Article

Populist Leaders as Gatekeepers: André Ventura Uses News to Legitimize the Discourse

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Abstract: This study explores the role of populist leaders as gatekeepers on social media, seeking to understand how André Ventura, president of Chega!, uses news to legitimize his political discourse. The methodology involved collecting 90 tweets containing legacy media news features, posted by Ventura on the social media platform X. These tweets cover key political events such as the resignation of Portugal's Prime Minister, the dissolution of the Portuguese Parliament, and European elections. Quantitative analysis using Voyant Tools identified key terms related to Ventura's ideological stance, while Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examined how these terms support his political narrative. The findings reveal a strategic use of news to promote themes like nationalism, immigration control, corruption and social dichotomy between "us" and "them". Ventura's tweets leverage news headlines to enhance his persuasive appeal, acting as heuristic shortcuts to reinforce his political messages. This study highlights the relevance of understanding social media's role in promoting populism and suggests avenues for future research, including comparative analyses of other populist leaders and the impact of these narratives on voter behavior and perceptions.

Keywords: populism; social media; radical right-wing; Critical Discourse Analysis; Portugal; André Ventura

1. Introduction

The level of political knowledge and involvement is related to the way citizens consume news (Hao et al. 2014). For example, political interest is a reason for more active engagement and can increase selective news exposure (Barnidge et al. 2020). Furthermore, it is known that news helps most citizens, in democratic societies, to learn about politics (Kriesi 2004) and its sharing can result in an action of social interaction, namely in promoting a sense of community (Swart et al. 2019) or in an act associated with a participatory culture (Brake 2014; Meikle and Young 2011). However, news consumption has changed with technological developments. Social media have become its main distributors, which has contributed to a less regulated and more biased consumption of information (Messing and Westwood 2014). Faced with this situation, political actors began to share news on social media as an action of political strategy (Buyens et al. 2024; Heidenreich et al. 2024). The sharing of news on social media by politicians seeks to achieve the same objective as the sharing of other types of content, mainly related to actions of self-promotion and party mobilization (Ernst et al. 2019; Pérez-Curiel 2020; Filimonov et al. 2016). Sharing news on social media can also serve as a political object to criticize opponents (Auter and Fine 2016) and to criticize traditional media (Egelhofer et al. 2021). Thus, party leaders find in social media, such as X, Facebook and more recently TikTok, ways to bypass traditional media and establish a closer and more direct relationship with citizens (Pérez-Curiel 2020).

This set of social dynamics makes social media a fertile ground for promoting right-wing populist attitudes (Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024). Several studies (Engesser et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2018; Gründl 2022) recognize that populist attitudes and messages adapt perfectly to the characteristics of social media. Social media has been used by right-wing populists to promote anti-immigration rhetoric, nationalist ideals and anti-elitist narratives, based on the dichotomy "us" (people's defenders and spokespeople) against an enemy and corrupt elite, "them" (Lorenzetti 2020; Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024).

In Portugal, the populist radical right has legitimized its ideals with the help of traditional media and online social platforms (Rydgren 2018; Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024). Although ideologically it self-identifies as "liberal-conservative", the Chega! represents the populist radical right (Mendes 2021; Marchi 2023; Lisi et al. 2021; Mendes and Dennison 2021). Chega! integrates the ideological group of the populist radical right by adopting the characteristics that are attributed to these parties (Mudde 2007), namely the defense of national sovereignty, the appeal to the "true people", intolerance towards social minorities and commitment to social division between "us" and "them".

Founded in 2018, Chega! elected for the first time, in 2019, a deputy to the Assembly of the Republic. Currently, it is the third political force in Portugal, having elected 50 deputies to the Portuguese parliament in the last national elections. To grow electorally, the Chega! party rejects the stigma of belonging to the extreme right (Mendes and Dennison 2021) and depends on the leadership of a popular and charismatic politician, André Ventura, who personifies himself around a common cause, uniting the people against the enemy elite. Chega! is, therefore, considered a "one-man-show" party (Biscaia and Salgado 2023) due to the media popularity of its leader (Marchi 2023; Marcelino 2020; Palma et al. 2021).

André Ventura has managed to capture the attention of traditional media more than any other politician (Almeida 2024). The populist leader adopts a simple communicative style based on informal language, which makes him a "charismatic" leader with more followers on social media (Baptista et al. 2024; Prior 2024). Even when he was the only Chega! deputy in the Portuguese parliament, André Ventura managed to obtain greater media coverage than other leaders, most particularly by adopting of a sensationalist and controversial manner of speech (Palma et al. 2021).

Like other politicians (Kissas 2020), the social network X, formerly Twitter, continues to be the most used by André Ventura. On the same network, André Ventura's tweets receive greater engagement than publications from the Chega! party's own account (Baptista et al. 2024).

Our study is based on the argument that social media brings populists closer to their voters, exposing them to their ideals, normalizing radical discourse through ideological learning, which results in a collective identity that is created through shared content (Schwemmer 2021). Therefore, it is increasingly important to understand how leaders of the populist radical right consolidate, through social media, their political positioning, legitimize their beliefs and reinforce their political agenda.

This study, of an exploratory nature, aims to analyze how André Ventura uses the sharing and collage of news, on the social platform X, to legitimize his speech, normalize his ideals and promote the populist narratives associated with the radical right in Portugal. Several studies have sought to understand how the media has helped to legitimize the discourse and ideals of radical right parties (Haanshuus and Ihlebæk 2021; Krzyżanowski and Ekström 2022; Ekström and Morton 2017; Ekström et al. 2022). However, these studies essentially focus on a perspective that comes from journalism and the media in general, namely trying to understand how media coverage of radical right parties contributes to their normalization. Studies in Portugal also seek similar objectives (Novais 2022a, 2022b). Conversely, few studies have analyzed the news shared by the radical right as an act of political legitimation (e.g., Dowling 2024).

Therefore, we believe that our study can be a contribution to the contemporary debate surrounding the selective use of news by political agents, with the aim of creating a reality that legitimizes their political attitudes and beliefs.

We carried out a quantitative discourse analysis (using the Voyant Tools software, v. 2.6.14) and a Critical (van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 2013) of an exploratory sample of 90 tweets with news, published by André Ventura (@AndreCVentura, https://twitter.com/AndreCVentura (accessed on 8 July 2024)). The tweets were analyzed according to rhetorical strategies, identity construction techniques and the narratives used to frame the news.

With this research we seek to answer the following general research questions:

- RQ1—How does André Ventura use news to legitimize his political speech on the social media platform X?
- RQ2—What are the most common rhetorical strategies used by André Ventura when referencing news in his tweets?
- RQ3—Which speeches and behaviors are most often legitimized through André Ventura's use of news on Twitter?

Our findings show that there is a selective choice of news around topics such as immigration, corruption and security to support his political proposals, while influencing public opinion.

2. Theoretical Background

Populism is a concept that does not have a consensual definition. Mudde (2004) classifies populism as an ideology, which, although tenuous, focuses on the social dyad that opposes the "people" to the "elite". Laclau (2005) considers it rather as a discursive game between antagonistic elements, such as people and power. Other authors (Moffitt 2015, 2016) approach populism as a performance or communicative strategy (Engesser et al. 2017) that makes social communication its stage of action (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). Hameleers (2020) considers populist action to be tactical, seeking to accuse the establishment of deceiving people. The relevant literature has found in right-wing populism a discourse aimed at citizens, critical of the power of elites and the corrupted system, which victimizes itself to justify intolerant rhetoric towards immigrants (Krämer 2017; Engesser et al. 2017).

Social media has given rise to "populism 2.0" (Gerbaudo 2014), where populist actors seek to strengthen relationships with their voters, while spreading their political messages (Engesser et al. 2017). Currently, the populist radical right is seen as a political trend (Rydgren 2018) and is presented as a threat to democracy (Pérez Curiel and Domínguez García 2021).The radical right, where the Chega! party ideologically fits, appears associated with a "new right" (Flanagan 1987; Inglehart 1971) of an authoritarian nature in response to the new Left parties, what Ignazi (1992) called " Silent Counterrevolution" This political ideology is known mostly for its intolerance towards immigrants, for the defense of traditional and nationalist values and for the valorization of a more severe social and political authority (Eatwell and Goodwin 2020; Mendes and Dennison 2021). These ideals integrate populist messages, made up of simple, informal and rude linguistic styles that great impact on social media (Moffitt 2016) while also capturing the attention of traditional media. In fact, populists adopt a political strategy designed for social media, called "pop politics" (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019) or "politainment" (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al. 2023), specifically designed to engage their audience. This populist style of communicating is part of the communication strategy of populist leaders on social media (Bracciale et al. 2021) and consists of using emotional speech, which arouses anger, fear or anxiety in users (Bracciale et al. 2021).

In Portugal, there is a greater commitment from the Chega! and its president, André Ventura, on social media, than is found in other mainstream parties and politicians. Recently, a journalistic report showed that there is an international campaign script with a strategy designed for the political communication of populist parties on social media (Malhado 2024).

The recent rise of the populist radical right in Portugal has earneddeserved the attention of academics, with studies focusing on communication strategies and André Ventura's narrative (Ramos-Antón and Baptista 2022; Reis 2020; Dias 2022; Prior 2024; Novais 2023). André Ventura uses a carefully structured narrative, assuming himself as the defender of the "good Portuguese" (Novais 2023). His speech presents him as the messiah, the savior who is invested with a divine mission to transform and save

Portugal (Figueiredo 2021; Jaramillo 2021; Dias 2022). Its political communication strategy is markedly opportunistic, adapting according to the context to achieve its objective of excluding certain social groups, such as Rroma and people of African descent, often portrayed as bandits (Melo 2021; Santos and Roque 2021).

Ventura also explores sensitive issues such as corruption and public security, defending extreme measures such as life imprisonment and chemical castration for sexual crimes, shaping himself as the only politician truly outraged by the corrupted system (Fernandes and Magalhães 2020; Prior 2024). Social networks serve to maximize the reach of his speech, combining anti-elitist and anti-system rhetoric with the image of an honest politician close to the people, reinforcing his popularity among voters dissatisfied with traditional politics (Jaramillo 2021; Baptista et al. 2024).

This narrative construction and the strategic use of the media and social networks have been fundamental to the exponential growth of Chega!, which has consolidated itself as the third political force in Portugal (Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024). However, in Portugal, the media were, until the emergence of Chega!, an exception in their resistance to political populism (Caeiro 2019; Salgado 2019; Salgado and Zúquete 2016). Before 2019, traditional media did not provide significant coverage of populist speeches, positions or parties (Caeiro 2019; Salgado 2019). With the election of André Ventura, the positioning of the Portuguese media changed, becoming a more positive and frequent media coverage, essentially because Ventura was a media figure (former sports commentator on an information channel and former politician of the Social Democratic Party (PSD)) (Salgado 2022).

It is important to emphasize that the Portuguese media system has been, over the years, the target of several debates. Hallin and Mancini (2004) included the Portuguese media system in the "Polarized Pluralist" model, which includes southern European countries, and is characterized by strong political parallelism, a weak journalistic culture and significant state intervention. However, several authors argue that the Portuguese media system has characteristics that distinguish it from other countries in the same group, showing an evolution towards a more liberal and less polarized model (Álvares and Damásio 2013; Brüggemann et al. 2014; Fishman 2011; Serrano 2014). The Portuguese media promote inclusion and favor heterogeneous points of view, with levels of professionalization on par with the European Union average (Álvares and Damásio 2013; Fishman 2011; Santana-Pereira 2016).

This professionalism and the decrease in political parallelism, recognized by Hallin and Mancini (2017), indicate a greater independence of the Portuguese media in relation to partisan influences, something that has contributed to a more balanced coverage that is less susceptible to populist manipulations. Even with the effective use of social media by figures like Ventura, the traditional Portuguese media system continues to resist, with a critical stance, a complete capture by polarizing discourses, maintaining a more moderate and inclusive approach (Salgado 2022). Given this media scenario, the spread of polarizing populist discourses through traditional media is difficult. Therefore, Ventura may be encouraged to turn to social media to directly reach the target audience that shares his views, promoting selective exposure and, therefore, greater political polarization (Stroud 2010).

At an international level, several studies have recognized that the populist radical right effectively exploits digital tools, namely through the creation of online communities and alternative media (Marwick et al. 2022; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2024). Online disinformation is a propagandistic instrument commonly used among radical right populists (Baptista and Gradim 2022b; Freelon et al. 2020; Mancosu et al. 2017). For example, some studies (Haanshuus and Ihlebæk 2021; Baugut and Neumann 2019) have shown that radical right-wing groups reshape news for their benefit. Haanshuus and Ihlebæk (2021) have shown that the radical right recontextualizes news to legitimize anti-Semitic speech. This type of strategy aims to create a collective identity, maintaining a cohesive group around its ideals and beliefs (Swart et al. 2019; Goh et al. 2019; Gaudette et al. 2021). The notion of collective identity implies the emergence of a social movement, which involves the mobilization of a group around common interests (Polletta and Jasper 2001). This sharing of news motivates interaction and digital "mobilization" that translates, in

cyberspace, into likes, comments, and shares. In this sense, Perry and Scrivens (2016, p. 69) consider that, within the scope of populist action, "collective identity provides an alternative frame for understanding and expressing grievances; it shapes the discursive "other" along with the borders that separate "us" from "them"; it affirms and reaffirms identity formation and maintenance; and it provides the basis for strategic action".

In this environment, politicians are, currently, gatekeepers who have the ability to select and filter the information they intend to pass on to their supporters (Thorson and Wells 2016; Dowling 2024). These opportunities offered by social media allow political leaders to interfere in the flow of information and, when they have numerous followers, can be crucial for amplifying content (Buyens et al. 2024). Sharing news on social media is more common among political forces that are in opposition than among forces that govern (Buyens et al. 2024). Therefore, with politicians assuming themselves as "opinion leaders" on social media (Pérez-Curiel 2020) and with a political message designed to make the content widely shared (López-García 2016; Campos-Domínguez 2017), right-wing populist rhetoric is more easily normalized.

3. Methods

3.1. Corpus Selection

We collected 90 news tweets (Table S1), published on the social media X, by André Ventura (@AndreCVentura) over a seven-month period. All selected tweets are associated with topics closely related to radical right-wing ideology (nationalism and national sovereignty; criticism of the EU, i.e., loss of national autonomy; immigration; security; social policies [LGBT, traditional values, criticism of gender ideology]; justice [harsher penalties]; and corruption [fighting corruption]). Only original tweets by André Ventura that correspond to a news feature collage were considered (Figure 1). Ventura uses screenshots of the news title in his tweets, not directly sharing the link to the news website, which further contributes to decontextualize the content.

(a)   (b)

Figure 1. Example of two tweets by André Ventura with news collage. (**a**) The news has the following title: "Grandfather got 15-year-old granddaughter pregnant in Braga". Through the design of the news website, it is possible to identify the image as belonging to Correio da Manhã, a Portuguese tabloid newspaper. André Ventura's description reads: "How is it possible that this man was sentenced to just 8 years in prison after raping and impregnating his own granddaughter? With CHEGA ruling, he would never see the light of day outside of prison again!" (**b**) The news has the following title: "Two men stabbed in a fight in Praça do Martim Moniz in Lisbon". The news website cannot be identified. André Ventura comments: "Another serious case in the middle of Martim Moniz square, in broad daylight. "Two men" stabbed in a fight? What is the nationality of those involved? The result of the immigration policy with open doors, without rules and without any control, is visible to everyone. Is this what you want for Portugal and Europe? Don't stay at home on 9th June and vote for those who truly defend you".

For the corpus of analysis, all news tweets from André Ventura, posted between 7th November and 7th June, were considered. This period begins with the resignation of António Costa as Portuguese prime minister, followed by the dissolution of the Portuguese parliament (on 15 January 2024)[1] and legislative elections are called for 10 March 2024.[2] In the legislative elections, Chega! becomes the third political force in Portugal and elects 50 deputies (out of a total of 230) to the Portuguese parliament.[3] Meanwhile, the European elections took place, with the electoral campaign ending on 7th June.[4] This period is, therefore, marked by several important events: (a) the resignation of the prime minister due to a comment from the Portuguese General Prosecutor; (b) legislative elections with the radical right obtaining the largest victory ever and (c) European elections.

3.2. Textual Analysis from Voyant Tools

Firstly, we carried out a quantitative analysis of the text corpus (N = 90 news tweets) posted by Chega¡s president, André Ventura. The analysis was carried out using the online software Voyant Tools v. 2.6.14 (Sinclair and Rockwell 2020). We use this software because, in addition to being free, it is easy to use and has a kit of important textual analysis tools to highlight the most important words in the text, allowing the terms to be statistically correlated (Sinclair and Rockwell 2020). Voyant Tools has already been used in communication studies that involve the analysis of news content or content published on social media (Baptista et al. 2023; Ittefaq et al. 2022; Corvo and Caro 2020).

The preliminary analysis of the corpus made it possible to identify a set of topics that are entirely related to the political ideology of the radical right (Mudde 2004, 2007). The Voyant Tools software, by identifying the most relevant words in the corpus, considering the number of occurrences of the words, corroborated the categories that were previously identified. An ideological categorization of the corpus was then carried out according to the words found and the correlations presented. We therefore seek to understand how the following ideological categories are present in the text: (1) nationalism and national sovereignty, (2) positioning towards the European Union, (3) immigration, (4) (in)security, (5) social issues (LGBT, traditional values, criticism of gender ideology), (6) justice (harsher penalties), and (7) the fight against corruption. In this procedure, we categorized the main keywords and observed how they correlate by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient between the relative frequency of words.

3.3. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) aims to study language through different social and political contexts (Wodak and Meyer 2009). This qualitative method is not tied to an exclusive approach, but rather to an analysis with a multidisciplinary nature (Wodak and Meyer 2009; van Dijk 1998; Fairclough and Mulderrig 2011). We set out for this analysis, aware that CDA aims to understand the dimension of discourse, through the analysis of present discursive formations, dependent on an ideology and a context.

In this way, our CDA starts from the 90 news tweets posted by André Ventura, already mentioned previously. We believe that this is a corpus of operational text and, as it is not very long, it does not compromise the qualitative stance of our study (van Dijk 2001; Meyer 2001). The analysis was based on a comparative approach between André Ventura's speech and the content of each news item that served as the basis for his description in each tweet. In this way, it is possible to understand the role of the news in legitimizing the speech of Chega!'s president.

Similar to the quantitative analysis, developed using Voyant Tools, we also focused the CDA on the seven thematic categories presented previously. Furthermore, we analyzed the tweets considering specific strategies related to discourse normalization techniques, namely legitimation and delegitimization strategies, nationalist and emotional appeals and polarization and identity construction strategies through the identification of the "us" vs. "them" dichotomy (Van Leeuwen 2007; Fairclough 2003).

4. Results

4.1. Voyant Tools Analysis

Analyzing the ranking formed by the most frequent concepts in our corpus (Table 1), our study allows us to perceive, at first, a nationalist focus in Ventura's speech. The words "Portugal", "Portuguese" and "country" are the most frequent and reinforce an ideology centered on the national qualities and the defense of the country's identity and interests.

Table 1. Top 10 most frequent words in the analyzed tweets.

Top 10	Words	*n*	Co-Occurrences
1	Portugal	31	Policy (3), to finish (3), we want (2)
2	Chega	23	I took (2), situation (2), reason (2)
3	Portuguese	17	Truth (3), security (2), stupid (2)
4	Country	15	It needs (3), to go back (2), Portugal (2)
5	Security	9	Portuguese (2), forces(2), control (2)
6	PS	9	Vote (1), enables (1), tics (1)
7	Policy	9	Result (3), Portugal (3), immigration (3)
8	Immigration	9	Policy (3), ilegal (2), out of control (2)
9	Control	9	Borders (4), security (2), rules (2)
10	Money	8	Health (3), we will have (1), to know (1)

Source: voyanttools.org (accessed on 8 July 2024).

Additionally, the frequent use of "Portuguese" may indicate the use of the rhetorical strategy of "us" vs. "them". It is possible to see the construction of a collective identity that resonates with the target audience.

On the other hand, we find other words related to their ideological positioning, such as "security", "immigration" and "control". If we also consider the co-occurrences with words such as "illegal", "uncontrolled", "borders" or "control", and "security", then this denotes a concern with national identity and security, supporting policies that limit the entry of immigrants and increase control over immigration.

This trend can be seen through the way words are correlated when organized by categories (Table 2).

Table 2 shows the words, organized by categories, that are statistically and positively correlated in the analyzed corpus. This means that the words show a similar tendency, increasing and decreasing together. Analyzing Table 2, it is important to highlight the correlation between words such as "Portugal" with "Wide open" (r = 0.76, *p* = 0.01), "Borders" (r = 0.74, *p* = 0.01) or "Europa" with "Wide open" (r = 0.76, *p* = 0.01) and "Control" (r = 0.07, *p* = 0.01) which feed a nationalist sense of protection against external influences. In this respect, it is important to highlight the correlation between the word "Portuguese" and "Immigrants" (r = 0.65, *p* = 0.03), corroborating the creation of a polarization between "us" and "them".

As for the immigration category, the correlation of the word "Immigrant" with "Extinction" (r = 0.66, *p* = 0.03) is evident as a warning to the perceived dangers of uncontrolled immigration, suggesting that unrestricted immigration is irresponsible and harmful to society, resonating with the idea of a great replacement, a far-right conspiracy theory.

In the corruption category, the correlation of words like "Clean-up" (r = 0.74, *p* = 0.01) and "Finish" (r = 0.72, *p* = 0.01) with "Cushy job" appeals to a feeling of renewal and national purification, where the objective is to restore the integrity of the government and institutions, dominated by "them" (corrupt parties) "PS" (r = 0.84, *p* < 0.001) and "PSD" (r = 0.65, *p* = −0.05).

Table 2. Association between words (r of Pearson).

Category	Word	Positive Correlation (Words)
Nationalism and National Sovereignty	Portugal	Wide open ($r = 0.76$, $p = 0.01$) Borders ($r = 0.74$, $p = 0.01$)
	Portuguese	Immigrants ($r = 0.65$, $p = 0.03$)
	Borders	Control ($r = 0.07$, $p = 0.01$)
	Control	-
	We (our)	-
Criticism of the EU	Europe	Wide open ($r = 0.76$, $p = 0.01$) Control ($r = 0.63$, $p = 0.04$)
Immigration	Immigration	Uncontrolled ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$) Foreigners ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$) Illegal ($r = 0.61$, $p = 0.05$)
	Immigrant	Illegal ($r = 0.83$, $p < 0.001$) Extinction ($r = 0.72$, $p = 0.01$) Government ($r = 0.61$, $p = 0.05$)
	Nationality	Illegal ($r = 0.76$, $p = 0.01$) Uncontrolled ($r = 0.76$, $p = 0.01$) Law ($r = 0.76$, $p = 0.01$) Enter ($r = 0.76$, $p = 0.01$) Immigration ($r = 0.72$, $p = 0.01$) Migrations ($r = 0.71$, $p = 0.01$) Extinction ($r = 0.66$, $p = 0.03$)
	SEF	Illegal ($r = 0.93$, $p < 0.001$) Imports ($r = 0.88$, $p < 0.001$) Immigrants ($r = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$) Migrations ($r = 0.75$, $p = 0.01$) Reverse ($r = 0.75$, $p = 0.01$) Nationality ($r = 0.71$, $p = 0.01$)
(In)security	Security	Criminality ($r = 0.65$, $p = 0.04$)
	Insecurity	Climate ($r = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$) Criminality ($r = 0.70$, $p = 0.01$) Daily ($r = 0.70$, $p = 0.02$)
	Assault	To happen ($r = 0.75$, $p = 0.01$)
	Police	Convicted ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$) Criteria ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$) People ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$) Bandit ($r = 0.65$, $p = 0.01$)
Social politics	Gender Ideology	-
	LGBT	-
Justice (Severe Penalties)	Prison	Assaults ($r = 0.93$, $p = 0.001$) Politicians ($r = 0.76$, $p = 0.01$) Doors ($r = 0.67$, $p = 0.03$)
	Penalty	-
Corruption	Corruption	Taxpayers ($r = 0.71$, $p = 0.01$)
	Cushy job	Corruption ($r = 0.93$, $p < 0.001$) PS ($r = 0.84$, $p < 0.001$) Minister ($r = 0.82$, $p = 0.003$) Clean-up ($r = 0.74$, $p = 0.01$) Acabar ($r = 0.72$, $p = 0.01$) Shady deals ($r = 0.66$, $p = 0.03$) PSD ($r = 0.65$, $p = -0.05$)

Source: voyanttools.org (accessed on 8 July 2024).

4.2. Critical Discourse Analysis: Identifying Topics and Patterns

André Ventura's tweets on the social media platform X use news articles to legitimize his political–ideological stance, particularly concerning political corruption, "uncontrolled" immigration, and the lack of strict punishment policies for these two "problems". In addition to these topics, we identified other recurring themes in the radical-right discourse. Some tweets comment on news with a clear appeal to nationalism and national sovereignty, inciting fear and distrust in the socio-political system to justify measures. In one tweet, describing news that "residents of Porto complain of insecurity" (Supplementary Material, Table S2 T1), Ventura claims that "the Portuguese people are captured by globalist interests sold to multiculturalism, while system politicians live in luxury condos [. . .]", labeling them as "traitors to Portugal!" (T1). In this case, the president of Chega! appeals to a vision of Portugal as a country that must be protected from external influence, advocating for national sovereignty.

Alongside these themes, the analysis of tweets highlights the sharing of alarmist news to justify security policies or stricter legislation. His discourse includes phrases like: "Robberies in broad daylight" (T2) or "a good thug is a jailed thug!" (T3) and a repeated reference to a "climate of insecurity" (e.g., T2). André Ventura shares a screenshot of a news article with the headline "Crime reaches its highest level in 10 years". To this news feature (the source of which is not identifiable), he adds the description in the tweet that "[. . .] this is the country the socialists left. We need to restore police authority and the speed of justice. A good thug is a jailed thug!" (T3). In this case, there is an amplification of the sense of insecurity to legitimize the need for harsher penalties to combat crime and restore safety in the streets.

In our analysis, sharing crime news serves to support the argument that the country needs a stricter judicial system. André Ventura criticizes the judicial system for being lenient. In the tweet where he shares the news "Convicted criminal tutor arrested for abusing two minors in Viana do Castelo", the president of Chega! writes that it is "another shocking news" and that "with Chega, pedophiles and rapists will not have suspended sentences, nor will they run scot-free" (T4). In another tweet, he shares the news: "Grandfather impregnated 15-year-old granddaughter in Braga". In the same tweet, Ventura expresses his outrage, asking, "how is it possible that this man was sentenced to only 8 years in prison after raping and impregnating his own granddaughter?" and promises that "with Chega governing, he would never see the light of day outside prison again!" (T5). These news stories legitimize a stricter justice system, with harsher sentences for violent crimes, portraying the current situation as permissive.

In this ideological line, there seems to be a strategic framing in the approach to the news being shared. For example, the news chosen often serves to illustrate a scenario of danger, be it from immigration, insecurity, or corruption, in which the Chega! party presents itself as the only viable solution. André Ventura makes statements like "if Chega ruled, a monster like this would never see the light of day again" (T6) or that "Portugal doesn't need this [. . .] our women and children need to be safe" (T7).

In a critique of the so-called "gender ideology", the president of Chega! uses news about the rejection of financial support for security forces (T8) to criticize resource allocation. Ventura frequently legitimizes his position on social policies by invoking traditional values and cultural norms. By criticizing the allocation of resources for promoting "gender ideology", the president of Chega! seeks to legitimize his position by suggesting that these resources would be better used in other areas. This appeals to the traditional value of good financial management and prioritization of what he considers to be the real needs of society.

We can look at another example where André Ventura tweets about news on increasing support for LGBTQ+ people and access to healthcare for transgender individuals (T9). The far-right politician positions himself as a defender of the general interests of the Portuguese population, highlighting the lack of family doctors and the waiting lists that should be the government's priority, saying, "what sense does it make that thousands of Portuguese are without family doctors, dying in hospitals [. . .]". Ventura seeks to

delegitimize the government's actions by implying that resources allocated to healthcare for transgender people are misdirected, as seen in the following: "[...] and, at the same time, the Government prioritizes resources for 'transgenders'?" The use of quotation marks around "transgenders" may suggest an attempt to devalue or question the legitimacy of this identity. The dichotomy between "us" (needy Portuguese) and "them" (the transgender community and the government) continues to be a central tactic in his discourse. Ventura aims to show that there is a conflict of interest between ordinary Portuguese citizens and government policies that he considers overly focused on specific minorities.

In addition to these themes, throughout our analysis, we also encountered some textual passages that involve nationalist appeals, with a strategy of polarization and construction of a common identity, often based on social divisions between "us" and "them". There is a defense of policies that supposedly protect national interests against external influences (immigration) and internal corruption. The following points of the analysis focus only on the following two categories: immigration and corruption.

4.2.1. Immigration

The topic of immigration has gained more prominence in the period leading up to the European elections. The sharing of news articles framed around the theme of immigration is a strategy used by André Ventura to delegitimize current immigration policies. Throughout the analysis, we found tweets of news articles that support the thesis of "uncontrolled" immigration, thus necessitating stricter border security policies. In Figure 2, we observe four tweets in which Ventura uses the news to justify a more severe policy regarding the entry and legalization of immigrant groups in Portugal. In Figure 2A, we read a headline stating that "The majority of Portuguese people agree with Chega! and believe that immigration is out of control" (T10). Sharing this headline allows the president of Chega! to legitimize his discourse, using logical and stylistic arguments presented by an authority, in this case a study from the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon, as mentioned in the lead. Figure 2B presents the sharing of an international news article about a crime in Paris (T11), committed by "an Islamic radical". In this tweet, Ventura uses a crime committed by an alleged immigrant to warn Portugal about the danger that "uncontrolled" immigration can represent for the Portuguese.

Figure 2. André Ventura's tweets about immigration. (**A**) The news article presents the following headline: "Majority of Portuguese agree with Chega and believe that immigration is out of control". In the lead, the following can be read: "a study from the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon concludes that about 55% of Portuguese people believe that immigration is out of control and nearly 50% think that Portugal should establish immigration quotas". (**B**) The news article presents the following headline: "Islamic radical kills one person in Paris; the victim was a German tourist". The lead of the news article is incomplete. The translation of André Ventura's comment can be read in Table S2 of the Supplementary Materials (T11).

André Ventura characterizes immigration policies as reckless and dangerous through his description of the news in the following tweet: "Portugal does not learn from what is happening in other European countries", stating that "it leaves the doors open to everyone, borders without control, risking the safety of all Portuguese people" (T11). Here, there is a clear association of "uncontrolled" immigration with the country's insecurity. The president of Chega! frequently seeks to justify the need for stricter immigration policies, which include the deportation of immigrants who commit crimes and the reactivation of the Foreigners and Borders Service (SEF). For example, he shared a news story about a woman who was raped by a driver during a trip to Lisbon (T7). The crime is attributed to an Indian immigrant. Ventura shares the news to justify deportation policies based on the need to maintain legal order, commenting that "for this [Indian immigrant] and others like him, there is only one word: deportation!" He then resorts to emotional appeals by stating, "[...] our women and children must be safe" (T7). In other tweets, the radical right-wing leader uses emotionally charged language to evoke fear and insecurity among the population, such as when he writes, "we warned that this climate of insecurity would reach our cities" in a comment on a news story that blames immigrants for "robberies and assaults" presented in a television news report (T2).

Thus, André Ventura uses the news to create a sense of urgency and fear, associating immigration with insecurity, which can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices without solid factual basis.

Focusing on the theme of immigration, the analysis of the corpus allows us to establish a division between "us" (the true Portuguese) and "them" (the immigrants and those who support immigration policies). Ventura calls for the defense of "our children" and "our women" (T7). Immigrants are presented as a direct threat to the safety of Portuguese families. Another passage that reinforces this dichotomy is when Ventura says, "We warned that this climate of insecurity would reach our cities". "We" refers to himself and the members of Chega! who have been raising national security alerts, while "they" (immigrants) continue to be associated with increased insecurity.

4.2.2. Corruption

Corruption is the most prominent topic in the analyzed corpus. This theme is present in tweets posted from November to May. As the European elections approached, as previously noted, Ventura began to prioritize sharing news related to immigration and security policies. During the legislative election campaign, corruption was the most predominant theme.

In general, the use of news sharing framed around this topic serves to delegitimize traditional political parties, accusing them of being corrupt and dishonest. Ventura often suggests that politicians, especially those on the left, are untrustworthy, undermining their legitimacy without necessarily offering concrete solutions to combat corruption. Voting for Chega! is presented as the only solution. For instance, when he states that "your [socialist party] corruption will not pass" (T12) or when he says that "we need a public administration that is not suffocated by party cards and regime boys" (T13).

The use of terms like "rotness" (Figure 3), "regime boys" (T13), or "party deals" (T14) in comments on the news that he shares aims to discredit and instill distrust in established parties, associating them with corrupt practices. This idea is evident in Figure 3, which shows a screenshot of a television news story that reads: "corruption and immigration are the main focus of Chega!". In the tweet, it reads that it is necessary to "clean the rot that exists in the institutions in Portugal".

"Furthermore, André Ventura creates another social division based on the dichotomy of 'us' (Chega! and the Portuguese) and 'them' (corrupt politicians). In comments on shared news articles, it is often read that Portugal 'needs cleansing' (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Tweet that exemplifies the use of coarse language.

Figure 4. Example of a Tweet by André Ventura in which he calls for the "cleaning" of Portugal. Note: The screenshot of the news has the following title: "MP [Ministério Público] says that Lacerda can continue alleged criminal activity because Costa [ex-prime minister], "his best friend", is in office until March 10th". In the photo, António Costa, former prime minister, appears on the phone. In full, André Ventura's comment says: "Prime Minister and leader of the PSD under suspicion of serious crimes. This is rottenness. Portugal needs cleaning!".

In this way, politicians and public institutions are classified as 'rotten' or 'dirty,' thus requiring a 'cleansing' that only Chega! can achieve. André Ventura uses news about corruption to reinforce the need for drastic measures. By sharing a news article about the 'teia operation', which involves corruption cases (T15), the leader of Chega! clearly aligns himself with the people ('us') against the corrupt elite ('them'), commenting that 'we continue to vote, they continue to steal' (T15). In response to this situation, he adds 'this has to stop. This will end!' (T15), promising that, with Chega!, as corroborated by the news, corruption will come to an end.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of tweets with news, posted by André Ventura, president of the Chega! party, on social media X, has allowed us to verify that there is a clear political communication strategy based on sharing news to justify its political–ideological positioning.

Our findings show that there is a selective choice of news around topics such as immigration, corruption and security, which is used to support their political proposals while influencing public opinion. By ignoring or minimizing topics that could be unfavorable, Ventura not only guides the focus of public debate, but also reinforces social divisions, such as the dichotomy between "us" and "them".

The results obtained in our quantitative and qualitative analyses complement each other. Voyant tools have made it possible to verify that concepts such as "security", "immigration" and "control" are recurrent, showing a concern with national security and restrictive immigration policies, or that words like "cleanliness" correlate with corruption. Meanwhile, the CDA has made it possible to confirm, in a more detailed way, that André Ventura curates the news to promote his interests and legitimize his speech.

According to Thorson and Wells (2016), this action by Ventura can be called "strategic curation", a type of content curation that exposes his followers or political supporters to a selective reality. In fact, any user can effectively be a gatekeeper in today's digital information environment (Buyens et al. 2024), with the possibility of playing the role of opinion leader on social media (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). However, politicians are not ordinary users, they seek influence on social media through the opportunity it offers, rather than through social media. Through social media, political leaders, namely populist actors, escape the criticism they are most frequently subjected to in traditional media (Salgado 2022). In the case of André Ventura, the advantage of "strategic curation" lies in the ability to control the public narrative. By carefully choosing which information to promote, Ventura can direct attention to topics that are favorable to him, such as immigration, security or corruption, while ignoring or minimizing aspects that could be harmful to his image.

Furthermore, our findings seem to be in line with other studies, which have discovered a strategic use of news on online platforms to build a collective identity (Baugut and Neumann 2019; Swart et al. 2019; Haanshuus and Ihlebæk (2021); Dowling 2024). In 1997, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) reported on the importance of framing news for its influence on public opinion. This is why André Ventura skillfully uses news headlines that can be used to support his arguments and which justify his ideal.

It is also important to note that the president of Chega!, on his X account, does not share news itself, that is, he never shares the link to the news website and the original news feature. Often, the source of the media is only identified through the design of the news website. In this sense, we can argue that André Ventura uses the cloning of the news title (screenshot) only to serve as a heuristic shortcut (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Entman 2007) in his persuasive strategy. Ventura makes tweets, commenting on news, with the purpose of using the persuasive authority of journalists and the news they report.

We found that this use of news effectively serves to amplify fears and insecurities. By commenting on news about crime, insecurity or corruption, Ventura is promoting the acceptance of strict policies. When news about crimes committed by immigrants is shared, there is a clear objective of generalizing the threat and exclusion of a certain group. Filtering this type of news can effectively legitimize your political position. Several studies have shown that the greater the media coverage of topics such as immigration or crime, the greater the tendency for voters to be in favor of anti-immigration policies (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2007; Burscher et al. 2015). Therefore, André Ventura's narrative coincides with the radical right's discourse by promoting collective anguish over others or "them" (Orazani et al. 2020). In fact, there is clearly the use of the "politics of fear" through their comments on the news, particularly when dealing with the threat that "they" (always represented as non-Portuguese or corrupt politicians) represent to "us" (good Portuguese and victim of the elites) (see Wodak 2015; Ekström et al. 2022).

In terms of populist platitudes, and similar to other studies (Prior 2024; Novais 2023; Santos and Roque 2021; Pérez-Curiel and Baptista 2024), our research has highlighted corruption and threats to national sovereignty, namely the increase in immigration, as the main topics of André Ventura's speech. In general, the president of Chega! maintains a rhetoric that coincides with his party's proposals, appealing to a vision of Portugal as

a country that must be protected from external influences. Immigration gained prominence close to the European elections, while corruption was addressed more during the legislative election campaign. The news shared essentially serves to delegitimize migration policies and public institutions, positioning Chega! as the solution to these problems.

To conclude, our study reveals the relevance of understanding the role of social media in promoting populism, highlighting how news can serve as heuristic shortcuts in legitimizing the discourse of the populist radical right. We contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating how strategic news curation is part of André Ventura's populist communication, distinct from non-populist strategies that generally do not employ such a calculated selection of content to influence public opinion. While other communication approaches may seek to build consensus or inform in a balanced way, populist strategies, such as those employed by Ventura, are explicitly aimed at manipulating public perception through the amplification of fears and prejudices (Berti and Loner 2023). Thus, in some ways our findings also reinforce the theory of the "politics of fear" (Wodak 2015; Ekström et al. 2022) as an important element in populist communication and offer new insights into how these tactics are operationalized in the digital environment.

We believe that this practice is based on the principle that news, especially that coming from recognized sources, has an inherent legitimacy that is transferred to the discourse with which it is associated (Mindich 2000). This happens because the news is perceived by the public to be an impartial representation of reality, giving credibility to the narratives built around it (Reich 2010). News credibility becomes a powerful tool in political communication, especially in contexts where trust in the political system is low and the populist narrative finds fertile ground. Ventura capitalizes on this credibility to reinforce the idea that his speech is based on facts, even though the selection of this news is partial and oriented to support a specific, generally alarmist or exclusionary, view. This strategic use of authentic news by Ventura resembles, in a certain aspect, the tactics of disinformation agents, who create or disseminate fake news to legitimize their speeches. Both cases start from the recognition that the news is perceived as a legitimate source of information (Baptista and Gradim 2022a). However, while Ventura selects true news that aligns with his speech, misinformation agents create fake content that mimics the structure of authentic news in an attempt to give his speech an appearance of legitimacy.

We believe that this study can be expanded to comparative analyses with other populist leaders in different international contexts, examining the effectiveness of communication strategies on social media.

Furthermore, future research can explore the impact of these narratives on voter behavior and perceptions, as well as the interaction between traditional and digital media in the construction of populist discourse.

6. Limitations

Although our study provides important contributions to the understanding of populist communication strategies, it is necessary to recognize its limitations. First, the analysis is restricted to a single case study—populist leader André Ventura—which limits the generalization of results to other contexts and populist leaders. Furthermore, the analysis focused exclusively on one platform (X), not considering other social media or communication channels that can also influence public discourse. Second, although the study uses both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the interpretation of the data still relies significantly on qualitative discursive analyses. This approach, although rich in details, can introduce interpretative biases.

Notes

[1] For more information, see https://www.dn.pt/4219714261/president-da-republica-decretou-a-dissolucao-do-parlamento/ (accessed on 8 July 2024).

[2] More information at https://pt.euronews.com/2024/02/26/arrancou-a-campanha-para-as-legislativas-de-10-de-marco (accessed on 8 July 2024).

[3] See https://cnnportugal.iol.pt/eleicoes-legislativas/andre-ventura/extrema-direita-pode-superar-os-40-deputados-e-rocar-o-milhao-de-votos/20240310/65ee258ad34e8d13c9b8aaf9 (accessed on 8 July 2024).

[4] See https://eco.sapo.pt/2024/06/09/portugal-vai-hoje-as-urnas-eleger-21-eurodeputados-mas-ha-paises-na-ue-que-ja-votaram-saiba-quais/ (accessed on 8 July 2024).

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