a salient and polarised issue around which it can build substantial support. This is one of the main reasons why the party remains electorally weaker than its Spanish counterpart.

These observations highlight that while Iberian exceptionalism has undoubtedly come to an end, it is far from a given that populist radical right parties will establish themselves as important political actors after their initial breakthrough. Chega is only likely to thrive if the public debate revolves around highly salient cultural – rather than socio-economic – issues. For Vox, meanwhile, there remains the possibility that voters might return to the PP, particularly if the latter takes a decisive position on Catalonia.

There are two key elements that stand to be crucial in this respect. First, the visibility that mainstream media organisations decide to grant to the radical right will have a major impact on their profile. Second, the strategic choices of other right-wing parties will shape the opportunities that are available for each of the two parties to carve out a space within the Portuguese and Spanish party systems. We now know there is a potential electorate for radical right parties in Portugal and Spain – what remains to be seen is whether this will translate into further success for Chega and Vox in the years to come.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper at [Political Research Exchange](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Vox España \(Public Domain\)](#)
