



Political Science Master's Degree Dissertation (A Research In Progress)

Entertainment Politics as a Communication Strategy of the Populist

Radical Right: the case of Chega in Portugal (2019 - 2025)

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Abstract

The consolidation of Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties across Europe has unfolded alongside profound transformations in political communication and democratic competition (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Contemporary politics increasingly operates within mediatized environments structured by visibility logic, emotional resonance, and hybrid information–entertainment formats (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). In this context, entertainment politics has moved from the margins of democratic practice to the centre of political communication. Spectacle, personalisation, emotionalisation, humour, and informal communicative registers are no longer peripheral stylistic devices; rather, they function as mechanisms through which political legitimacy, differentiation, and symbolic proximity are constructed and negotiated in media-saturated societies (Street, 2011; Stanyer, 2013; de Vreese et al., 2018).

This research examines how entertainment politics operates as a political communication strategy within PRR parties, focusing on the Portuguese case of Chega between the legislative elections of 2019 and 2025. More specifically, the study investigates whether entertainment-oriented logics are systematically incorporated into Chega’s communication practices, how these logics are enacted across different media settings, and how their use evolves across successive electoral cycles. In doing so, the research engages with scholarship conceptualising populism both as a thin-centred ideology structured around people–elite antagonism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) and as a political style grounded in performance, affect, and mediated visibility (Moffitt, 2016, 2020; de Vreese et al., 2018).

Portugal constitutes a particularly relevant empirical setting. For decades considered resistant to radical right breakthrough, the Portuguese party system experienced rapid transformation

following the emergence of Chega in 2019. Within a short period, the party consolidated itself as a central parliamentary actor, reshaping electoral competition and media agendas. While international scholarship has extensively examined PRR communication in contexts such as Italy, the Netherlands, or the United States (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Arter, 2010), Southern European cases remain comparatively underexplored. Moreover, Portuguese research has addressed mediatization and digital political communication (Figueiras, 2017; Costa, 2021; Pereira, 2023), yet has devoted limited systematic attention to entertainment politics as an integrated analytical framework. The Portuguese case therefore offers an opportunity to extend and refine theoretical debates on political marketing, mediatization, and populist communication within a media system historically shaped by television dominance and subsequently transformed by digital fragmentation (Fafe, 2017; Figueiras, 2022).

Theoretically, the study integrates three complementary strands of literature. First, political marketing scholarship conceptualises political communication as a strategic process of segmentation, positioning, and symbolic value construction (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Maarek, 2011; Baines & Lynch, 2005). Within this framework, political actors seek to cultivate voter loyalty and legitimacy through relational and symbolic negotiation rather than unilateral persuasion (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2012; Brennan & Henneberg, 2008). Second, mediatization theory emphasises how media logic reshapes political practice by privileging performance, visibility, emotionalisation, and dramatization (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). Third, research on populist communication demonstrates how PRR actors mobilise personalisation, antagonistic framing, and emotional rhetoric to construct authenticity and proximity (Bos et al., 2013; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Moffitt, 2016; de Vreese et al., 2018). By conceptualising entertainment politics as a structuring logic that intersects these strands, the study advances an integrated

analytical framework capable of capturing how mediated performance shapes political positioning in PRR parties.

Within this framework, entertainment politics is operationalised through four analytically interrelated dimensions derived from the literature on mediatized and populist communication: spectacle, personalisation, emotionalisation, and informal register (Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Bos et al., 2013; de Vreese et al., 2018; Moffitt, 2016). Spectacle refers to dramatization, visibility amplification, and performative intensification consistent with mediatized political competition (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Personalisation captures the central positioning of the leader's identity and biographical narrative within communicative acts (Stanyer, 2013; Corner & Pels, 2003). Emotionalisation encompasses the mobilisation of affective appeals such as indignation, fear, empathy, or victimisation as structuring elements of political messaging (Bos et al., 2013; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014). Informal register refers to the adoption of relaxed, humorous, or transgressive communicative tones that depart from conventional institutional discourse (Street, 2011). These dimensions are translated into explicit coding criteria through a detailed analytical codebook, ensuring conceptual precision, transparency, and systematic comparability (Krippendorff, 2004).

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative, longitudinal single-case study design grounded in a constructivist ontological and interpretivist epistemological framework (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Furlong & Marsh, 2010). Political communication is approached as a performative and meaning-producing practice rather than as a neutral transmission of information. The objective is not to establish causal generalisations but to reconstruct how communicative strategies were enacted, stabilised, and strategically adapted within specific electoral and media contexts between 2019 and 2025 (George & Bennett, 2005; Vennesson, 2008).

The primary empirical corpus consists of eight nationally broadcast entertainment-oriented television programmes featuring André Ventura. These hybrid formats are analytically privileged because they intensify personalisation, emotional exposure, mediated intimacy, and performative staging, thereby offering concentrated sites for observing entertainment politics in action (Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Street, 2011). Complementary materials, including official digital communication disseminated on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, as well as selected campaign artefacts, are incorporated for contextual triangulation. This multi-source strategy allows the assessment of cross-platform coherence and strategic alignment in line with research on digital populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017; Krämer, 2023).

The analytical strategy combines qualitative content analysis and selective discourse analysis. Content analysis systematically maps the presence, recurrence, and relative intensity of the four operationalised dimensions across episodes and electoral cycles (Krippendorff, 2004). Discourse analysis, informed by critical approaches to language and symbolic construction (Fairclough, 1995; Martins, 1990), is applied to analytically significant cases in order to examine how entertainment-oriented elements are articulated within broader narratives of authenticity, antagonism, crisis, and proximity. The integration of these methods allows the study to connect observable communicative features to their symbolic and strategic functions within Chega's broader political positioning.

The research is guided by the overarching hypothesis that Chega employs entertainment politics as a deliberate instrument of political marketing, progressively refining and consolidating its use across electoral cycles. In line with international findings on PRR communication (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; de Vreese et al., 2018), it is expected that leader personalisation will constitute the primary mechanism for constructing symbolic

proximity and that entertainment-oriented repertoires will intensify as the party consolidates its electoral relevance.

Preliminary findings suggest that entertainment politics operates not as an episodic campaign tactic but as a consolidated communicative logic embedded within Chega's strategic repertoire. The analysis indicates increasing leader centrality, heightened emotionalisation, and growing cross-platform alignment between televised performances and digital communication. These dynamics point toward a progressive normalisation of entertainment-oriented communication within Portuguese political competition, reinforcing broader mediatization processes identified in both international and Portuguese scholarship (Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Figueiras, 2022).

The study contributes to academic debate in three principal ways. First, it conceptualises entertainment politics as an integrated analytical framework that bridges political marketing, mediatization, and populist communication. Second, it extends empirical research on PRR communication to the Portuguese context through a systematic and longitudinal case study. Third, it provides a methodologically explicit operationalisation of entertainment politics that can inform comparative research in other national settings. More broadly, the research contributes to ongoing debates on democratic representation in mediatized societies, demonstrating how visibility, affect, performance, and leadership personalisation reshape political competition in contemporary Europe (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Street, 2011; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).