



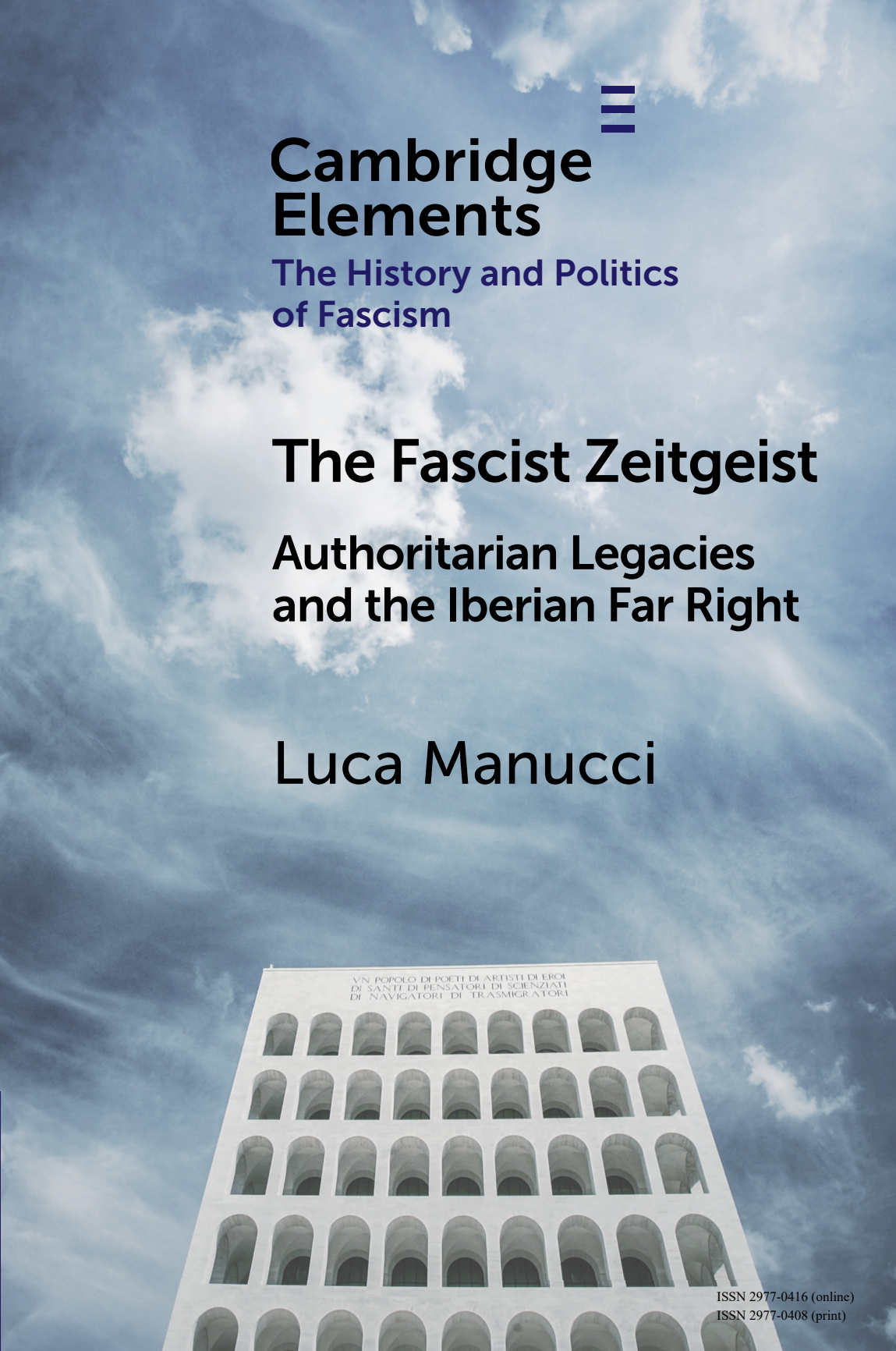
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Elements**

**The History and Politics
of Fascism**

The Fascist Zeitgeist

**Authoritarian Legacies
and the Iberian Far Right**

Luca Manucci



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University of Lisbon

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The Fascist Zeitgeist

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Elements in the History and Politics of Fascism

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Luca Manucci
University of Lisbon

Author for correspondence: Luca Manucci, luca.manucci@ics.ulisboa.pt

Abstract: The far right is achieving unprecedented electoral success, even in countries once considered immune such as Spain and Portugal. For decades, the stigma surrounding the long dictatorships of António Salazar and Francisco Franco seemed to inoculate the Iberian Peninsula against far-right mobilisation, yet Chega and VOX have shown that collective memory evolves – and stigma fades. This Element argues that understanding the far right's global rise requires attention to authoritarian nostalgia: a longing for an idealised authoritarian past. When activated by credible political actors with sufficient media visibility, this sentiment can generate support for far-right movements even in societies with a collective memory firmly condemning their authoritarian past. Using original survey data, the Element shows how contemporary far-right forces mobilise the ghosts of authoritarianism to erode democratic norms, revealing the enduring power of collective memory in shaping political behaviour.

Keywords: far right, authoritarian nostalgia, collective memory, Iberia, democratic transition

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Hey you know everybody's talking about the "good old days"
Everybody! The good old days
Well, let's talk about the good old days
Know what I'm saying?

Wu-Tang Clan, Can It Be All So Simple / Intermission.

To Milo

Preface

I arrived in Portugal in March 2019, and a few months later began a postdoctoral project at the University of Lisbon that posed a striking question: why was there no populism in Portugal? Populism, of course, existed – as it did everywhere – both as an attitude among the population and as a type of discourse articulated by parties. The country, however, lacked the far-right success that was spreading across Europe. That same year, Chega was founded, and by October it had entered the *Assembleia da República*. Its breakthrough not only demonstrated that no country is immune to the far right but also signalled that the legacies of the 1974 Carnation Revolution were fading and the stigma attached to the Estado Novo was weakening.

My own history has always been shaped by echoes of the past. I was born in Forlì – also called the city of the *Duce* because Benito Mussolini was born in a nearby village, Predappio. Once in power, Mussolini transformed Forlì with monumental architecture: the oversized train station and post office, the broad Mussolini boulevard (now *Viale della Libertà*), and *Piazza della Vittoria* with its central monument to the fallen of the First World War that was inaugurated on the tenth anniversary of the 'fascist revolution'.

I grew up near a bar filled with fascist memorabilia, including a bust of Mussolini's mother, and the local calendar was regularly marked by nostalgic pilgrimages to the dictator's tomb in Predappio. Yet Emilia-Romagna, my home region, was known as *rossa* ('red'): shaped by a deep anti-fascist tradition, it consistently supported left-wing parties after 1945, especially the Italian Communist Party. This tension between the visible remnants of authoritarianism and the resilience of anti-fascist politics profoundly shaped my political imagination. In 2019, Forlì elected its first right-wing mayor since the Second World War – just months before Chega's breakthrough in Portugal. Two long-standing exceptions collapsed at once around me.

Before moving to Lisbon, I spent over four years in Switzerland, where Mussolini's shadow followed me in its 'revolutionary syndicalism' form. There, I wrote my PhD dissertation at the University of Zurich, later published as *Populism and Collective Memory: Comparing Fascist Legacies in Western Europe* (2020). When I began in 2013, populism was still marginal; by 2020, it dominated headlines, social media, and political debate – invoked as a catch-all to explain almost every social and political phenomenon worldwide. Yet, as this Element argues, beneath the populist hype lay a deeper undercurrent: the steady turn of global politics towards the far right.

We now know that although most of those labelled 'populists' were in fact far-right actors claiming to embody the people's will, political analyses often focused on their populist rhetoric rather than on their nativism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism. Jair Bolsonaro, who ruled Brazil from 2019 to 2022, exemplifies this pattern. Though widely described as a populist, he showed little interest in the popular will, instead serving elite interests. After losing the 2022 elections, he incited a violent coup attempt in January 2023, including a plot to assassinate Lula, his political opponent. When I visited the Brazilian Congress in early 2025, the door to the Senate chamber was still shattered – a stark reminder of democracy's fragility. Now, as I finish writing this Element in September 2025, violent anti-immigration protests in the UK and the Netherlands mark a new peak in Europe's decades-long cycle of far-right mobilisation. Movements once confined to the political fringes now draw mass turnouts and mainstream attention, and their scale and violence underscore the mounting challenge liberal democracies face in containing them without further deepening polarisation.

Democracy is never guaranteed: even when elections take place, it can be eroded, weakened, or attacked. Memory plays a crucial role in sustaining democratic norms. In 2025, some 220,000 Jewish survivors of Nazi concentration camps are still alive, among them Liliana Segre, born in 1930 and deported to Auschwitz, where her family was murdered. In 2022 – exactly a century after Mussolini's March on Rome – Segre, then Senate president, was replaced by Ignazio La Russa of the far-right party Brothers of Italy after delivering an emotional speech about the impact of Italy's racial laws on her life. La Russa, whose middle name is Benito, considers it an 'honour' to be called a fascist – turning the succession into a chilling reminder of how history can echo in the present.

Sinister traces of the past keep resurfacing with alarming frequency, shaking the foundations of democracy and exposing the fragility of its institutions. I felt compelled to write this Element due to my personal history, my academic path, and the urgency of our global political

moment. Above all, I wrote it for my friends and family in Forlì, whose streets shaped my *Weltanschauung* and whose corners, jests, and accents continue to resonate in my thoughts.

I wrote this Element for Lea and Milo, because I cannot imagine a future without them.

And, ultimately, I wrote this Element because history without political science bears no fruit, and political science without history has no roots. I have always sensed this, but only now do I *know* it.

1 Introduction: A Fascist Zeitgeist

Two decades ago, populism began attracting intense scholarly attention (again), crystallised in Cas Mudde's influential article 'The Populist Zeitgeist' (2004), in which he described populism as an ideology that pits the pure people against the corrupt elites. Since then, the term has entered mainstream discourse – so thoroughly that Cambridge Dictionary named it its Word of the Year in 2017 – and it has been used to explain political transformations across the globe, from Brexit and Donald Trump's presidency to the Occupy Wall Street movement and Israel's foreign policy. Yet its ubiquity has diluted its meaning. Journalists, scholars, and pundits have stretched the label to encompass far-right, authoritarian, illiberal, or even fascist tendencies, normalising extremist ideas and presenting them as legitimate expressions of the *vox populi* rather than threats to democratic norms. The widespread focus on populism, and the casual use of the term, in effect enabled a distinctly *fascist Zeitgeist* to proliferate, granting far-right movements legitimacy in both discourse and practice, presenting authoritarian ideas as the absolute expression of the *volonté générale* rather than signals of the erosion of democratic norms.

Contemporary politics is not witnessing a return to historical fascism, and present-day actors should not be straightforwardly labelled as fascist. The fascist Zeitgeist consists in a broader shift in the boundaries of what can be publicly expressed and politically mobilised. Ideas, symbols, and historical references once considered electorally toxic and normatively unacceptable have gradually re-entered mainstream discourse. What was previously confined to extremist margins can now be articulated, reframed, and normalised within democratic politics.

Rather than a return of historical fascism, this fascist Zeitgeist can be understood as a cultural and political climate in which authoritarian nostalgia, exclusionary nationalism, and the mainstreaming of extremist symbols increasingly shape public life. It manifests in the normalisation of far-right ideologies, the decline of democratic principles, and the manipulation of collective memory to justify authoritarian agendas. A crucial

step in the rise of far-right politics is the whitewashing of past crimes, the weaponisation of history, and the rewriting of historical narratives to legitimise authoritarianism.

Conflicting narratives about the authoritarian past play a key role in the diffusion of nostalgia for that past. Disputes over statues, museums, street names, and sites of remembrance have sharpened across the continents, as societies wrestle with the legacies of colonialism and authoritarianism (Montanari, 2024). At stake is not simply heritage, but the contested terrain of collective memory – who has the authority to shape it, which stories endure in public space, and how societies reckon with histories that refuse to remain buried (Thatcher, 2025).

With far-right currents across Europe increasingly echoing the fascist past, Spain and Portugal long appeared to be exceptions. In both countries, the enduring stigma attached to the authoritarian regimes of Francisco Franco and António Salazar seemed to ‘inoculate’ their political systems against far-right resurgence. For decades, despite favourable conditions and a latent electorate, far-right parties remained electorally marginal, weighed down by associations with the old dictatorships. This changed dramatically after 2019, when far-right parties entered national parliaments and quickly rose to become key political forces.

These developments make Spain and Portugal especially compelling cases for analysis. They allow us to examine the reactivation of far-right electorates dormant for decades, the transformation of collective memory, and the erosion of social norms and political stigma. Moreover, the Iberian Peninsula offers a unique comparative lens: while the two countries share deep social, cultural, economic, and historical similarities, their paths to democracy diverged sharply (Fishman, 2019). Portugal underwent eighteen months of social revolution, whereas Spain pursued a ‘pact of silence’, choosing to suppress debates about its past. This contrast enables us to address pressing questions. How do different types of democratic transition shape collective memory? How does the evolution of collective memory, in turn, affect political systems? How enduring are the legacies of the transition itself, and what other forces or historical layers might gradually dilute the influence of each society’s pathway to democracy? And what do Spain and Portugal reveal about the fragility of democratic norms in societies where the authoritarian past, once heavily stigmatised, is once again casting a long shadow?

In just a few years, the Iberian political landscape has changed dramatically. In Portugal, André Ventura combined the strategic use of controversy and unprecedented media visibility to propel Chega from a fledgling

movement into the country's first electorally significant far-right party and, by 2025, its second-largest parliamentary force. In Spain, Santiago Abascal pursued a parallel strategy, relying on provocative rhetoric and high-profile events to dominate the news agenda and normalise VOX's far-right positions. With the electoral breakthrough of reactionary forces, aspects of the Franco and Salazar regimes once thought permanently buried resurfaced, including mottos, mythologies, exclusionary ideologies, and authoritarian practices. Taken together, these developments highlight how authoritarian legacies continue to shape the trajectory of far-right mobilisation, while also raising troubling questions about the erosion of democratic norms, the weaponisation of history, and the reappearance of authoritarian echoes in contemporary political life.

Like in the rest of the world, unresolved historical legacies and social grievances shape the Iberian political life. In Portugal, tensions over the authoritarian and revolutionary past, as well as the country's colonial and slavery legacies, fuel heated political debates. The creation of a commission to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 25 November 1975 counter-coup that ended the revolution, for example, highlights the increasingly contested memory of the democratic transition. Similarly, President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa's proposals to acknowledge and compensate for colonial-era crimes and slavery provoked sharp criticism from Ventura, who framed these measures as attacks on Portuguese history and national pride. In Spain, the exhumation of Franco's body from the Valley of the Fallen in 2019, followed by the 2022 Law of Democratic Memory, reignited debates over how the dictatorship should be remembered. The fiftieth anniversary of Franco's death in 2025 brought these tensions back to the forefront, intensifying divisions over historical memory. At the same time, hostility towards migrants has escalated: in July 2025, migrant hunts in Torre Pacheco, organised by far-right networks linked to VOX and Chega, demonstrated how nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric can translate into real-world violence.

Today's Europe is not returning to an authoritarian past where minorities were violently oppressed, democracy was abolished, pluralism was severely restricted, and information was censored. Democratic attitudes are now widespread: checks and balances uphold the separation of powers and the rule of law, the media operate freely, and a plurality of viewpoints is not only permitted but also encouraged. At the same time, however, significant segments of the population are feeling alienated, isolated, and dissatisfied. Alarmingly, the idea that a return to authoritarianism might be preferable to the status quo is spreading – not only among older

citizens nostalgic for Franco and Salazar but also among younger generations with no direct experience of that past. Fifty years after the end of the Iberian dictatorships, the broad consensus in favour of democracy is showing signs of erosion, while authoritarian ideas are resurfacing. For decades, the legacies of a dark past helped sustain solid democracies, but with the electoral success of far-right parties such as Chega and VOX, liberal democracy faces the risk of taking a darker turn – a trend observable across the world, from Argentina to the United States, and via Turkey, Israel, Russia, and India.

That far-right actors come to power through democratic elections does not mitigate the problem; if anything, it deepens it. Unlike the violent coups or revolutionary takeovers that marked twentieth-century regime changes, contemporary democratic erosion occurs primarily from within, through the actions of duly elected leaders who exploit institutional weaknesses to undermine democratic norms (Bermeo, 2016; Boese et al., 2022). Indeed, using legal and institutional means to erode checks and balances, attack independent judiciaries, restrict the media, and manipulate electoral systems in their favour, it is possible to subvert the constitutional order and produce authoritarian societies (Przeworski, 2019). Democratic backsliding – the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, rules, and norms – has become a global phenomenon (Gidron et al., 2025; Riedl et al., 2025). It is frequently accompanied by revisionist accounts of history, where selective retellings of the past legitimise present-day authoritarian ambitions. Across both established and emerging democracies, authoritarian nostalgia is often mobilised through mythologised narratives of a glorified past, constructed and propagated by political campaigns (Goidel & Goidel, 2025).

Nostalgia for past authoritarian regimes does not necessarily mean that the future will recreate our dark history in identical form. While a return to historical fascism is highly unlikely, authoritarian ideas can resurface in a form adapted to contemporary democratic contexts drawing on themes such as law and order, traditional gender roles, strict social hierarchies, and cultural homogeneity. Yet the positive remembrance and reinterpretation of a past long stigmatised deserves careful examination; this is precisely the aim of this work. Spain and Portugal provide particularly instructive cases for exploring this phenomenon: both countries were long considered largely immune to authoritarian nostalgia and yet, since 2019, this assumption has proven false despite decades of apparent resistance. To analyse these issues, the volume explores in depth the dynamics of authoritarian nostalgia and collective memory through the Iberian case.

Section 2 examines the Franco and Salazar regimes as right-wing authoritarian rather than strictly fascist, focusing on how they seized power, justified their rule, and the myths they forged and mobilised. It highlights common features of the two regimes before analysing their transition to democracy. Portugal's Carnation Revolution created a clear break with the past, while Spain's 'pact of forgetting' tried to bury the past by silencing it. The section then introduces the concept of collective memory and explores how these transitions produced different narratives: whereas in Portugal, memory emphasises heroisation through revolutionary mythology, in Spain, it reflects deliberate cancellation.

Section 3 investigates the links between past authoritarianism and contemporary far-right parties. In Iberia, violent repression and limited freedoms produced strong stigma against parties invoking Franco or Salazar. In Portugal, this stigma was further reinforced by the shared revolutionary mythology of the Carnation Revolution, while in Spain, the additional traumatic legacy of the civil war intensified it. This Iberian exceptionalism, which delayed far-right electoral success longer than in most other European countries, ended when VOX in Spain and Chega in Portugal entered parliament in 2019. The section then offers an analysis of the history, leadership, ideology, and electorate of these parties, providing insights into the factors behind their breakthrough.

Section 4 focuses on authoritarian nostalgia as a key driver of these parties' appeal. After defining the concept and situating it beyond Iberia, the section shows how VOX and Chega portray a positive image of the authoritarian past – more openly in Spain than in Portugal, reflecting differences in the two countries' democratic transitions. Drawing on original survey data, it argues that both parties attract disproportionately nostalgic electorates, including younger voters. Their electoral success thus provides an institutional channel for authoritarian nostalgia.

The concluding section draws together the empirical findings and theoretical contributions while situating them within broader debates about democratic resilience and collective memory. It returns to the Iberian cases to show how distinct post-authoritarian memory regimes in Portugal and Spain delayed – but ultimately failed to prevent – the far-right's electoral breakthrough. A key lesson is that authoritarian nostalgia endures as a latent attitudinal reservoir that can be activated when political opportunity structures and credible far-right entrepreneurs converge. Going beyond Iberia, it is possible to observe how generational change, contested remembrance, and the erosion of stigma surrounding authoritarian pasts reshape the boundaries of legitimate politics. Therefore, democratic

consolidation depends not only on institutional safeguards but also on the critical and responsible transmission of historical memory.

2 Authoritarian Past and Collective Memory

This section explores the parallel trajectories of authoritarianism and democratic transition in Portugal and Spain (see Figure 1). Both countries experienced long-lasting right-wing regimes in the twentieth century that shared core features such as political repression, anti-communism, and a rhetoric of national salvation in contrast to the chaotic republican experiences they replaced. Yet they diverged sharply in the paths they took towards democracy. These differing transitions have shaped collective memory in distinct ways, creating complex legacies that continue to inform the political landscape today.

Following a classic definition of fascism as a palingenetic form of ultra-nationalism that seeks to establish a totalitarian state through mass mobilisation and violence (Griffin, 1993), the Iberian dictatorships were not fully comparable to the overtly fascist regimes of Italy and Germany. Franco’s Spain and Salazar’s Portugal pursued a formal yet flexible neutrality during the Second World War, avoiding the military defeat and political collapse of their Axis counterparts. This strategic positioning, coupled with Cold War alignment and controlled narratives at home, enabled both regimes to endure and benefit from selective postwar economic expansion while escaping sustained international ostracism.

As this section shows, another factor behind this relative absence of demonisation was the construction of collective memories that

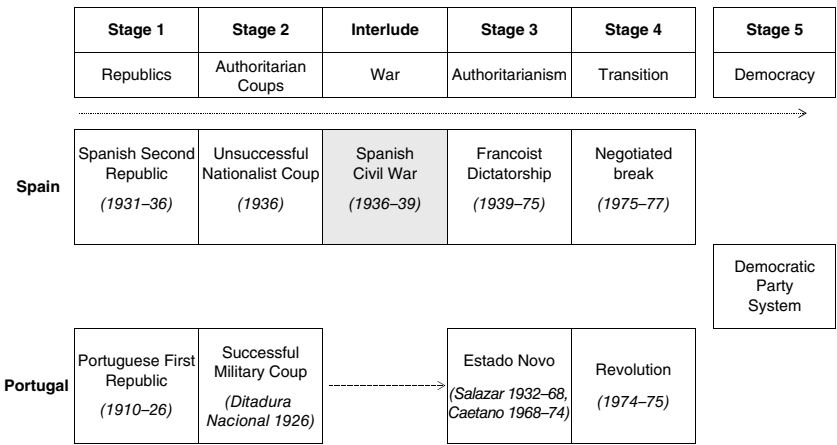


Figure 1 The evolution of political systems in Iberia

downplayed or obscured the dictatorships' crimes and repression. In Portugal, the 1974 Carnation Revolution produced a triumphant narrative of liberation, which often overshadowed critical engagement with the dictatorship and its colonial wars. In Spain, the post-Franco transition rested on a 'pact of silence' that normalised amnesia about Francoist repression in the name of national reconciliation. Despite these limitations, both countries managed for decades to marginalise far-right narratives and partially stigmatise their authoritarian pasts – a phenomenon that will be explored in the third section.

2.1 The New State and the Carnation Revolution

On 5 October 1910, the Portuguese First Republic (1910–1926) brought nearly eight centuries of monarchy to a close. It proved short-lived, ending with a military coup on 28 May 1926. During those sixteen turbulent years, the republic saw thirty prime ministers and eight presidents. Yet it also produced a new constitution that established a secular and republican regime, emphasising civil liberties, the separation of church and state, and the sovereignty of the people (Billig & Marinho, 2017). This fragile democratic experiment briefly shifted towards authoritarianism in 1918 when Sidónio Pais – dubbed 'the President-King' – took power via a military junta that violated the very constitution he helped draft. His corporatist, charismatic leadership prefigured traits of future fascist regimes (Pinto, 1995).

The 1926 nationalist military coup implemented a new regime known as *Dictadura Nacional* (National Dictatorship), the de facto start of forty-eight years of authoritarian, corporatist, and nationalist rule. In 1928, António de Oliveira Salazar, a political economy professor with strong Catholic roots, was named Minister of Finance. By 1932, he had become Prime Minister and, when a 1933 constitutional referendum converted the military dictatorship into a civilian right-wing regime known as the *Estado Novo* (New State), he became the country's leader. Salazar justified authoritarianism by highlighting the instability of the First Republic (Sardica, 2011), framing his regime as a necessary response to political chaos and secularism (Gori, 2025). In this regard, Salazar also reactivated the myth of the *Reconquista* – a series of military and cultural campaigns that had allowed Portugal to expel Muslims from Europe (Silva, 2019).

During the *Estado Novo*, the 1926 coup was rebranded as a 'National Revolution' and likened to the 1640 restoration of independence from Spain. Salazar framed his rule as a moral crusade against the First Republic, which he claimed had rejected truth, faith, and morality – paving

the way for crisis and communism. The regime also reinterpreted the myth of Sebastianism, presenting Salazar as a national saviour. Similarly, official discourse and school textbooks compared Salazar to Afonso I, casting both as founders who restored the nation through Catholic and traditional values (Matos, 1988).

Whether or not the *Estado Novo* can be labelled as fascist (Santos et al., 1980), and despite its non-totalitarian features (Bermeo, 2007), it certainly was a right-wing authoritarian regime as defined by Juan Linz (2000). Even though the single party (*União Nacional*) failed to become a true mass movement, the regime was characterised by the absence of political freedom, a strong censorship limiting or eliminating freedom of expression, and an infamous political police known as PIDE that kept files on an estimated three million people (Martins, 1968; Pinto, 2001; Bermeo, 2007; Rosas, 2009). Unlike Italian fascism, it lacked mass mobilisation and totalitarian ambitions (Pinto, 1995) but functionally mirrored fascism through its anti-liberal, anti-socialist, and anti-democratic stance rooted in social Catholicism.

Elections were held from 1934 but were tightly controlled (Raimundo, 2023); in 1958, Humberto Delgado contested a rigged presidential election, in 1959 was forced into exile, and in 1965 was assassinated by PIDE. Underground groups, particularly the Communist Party, faced brutal persecution, while moderate democratic opponents endured less severe but persistent repression. Methods of control included imprisonment without trial, torture, forced labour, purges, and an extensive informant network. Political activism was effectively stifled and the populace was pacified and distracted through the ‘three Fs’: Football, Fado, and Fátima – symbolising sport, music, and religion.

Additionally, Salazar promoted a vision of hierarchy, stability, and social harmony, encapsulated in the motto ‘God, Country, and Family’. He also supported Franco during the Spanish Civil War, framing the conflict as a crusade against Bolshevism (Pena Rodríguez, 2019). In terms of the regime’s religious principles, Catholicism was a key part of Salazarism and the 1940 concordat between the *Estado Novo* and the Holy See granted the Church significant institutional privileges (e.g., religious education in schools and ecclesiastical autonomy) and Salazar used it as a propaganda tool to enhance the regime’s prestige (R. Carvalho, 2016).

Salazar’s imperial vision established the *Estado Novo* as the rightful successor of Portugal’s maritime empire, promoting a ‘civilising mission’ aimed at converting and educating populations deemed inferior (Castelo, 1998; Polonah, 2011). The Monument to the Discoveries (*Padrão dos*

Descobrimentos) embodied this imperial propaganda in Lisbon, the nation's capital. By reviving symbols of the Age of Discoveries, the regime glorified colonial history while erasing its violence, cultivating myths of national greatness and racial harmony that ignored exploitation, slavery, and racism (Claerhout, 2025). This narrative was later reinforced by *Luso-tropicalism*, which idealised Portuguese colonialism as uniquely tolerant and multicultural, despite discriminatory systems like the *Estatuto do Indígena*, which demanded cultural assimilation for access to basic rights well into the twentieth century.

Yet beneath this idealised image, the empire faced mounting resistance. From 1961, anti-colonial wars broke out across Africa. Even after Salazar's replacement by Marcelo Caetano in 1968, Portugal persisted in these costly conflicts. They ultimately contributed to the 1974 Carnation Revolution led by the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), ending the *Estado Novo* and restoring democracy (Bermeo, 2007). Initiated by middle-ranking officers of the MFA through the Carnation Revolution on 25 April 1974, the transition was marked by a state crisis, military leadership, and sweeping societal transformations (Pinto & Paris, 2023; Rezola, 2023), in line with the definition of a classic social revolution rooted in a pattern of state crisis (Skocpol, 1979). Radical measures including purges, nationalisations, and agrarian reforms dismantled the *Estado Novo*. Symbolic measures were also implemented, such as the creation of the Commission for the Black Book on Fascism, which published over twenty books documenting repression, censorship, and political police activity (Pinto, 2001, 2006; Raimundo & Pinto, 2014).

The revolutionary process teetered on the brink of collapse on 11 March 1975 when General António de Spínola, a conservative figure and former President of the Republic, launched a coup to halt decolonisation and crush the rising influence of the radical left within the MFA. His bid to 'restore order' crumbled within hours, unleashing a surge of radicalisation that propelled the revolution into the turbulent 'hot summer' of 1975, when strikes, occupations, and mass demonstrations pushed the country to the edge of civil conflict. Amid this chaos, a decisive countercoup on 25 November 1975 by moderate MFA officers wrested back control, steering the transition onto a more stable path and bringing the revolutionary period to a dramatic close.

Subsequent elections in 1975 and 1976 consolidated moderate forces and marginalised the radical left (Lisi, 2015). The 1976 Constitution, one of Europe's most progressive in social and labour rights, banned fascist parties – a clause retained even after later revisions (Pinto, 2001). The

transition fostered a party system shaped by the revolutionary juncture: a divided left, and a right without any authoritarian successor party, given that right-wing forces became heavily stigmatised (Dinas & Northmore-Ball, 2020; Freire, 2021). Overall, Portugal's democratic consolidation unfolded amid national reconciliation and an enduring commitment to participatory democracy and antifascist consensus (T. Fernandes, 2015).

Under these conditions, the right had to distance itself from the *Estado Novo* and prove its democratic credentials beyond doubt. The *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD), later renamed *Partido Social Democrata* (PSD), and the *Centro Democrático Social* (CDS) made significant efforts, at least at the national level, to exclude individuals associated with the dictatorship and to project democratic legitimacy (Pinto, 2010). While the PSD quickly became part of the provisional governments, the CDS faced initial resistance and was nearly declared illegal before the 1975 elections. Despite their ideological differences, both parties – especially in their early years – adopted platforms further to the left than their European counterparts, reflecting the revolutionary climate (Bruneau & Macleod, 1986; Gunther & Montero, 2001; Dinas, 2017).

2.2 Francoism and the Pact of Silence

Following the collapse of Miguel Primo de Rivera's authoritarian regime in 1930 – marked by economic crisis, inflation, and the loss of support from both the king and the army (Casanova, 2010) – Spain held municipal elections in which republicans secured a decisive victory. In December 1931, the Second Spanish Republic was established as a secular democracy granting equal rights to all citizens and restoring statutes of autonomy for Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia, previously revoked by Primo de Rivera (Payne, 1993). However, tensions escalated: when the Catholic conservative party won the elections in 1933, the radical and socialist majority in the assembly refused to accept the outcome. This led to revolutionary uprisings in 1934, notably the October Revolution, which were violently repressed (Jackson, 1965).

The left reorganised under the Popular Front and won the 1936 elections, but instability deepened. The fascist Falange Española, led by José Antonio Primo de Rivera – son of the former dictator – gained traction amid mounting violence and political assassinations. In July 1936, a coup led by General Francisco Franco began with an army uprising in Spanish Morocco. Failing to take key cities like Madrid, the conflict escalated into civil war. The Nationalists, supported by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Salazar's Portugal – most infamously in the bombing of Guernica

by German and Italian warplanes at Franco's request – fought against Republicans backed by communists, anarchists, and the International Brigades. Franco's 1939 victory ushered in a brutal dictatorship marked by mass killings and the revocation of regional autonomies (Preston, 2012).

Franco's regime displayed more pronounced fascist and even totalitarian features than the Portuguese *Estado Novo*. Estimates indicate that it was responsible for the execution of approximately 150,000 Republicans, the imprisonment of up to 500,000 individuals in concentration camps, and the forced exile of hundreds of thousands (Aguilar Fernández et al., 2011; Preston, 2012; Aguilar Fernández & Ramírez-Barat, 2014). State violence remained intense in the early postwar years, especially in the 1940s, continuing the logic of wartime repression (Juliá, 1999; Balcells, 2017). Spain is often described as the second country in the world, after Cambodia, for the number of mass graves containing victims of forced disappearances, though no official UN data are available.

The regime purged state institutions and any form of internal resistance or collective action faced harsh suppression (Balcells & Villamil, 2020). It framed leftist opponents as subversives threatening national unity and the army as saviours of Spain (P. Davis & Lynch, 2002). Civil liberties were severely restricted, and any form of association had to operate clandestinely. The Public Order Court (TOP), established in 1963 to prosecute political dissent, remained active until its formal abolition in January 1977 (Del Aguila, 2001). Francoist ideology cast democratic rule as inherently chaotic, portraying the Second Republic as a cautionary tale of instability and civil war and the political parties as responsible for the increasing polarisation (Aguilar Fernández & Humlebaek, 2002). Francoism also reinstated traditional gender roles by reversing Republican-era laws on civil marriage, divorce, and abortion (Hepworth, 2023). In recent historiographical work, Francoism is understood not merely as a political dictatorship but as a complex institutional and ideological project that sought to shape Spanish society at multiple levels – from state structures to cultural norms and social identities (Godicheau & Marco, 2025).

Another key myth upon which Franco built his dictatorship is the *Reconquista*. He instrumentalised the crusade by Catholic monarchs to take Iberia away from its Moorish rulers as a justification for the 'reconquering' of Spain from communists, leftists, and atheists during the Civil War (García Sanjuán, 2020; Hepworth, 2023). He cast himself as a modern-day Catholic monarch reclaiming Spain from 'Moors' – symbolised by Republicans and Marxists. Moreover, between 1950 and 1958,

Franco oversaw the construction of the *Valle de los Caídos* (now Valley of Cuelgamuros) using forced Republican labour. Officially framed as a gesture of reconciliation, the site glorified Franco's 'crusade' and buried Nationalist victims. In 1959, thousands of Republican remains were exhumed from mass graves and transferred there, and Franco inaugurated it officially to mark the twentieth anniversary of his victory in the Civil War (Hepworth, 2014). Beyond the *Valle*, Francoism did not merely commemorate its dead but constructed an extensive monumental landscape. These monuments function as political instruments that encoded a moral division between 'good' and 'bad' Spaniards and normalised the regime's interpretation of the Civil War in public space (del Arco Blanco, 2024).

By the early 1970s, the regime faced growing internal dissent and international isolation. Amid rising civil unrest and the 1973 assassination of Franco's designated successor, Admiral Carrero Blanco, by ETA – the Basque nationalist armed organisation responsible for a decades-long campaign of terrorism – the regime entered a phase of controlled liberalisation (T. Fernandes, 2015). Franco's death in 1975 marked the end of the dictatorship, and a negotiated democratic transition – *la Transición* – began under King Juan Carlos I and Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez, culminating in the 1978 democratic constitution. The Franco regime was never defeated by its opponents but instead abolished itself and ceded power peacefully. Unlike Portugal, Spain's democratisation did not emerge from a state crisis or revolutionary upheaval but rather through a strategic dismantling of authoritarian institutions under regime oversight. This elite-led, top-down, consensual process prioritised continuity, moderation, and political stability – hallmarks of what became known as the *ruptura pactada*, or 'negotiated break' (Aguilar Fernández, 1998, 2001).

Central to Spain's transition was a shared commitment by the elite to avoid the polarising legacies of the Civil War and Francoist repression (Linz & Stepan, 1978; Gunther et al., 2004). As such, both moderate opposition actors and reformist Francoists converged around a tacit 'pact of forgetting' (*pacto del olvido*), which discouraged legal, symbolic, or historical reckoning with the dictatorship, and introduced no accountability for past human rights violations (Aguilar Fernández, 2008; Sikkink & Kim, 2013). This consensus was crystallised in the 1977 Amnesty Law, the first major act of the new democratic parliament.

While it freed remaining political prisoners, legalised all political parties, and restored civil liberties, the Amnesty Law also shielded former regime officials from prosecution and foreclosed institutional truth-seeking

(Aguilar Fernández & Ramírez-Barat, 2014). Further measures aimed at ‘national reconciliation’ included selective reparations to Civil War victims and the restoration of Catalan autonomy in 1979. The avoidance of accountability, absence of symbolic ruptures, and refusal to condemn the dictatorship reflected the logic of consensus and depolarisation that defined the transition’s cultural dimension. Despite these shortcomings, Spain has been considered ‘a paradigmatic case of a successful transition based on the decision to leave aside the most painful episodes of the past’ (Aguilar Fernández, 2008, p. 418).

Spain’s emerging party system bore the imprint of these negotiated arrangements, thus diverging significantly from the Portuguese case. The *Unión de Centro Democrático* (UCD), founded by Francoist reformists, led the early governments but collapsed in 1983 amid instability, including an attempted coup in 1981 by elements of the Civil Guard and the Spanish military to revert Spain to a Francoist government (Aguilar Fernández & Sánchez-Cuenca, 2009). More enduring was the *Alianza Popular* (AP), later renamed *Partido Popular* (PP), formed in 1976 by former Francoist ministers. As a classic case of a (reactive) authoritarian successor party, the PP remained a major political force in subsequent decades (Loxton & Mainwaring, 2018). Unlike Portugal’s PSD and CDS – parties that explicitly broke with the previous regime – the PP retained ideological and organisational links to Francoism.

2.3 Collective Memory

So far, we have examined the historical facts concerning the two Iberian dictatorships. But how were they remembered? History and memory, though often used interchangeably in everyday discourse, are distinct (Boyd, 2008). Like individuals, societies choose which parts of the past to remember or forget, which events to commemorate, and which to condemn or learn from (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Ricoeur, 2004). Collective memory is the outcome of a social process through which societies transmit selected narratives of the past to future generations. This memory is not fixed; it evolves through ongoing struggles and power relations. While never fully unified, collective memory can at times see a dominant narrative achieve broad consensus (Jelin, 2003). It is often instrumentalised – and sometimes weaponised – for political purposes. Memory entrepreneurs play a key role: they mobilise communities and influence discourse by promoting particular narratives of the past and linking them to present concerns (Balcells, 2012; Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017; Villamil, 2021).

Societies employ a wide range of practices to sustain memory regimes, including rituals, commemorations, museums, monuments, street names, and public policies (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014). Physical manifestations of collective memory – what Nora (1989) refers to as ‘sites of memory’ – are particularly potent because they render memory visible and enduring in public life. However, the content and nature of collective memory are shaped not only by top-down decisions but also by bottom-up processes: debates among historians, books, films, television programmes, exhibitions in museums, activism from civic associations, judicial proceedings, and broader social conflicts over historical interpretation. As a result, collective memory is inherently plural and contested (Feindt et al., 2014), and it is transmitted not only through official narratives but also through familial and social socialisation (Voigtländer & Voth, 2012). Notably, memory policies can sometimes backfire, provoking public resistance to the intended narrative (Villamil & Balcels, 2021; Rozenas & Vlasenko, 2022).

Memory plays a fundamental role in forging collective identities by shaping not only how communities understand their past (Ariely, 2019; Sierp, 2025) but also opinions, behaviours, and political attitudes (Haffert, 2022; Wayne & Zhukov, 2022; Fouka & Voth, 2023; Cremaschi & Masullo, 2024). In cases of traumatic or violent histories, like wars or dictatorships, social pressure can effectively stigmatise nostalgic views, rendering them socially unacceptable and subject to both material and symbolic sanctions, thereby hindering their diffusion and normalisation (Colombo, 2025). For instance, the way a society remembers an authoritarian past can significantly affect public attitudes towards democratic transitions (Aguilar Fernández, 1998).

Perhaps the most effective way to ensure that a new democracy rests on solid foundations is to truly confront a divisive authoritarian past. By acknowledging mistakes and transmitting their lessons to future generations, societies can neutralise the lingering legacies of dictatorship. A key example of this approach – what I call *culpabilisation* (Caramani & Manucci, 2019) – is Germany’s moral and political effort to reckon with the crimes of the Nazi regime. This process is commonly referred to as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (‘coping with the past’), though Adorno (1977) preferred the term *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (‘working through the past’), emphasising that confronting history is an ongoing process rather than a final resolution.

The opposite approach, *victimisation*, generates minimal stigma towards the authoritarian past. It occurs when a country refuses to accept responsibility and instead portrays itself as a victim. In such cases, collective

reckoning is difficult, lessons are forgotten, and the legacies of authoritarian rule remain strong. Italy's lack of critical reflection on its fascist past provides a clear example of this type of memory (Del Boca, 2005). Whereas parties linked to the former regime are heavily stigmatised in countries marked by *culpabilisation*, the opposite occurs when victimisation narratives prevail (Manucci, 2020).

Two intermediate types of collective memory of the authoritarian past can be identified: *heroisation* and *cancellation*. Both create some degree of stigma towards the dictatorship – more than victimisation, but less than culpabilisation. This framework helps situate the Iberian trajectories: Portugal and Spain embody these intermediate forms. In Portugal, memory has taken the form of *heroisation*: the nation portrays itself as having acted bravely against the authoritarian regime to reclaim freedom and democracy. Spain, by contrast, has followed the path of *cancellation*, choosing largely to silence its past. How were these memories constructed? How did they evolve over time? And with what consequences?

2.3.1 Portuguese Heroisation

The collective memory that emerged in Portugal following its democratic transition is marked by a process of *heroisation*. A powerful mythology developed around the 1974 Carnation Revolution, framing the rejection of authoritarianism and the celebration of democracy as the foundational pillars of Portuguese democratic identity. To reinforce this narrative, symbolic measures were adopted: Salazar's name and statues were removed from public spaces, and national holidays were redefined. Notably, the republican revolution of 5 October 1910 gained renewed significance, and the Salazar Bridge over the Tagus River was renamed *Ponte 25 de Abril* (Pinto, 2006).

Building on this foundational myth, Portuguese institutions adopted an anti-authoritarian narrative rooted in the legacy of resistance to the dictatorship. At the heart of this memory lies the Carnation Revolution, portrayed as a popular uprising through which the Portuguese people reclaimed freedom, civil rights, and democracy after nearly five decades of right-wing authoritarian rule (Bermeo, 1986). This narrative has been institutionalised through a range of official commemorations and popular remembrance practices, including the annual retelling of the events of April 1974. Key to the transmission of this heroic legacy are street demonstrations and celebrations, the annual commemorative session in parliament, and educational activities organised in schools and other public institutions (Fishman, 2019).

Initially, Portugal faced a double legacy with a tension between opposing poles: the memory of the right-wing dictatorship, and the extremism of the revolutionary process (*Processo Revolucionário em Curso* – PREC). By the mid-1980s, however, this dual legacy had largely faded. No right-wing party represented the former authoritarian elite or upheld its values, while the military and socialist legacy of the revolution was dismantled through the constitutional reforms of 1982 and 1989 (Pinto, 2010). Around the same time, Portugal also resolved most of its transitional justice challenges (Raimundo & Pinto, 2014) and normalised into a typical liberal democracy.

Despite the occasional heated debate, the past remained a relatively de-politicised issue (Lobo et al., 2011; Santana-Pereira et al., 2016; Raimundo, 2023). All major political parties express commitment to commemorating the revolution (Fishman, 2019), and surveys conducted in 2004 and 2014 show that most citizens across the political spectrum – but particularly the left-leaning – view the transition positively and with pride (Lobo, 2016; Lobo et al., 2016). During democratic consolidation, political efforts prioritised managing transitional legacies over critically addressing the authoritarian past, aiming to promote reconciliation and pacification (Pinto, 2010).

However, a narrative as dominant and celebratory as Portugal's revolutionary memory inevitably creates blind spots, allowing alternative or marginalised accounts to take root behind its monolithic façade. Even the supposedly consensual legacy of 25 April is subject to reinterpretation and political dispute (Loff & Cardina, 2024). Although the dictatorship is formally and unanimously condemned, its crimes are frequently whitewashed or omitted from public discourse and educational curricula (Loff, 2014; Da Silva & Ferreira, 2019). At the same time, visual and cultural references to the country's colonial and authoritarian past remain deeply embedded in the urban landscape and national iconography of contemporary Portugal, but there is little or no critical reckoning with post-colonial justice (Peralta, 2025). The persistence of positive narratives about Portuguese colonialism is therefore interconnected with broader mnemonic struggles over the colonial wars and liberation struggles (Cardina, 2024).

Despite broad consensus on the positive legacy of the revolution, the memory of the Salazarist empire and the colonial past continues to evoke national pride because it is framed around an allegedly tolerant approach – a myth known as *Luso-tropicalismo*, promoted by the regime for colonial propaganda (de Oliveira, 2015). Developed by Brazilian sociologist

Gilberto Freyre in the 1930s and later exploited by the *Estado Novo*, this narrative claimed that the Portuguese were uniquely suited as colonisers: more tolerant than other imperial powers, more willing to intermingle culturally, and more open to racial mixing. Such ideas have left a lasting imprint on Portugal's collective self-representation. As Vala and colleagues (2008) show, *Luso-tropicalismo* fostered a public anti-prejudice norm by emphasising the supposed adaptability and harmony of the Portuguese 'national character'. Yet this representation, while weakening the link between national identity and overt prejudice, also masks subtler dynamics. It shields against the open expression of racism but leaves deeper structures untouched, allowing colonial myths to persist and racial blind spots to endure in contemporary Portuguese society.

Similarly, the regime's repressive apparatus has never been fully examined through formal truth-seeking mechanisms: the Commission for the Black Book on Fascism remained confined to specialist circles with little social impact, and musealisation was long delayed (Raimundo & Pinto, 2014). Lisbon's first resistance museum opened only in 2015, followed by a second in Peniche in 2019, both housed in former prisons where dissidents were detained and tortured. Controversial themes such as *Luso-tropicalismo* and the role of General Spínola are also largely absent from national commemorations, overshadowed by the revolution's heroic narrative (Billig & Marinho, 2017). This institutional neglect has fostered collective amnesia: surveys show that nearly half of Portuguese citizens view the dictatorship in neutral or even positive term (Santana-Pereira et al., 2016).

Although Portugal's democratic transition is often portrayed as depoliticised, the revolution's legacy remains contested. Beyond the broad consensus around its idealised image, political actors have strategically instrumentalised memory. Between 2012 and 2015, left-wing parties and social movements invoked the past during anti-austerity protests, framing government policies as threats to core achievements of the Revolution and Constitution – social rights such as healthcare, education, social insurance, and labour protections (T. Carvalho & Ramos Pinto, 2019). Moreover, political parties have acted as 'mnemonic warriors' (Raimundo & Dias, 2020). While the socialists remain ambivalent, the radical left portrays the revolution as a grassroots democratic uprising. In contrast, the right emphasises the November 1975 counter coup as the true moment of democratic consolidation, framing earlier events as dangerously radical (Billig & Marinho, 2017; Raimundo & Almeida, 2019). This fragmented memory landscape politicises even shared symbols like red carnations,

while obscuring the memories of dictatorship, colonialism, and revolutionary initiatives, such as the MFA's Cultural Mobilisation and Civic Action Campaigns (Raimundo, 2018). Ultimately, competing interpretations of 25 April render the founding myth of Portuguese democracy not only open to manipulation but also incapable of supporting a thorough reckoning with the authoritarian past.

2.3.2 Spanish Cancellation

The 'Spanish model' of transition is often praised for its peaceful character and successful institutional consolidation (Gunther et al., 2004; Muro & Alonso, 2011). The *cancellation* of the country's authoritarian past assumed that working through the past would have reopened the wounds and divisions of the civil war. The priority after the end of Franco's regime was to 'let bygones be bygones', hence the *pacto del olvido* and the decision to silence the divisive past (Aguilar Fernández, 2008). The transition thus rested on a pact of forgetting that avoided confrontation with those responsible for the dictatorship and denied public recognition of its victims, hindering a full reckoning with the country's authoritarian past (Boyd, 2008). Clearly, the political choice to 'cast into oblivion' certain issues as a strategy to avoid conflict does not mean that society truly forgot the past or stopped talking about it, but that personal memories were passed across generations and circulated *despite* the top-down pact of silence and, as we will see further, eventually emerged with force back into the public debate (Juliá, 2017).

The institutional effort to bury the past was successful for decades: not only the memory of the dictatorship was swept under the carpet of history in a nationwide, institutionalised act of collective amnesia and silencing (Encarnación, 2008) but, contrary to Portugal, any collective memory of the democratic transition was absent. Key aspects of Francoist repression remain underexplored in public discourse and institutional memory. Notably, Spain still lacks a national museum that presents a comprehensive and balanced account of the Civil War. Another disturbing chapter that has received limited public reckoning is the estimated 300,000 babies taken from political opponents and placed with regime-approved families, a practice that began during the dictatorship and continued into the 1980s.

Because of its memory of cancellation, Spain did not pursue any trials for crimes committed by Francoism and did not implement any purge or symbolic reparations (Aguilar Fernández & Humlebaek, 2002; Encarnación, 2014). Franco's dictatorship was not officially condemned,

no symbolic measures aimed at the reparation of all the victims were introduced, and a truth commission was never established (Aguilar Fernández et al., 2011). The deliberate suppression of historical memory was supposed to soothe the wounds, but it also prevented a thorough stigmatisation of the authoritarian past. Calls for accountability and truth – initially marginalised – gained prominence only in the late 1990s, driven by books, movies, and especially younger generations. The so-called grandchildren of the war, children of those who experienced the Francoist regime as adults, started questioning the pact of forgetting (M. Davis, 2005; Boyd, 2008; Barahona de Brito & Sznajder, 2010; Aguilar Fernández & Payne, 2016; Hepworth, 2023).

From the early 2000s, the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) aimed to put an end to the political silence surrounding the disappearance of thousands of people during the Civil War and the subsequent dictatorship. The political arena could no longer ignore the national and international pressure for justice, and in 2007 the socialist government approved Law 52/2007 (called Law of Historical Memory). The law constitutes the first official attempt to establish a record of bodies (although exhuming and identifying the bodies was left in the hands of civil society). Moreover, it increased compensations and indemnities, created a centre for the study of the Civil War in the city of Salamanca, opened some archives and established that the *Valle de los Caídos* cannot be used to celebrate political rallies. Pandora's box was open, and the reactions were polarising: the PP accused the socialists of using the past for political reasons, thus breaking the *pacto del olvido*, while left parties, organisations and groups criticised the PSOE for not doing enough.

Even among the Portuguese, the dictatorship was the object of a relatively positive memory, despite the heroisation narrative linked to the revolution. In this context, it is not surprising that the Spanish population also formed a favourable memory of Francoism, particularly in the absence of a clearly stigmatising institutional memory. The quality of life and the regime's economic performance are among the reasons for a majority of Spaniards claiming that Francoism had both good and bad effects (Aguilar Fernández & Humlebaek, 2002; Aguilar Fernández, 2009; Aguilar Fernández & Ramírez-Barat, 2014). Similarly, support for transitional justice in Spain is not uniformly supported. It tends to be found largely among younger, left-leaning, and educated individuals – particularly those with family ties to Republican victims of the dictatorship – and is more pronounced in regions with strong historical grievances, such as the Basque Country and Catalonia (Aguilar Fernández et al., 2011).

Like in Portugal, the economic crisis in Spain triggered a re-examination of the transition and its political legacy, bringing repressed memories of the past to the surface in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The *indignados* movement acted as a mnemonic agent, questioning the legitimacy of the 1978 Constitution – now dubbed the ‘Regime of 78’ – and calling for ‘real democracy’, thus implying the post-Franco system lacked authenticity (Kornetis, 2019). Rather than addressing Francoist repression directly, public discourse shifted towards the civil war, present-day inequalities, and the transition’s structural failures, some rooted in late-Francoist economic policies. Despite the efforts of Spain’s official narrative of silence to depoliticise and foreclose debate about the past, this suppression of memory proved unsustainable: unresolved legacies and silenced traumas resurfaced in public discourse, civic activism, and political contestation. As a result, memory in Spain has not only endured but also re-emerged as a deeply contested field, shaped by ongoing struggles over truth, justice, and historical recognition. Despite the attempts to silence the past, Franco’s image has been continuously reconstructed across different political periods, shaping how the dictatorship is symbolically understood in contemporary Spain (Rodrigo Sanchez, 2025).

3 The Iberian Far Right

For much of the post-authoritarian era, the Iberian Peninsula seemed to resist trends sweeping Europe. While far-right parties gained ground elsewhere, Portugal and Spain stood apart: for decades, challengers failed to impact national politics. The *collective memory* of dictatorship – and, in Portugal’s case, the legitimacy of the Carnation Revolution – cast a long shadow, rendering authoritarian ideas untouchable. Scholars called this enduring absence *Iberian exceptionalism*: the persistent weakness of the far right in Portugal and Spain, which marked the peninsula as an outlier in Europe’s political landscape (see Figure 2).

However, this apparent immunity proved more fragile than it seemed. In 2019, VOX entered Spain’s Congress of Deputies, and Chega gained seats in Portugal’s Assembly of the Republic. In a single electoral cycle, Iberia’s firewall against the far right was breached. Within a few years, both parties consolidated themselves as pivotal actors, reshaping alliances, polarising debates, and redrawing the contours of Iberian politics. Their ascent revealed that the demand for far-right politics had not been absent but *dormant* – awaiting the right supply, organisational credibility, and media amplification to turn frustration into electoral support.

This section traces the trajectory of the far-right from failure to success, asking how a breakthrough once thought impossible became reality. In doing so, it illuminates not only the Iberian cases but also offers broader insights into how far-right challengers can overcome seemingly unbreachable political barriers.

3.1 From Fascism to (Neo)Fascism

The far right encompasses a broad family of ultranationalist actors defined by an exclusionary and authoritarian worldview. Within this spectrum, scholars distinguish between radical right actors, who challenge liberal democratic principles such as minority protection, checks and balances, media freedom, and the rule of law, and extreme right actors, who reject democracy altogether – and with it, the legitimacy of elections (Mudde, 2007). Overall, the far right draws on core elements of classic fascism, reformulating them within democratic contexts (Holmes, 1996; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Laruelle, 2022). Contemporary variants thus represent an adaptation rather than a rupture, advancing their agenda through formal democratic means while shifting from biological racism to cultural forms of exclusion (de La Torre, 2025).

The clarity of this link, however, has long been contested. For decades, the prevailing view among historians and political scientists was that fascism ended with the defeat of the Italian and German regimes in Second World War. Ernst Nolte (1966) and Renzo De Felice (1977) treated it as a closed chapter, unlikely to re-emerge. Stanley Payne (1995) similarly argued that while neo-fascism lingered after 1945, it remained a fading cultural residue. More recent scholarship has challenged this consensus, showing that fascism can resurface in updated forms, adapting to contemporary contexts.

Roger Griffin (1993), for example, argued that fascism's ideological core persists across new iterations, offering a way of identifying continuity beneath surface change. Umberto Eco (1995) reinforced this perspective with his notion of *Ur-Fascism*, outlining recurring features that allow the ideology to reappear in different guises. Robert Paxton (2004, 2010) acknowledged that contemporary far-right movements' most extreme expressions of xenophobia and nationalism display unmistakably fascist traits: initially reluctant to call Donald Trump a fascist, he declared in 2024 that the label is not only acceptable but necessary. Nigel Copsey (2018) traced a direct line between historical fascism, its post-war reinterpretations, and today's far right. Taken together, these contributions highlight a growing scholarly consensus that fascism

should be understood less as a closed historical chapter than as a mutable tradition capable of resurfacing in new forms.

If fascism persists in transformed guises, the key question is how such movements adapt to survive in a post-fascist age. Stripped of swastikas, salutes, and overt authoritarian symbols, today's far right often cloaks itself in democratic language, populist slogans, and nationalist branding (Finchelstein, 2017; Traverso, 2019). Far-right actors adopted this disguise strategically: after 1945, they were heavily stigmatised by association with the regimes and wars of the interwar era (Mammone, 2009). The 'never again' ethos rendered explicit references to fascism electorally toxic. Numerous studies show how stigma over the brutality of fascism doomed far-right parties to failure and ostracism (Rydgren, 2005; Van Spanje, 2010; Hartevelt et al., 2019; Van Spanje & Azrout, 2019; Manucci, 2020).

While stigma constrained far-right parties for decades, the twenty-first century has seen these barriers weaken under new social and political pressures. Between 1945 and 2000, during the first three waves of the far right, the effects of stigma on electoral performance were especially visible (Mudde, 2019). Today, far-right actors are emboldened by cultural and economic crises, wars, and pandemics and have become increasingly mainstream and normalised. They now occupy positions of power worldwide – from the United States to Argentina, India, Turkey, Israel, Italy, and beyond. This normalisation has blurred the line between radical and extreme variants, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between actors opposing liberal democratic principles and those rejecting democracy outright (Pirro, 2023). Some movements still abide by electoral rules yet hollow out liberal democracy once in power (Vachudova, 2020; Pirro & Stanley, 2022).

As the far right has become normalised globally, its threat to democracy has intensified. Linz and Stepan's (1978) *litmus test* for democratic stability, later updated by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), evaluates parties by asking whether they reject democratic rules, delegitimise opponents, tolerate violence, or restrict civil liberties. By this standard, all contemporary far-right movements pose serious danger, and once in power they often undermine democratic survival (Bermeo, 2016; Mondon & Winter, 2020; Gamboa, 2022).

Yet not all countries followed the global pattern of far-right normalisation. Spain and Portugal, shaped by the shadow of authoritarianism, resisted such movements for decades. Both countries developed a strong 'antidictator bias' (Dinas & Northmore-Ball, 2020), creating electoral and political barriers against parties reminiscent of Franco and Salazar

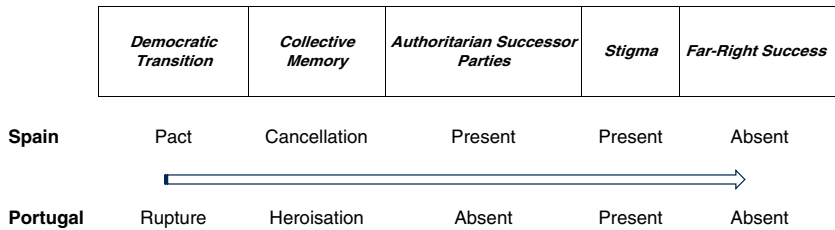


Figure 2 Paths towards Iberian exceptionalism: 1975–2019

(see Figure 2). Portugal established a sharp break with the past immediately after 1974, whereas Spain underwent a negotiated, gradual process in which Francoist elites remained influential, which explains why in Portugal no authoritarian successor parties were created, while in Spain the Francoist elites founded *Alianza Popular*, later rebranded *Partido Popular*. Through different paths, both countries avoided the resurgence of the far-right for decades. This phenomenon – uncommon enough to be labelled ‘Iberian exceptionalism’ – persisted until 2019, when the far right had already fully normalised across most of Europe and beyond. A key ingredient of this resilience was the collective memory each country formed of its authoritarian past (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; Mendes & Dennison, 2021; Marchi & Alves, 2023).

Earlier far-right initiatives in Spain during the 1990s and 2000s were organisationally weak and electorally marginal. Early formations such as *Fuerza Nueva* – led by Blas Piñar, a prominent figure under the dictatorship – and its splinter *Movimiento Católico Español*, embodied post-Franco ultranationalism but obtained no significant electoral results, as did numerous falangist splinter groups openly claiming Franco’s legacy. Even less extreme actors fared no better. *Democracia Nacional* and *España-2000* combined nationalism, law-and-order rhetoric, anti-immigration policies, and anti-elitist discourse, yet never surpassed 1 per cent of the national vote (Rodríguez, 1990; Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). *Plataforma per Catalunya* achieved significant results between 2003 and 2012. Its anti-immigration and strongly anti-separatist platform foreshadowed themes that would later be nationalised by VOX. However, its relative success remained confined to the local and regional levels. Overall, for decades, the mainstream *Partido Popular* – an authoritarian successor party – was the only force able to connect to Francoism electorally, and even then, only by avoiding explicit positive references to the dictatorship.

In Portugal, the stigma of the Carnation Revolution compelled mainstream right-wing parties to demonstrate impeccable democratic

credentials and distance themselves from the *Estado Novo* (Marchi & Alves, 2023; Prata & Bizarro, 2023). Openly vindicating Salazar's legacy invariably led to electoral marginalisation. Early post-revolution far-right groups – such as the *Partido da Democracia Cristã*, the *Movimento Independente para a Reconstrução Nacional* (MIRN, founded by General Kaúlza de Arriaga, a key commander in Salazar's colonial wars), and the *Frente Nacional* – remained tied to the authoritarian past and were eclipsed by the PSD and CDS (Zúquete, 2007; Marchi, 2013). The *Partido Nacional Renovador* (PNR), founded in 2000 and nostalgic for Salazar's regime, sought modernisation through European-style populist rhetoric and formal adherence to democratic norms. However, it consistently failed to obtain relevant electoral results. Its explicit symbolic and discursive ties to the *Estado Novo*, combined with a persistent media stigma, kept support low, peaking at 0.5 per cent in 2015. Rebranded as *Ergue-te* in 2020, it failed to gain traction and had dissolved by 2025. For a comparison with Chega's success, see Marchi (2026).

Even into the twenty-first century, Spain and Portugal resisted the far-right surges sweeping other countries. Global threats – terrorism, economic crises, declining trust in democracy, and increased migration – created conditions ripe for far-right success. At the same time, populist attitudes were widespread, and racism and authoritarianism were as intense, if not more so, than elsewhere. Yet despite this latent demand and favourable exogenous conditions, no credible far-right actor – one perceived as genuinely democratic rather than a continuation of the old dictatorship – was able to mobilise this *dormant* electorate (Mendes, 2021; Santana-Pereira & Cancela, 2021; Lobo et al., 2024; Heyne et al., 2025; Manucci, 2025).

The supply gap was eventually filled in 2019, when two far-right parties entered their respective national parliaments: Chega in Portugal and VOX in Spain. Their ideology aligns closely with other far-right parties across Europe, emphasising nationalism, law and order, tradition and stability, authoritarianism, opposition to immigration, and resistance to expanding rights for ethnic minorities. Even though they employ populist rhetoric and could be labelled populist radical right parties (Mudde, 2007), research shows populist attitudes are not central to their appeal (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Pimenta et al., 2022; Manucci & Hauwaert, 2026). Moreover, framing them primarily as 'populist' risks normalising their extremist, antidemocratic tendencies and underplays the primacy of the nativist element in their ideology (Art, 2022).

The following sections closely examine the trajectories of VOX and Chega – their histories, ideologies, electoral performances, and voter bases.

Their breakthroughs were not accidental but emerged from a potent mix of latent demand, credible supply, and strategic opportunity. Crucially, traditional media amplified their visibility, enhancing their perceived legitimacy and framing them as normal and democratic political actors.

3.2 Chega

André Ventura, Chega founder and leader, entered national politics already well-known from his role as a television pundit, giving him substantial media visibility before joining the established right-wing party PSD. His father was a Portuguese Colonial War soldier, and Ventura spent part of his youth in a seminary, maintaining connections to ultra-conservative religious networks such as *Opus Dei* (Marchi, 2023). Chega is highly centralised around Ventura, a charismatic leader who presents himself in a messianic manner and portrays the party as a vehicle for moral and political renewal (Ferreira Dias, 2022; Pimenta et al., 2024; Santana-Pereira, 2024). Despite links between his inner circle and extremist groups, the party has largely avoided the historical stigma associated with the far right.

Founded in April 2019, Chega rapidly entered the *Assembleia da República*, with Ventura winning a seat in Lisbon by October that year. Ventura came third in the 2021 presidential elections, which are formally non-partisan, and Chega consolidated its parliamentary presence in the following snap elections, becoming Portugal's third most-voted party and second for seats (Table 1). In 2026, Ventura was the second most voted candidate at the presidential elections, forcing a second round that

Table 1 Electoral history of Chega

Date	Election	Vote share	Ranking	Seats
October 2019	National elections	1.29%	#7	1/230
January 2021	Presidential elections*	11.93%	#3	—
September 2021	Local elections	4.16%	#4	—
January 2022	National elections	7.18%	#3	12/230
March 2024	National elections	18.07%	#3	50/230
June 2024	European elections	9.8%	#3	2/21
May 2025	National elections	22.6%	#3	58/230
October 2025	Local elections	11.9%	#3	—
January 2026	Presidential elections*	23.52%	#2	—

Note: Presidential elections in Portugal are formally non-partisan: the candidate was André Ventura, not Chega.

was not necessary since 1986. Chega's electoral breakthrough not only marked the end of Portuguese exceptionalism but also cast doubt on the apparent stability of the Portuguese party system (Mendes, 2021; Prata & Bizarro, 2023). Chega's quick rise coincided with the decline of the conservative CDS and contributed to increased ideological and affective polarisation (Heyne et al., 2025).

In terms of ideology, programmatic orientation, and policy positions, Chega is a classic far-right party. Since its foundation, it has combined authoritarianism, nativism, and economic liberalism. Its 2019 manifesto included some of the most hardline proposals in Portuguese political history, such as chemical castration for sex offenders, the elimination of gender quotas, and the immediate deportation of undocumented migrants (J. Fernandes & Magalhães, 2020), reflecting a broader law-and-order agenda that linked immigration and minority groups to insecurity and disorder. Before Chega, no party that heavily politicised immigration had achieved significant electoral results in Portugal, where the issue had long remained marginal (J. Carvalho & Duarte, 2020).

On cultural matters, Chega mirrors other European far-right parties but uniquely targets Roma communities. Its discourse merges nativism with social conservatism, denouncing abortion as 'tyranny' and gender politics as ideological dictatorship (Heyne & Manucci, 2021; Mendes, 2021). These stances – including opposition to feminism, same-sex marriage, and gender-affirming procedures – are embedded in a broader project of moral renewal framed against what Chega portrays as a permissive and corrupt political establishment (Mendes & Dennison, 2021).

Chega also politicises socio-economic cleavages long central to Portuguese politics through a radical right lens, including health, pensions, and social security (Ferreira da Silva & Mendes, 2019). The party blends welfare chauvinism with claims that the state rewards undeserving groups while neglecting the truly needy. Its 2019 manifesto proposed privatising health and social security, denying housing as a right, and recasting the state as a neutral arbiter rather than a 'Robin Hood'. In doing so, Chega reactivated dormant welfare cleavages and positioned itself decisively outside the post-1974 democratic consensus and the traditional right-left divide (Manucci, 2024).

To capture Chega's ideological profile, Table 2 shows the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Rovny et al., 2024). CHES data allow to place Chega in context across multiple ideological dimensions from 0 (not at all) to 10 (maximum), in comparison with major political actors such as right-wing PSD, the socialist PS, and radical Left Bloc (BE).

Table 2 Ideological positioning of Chega

Party	Gal-tan	Left-Right	Nationalism	Immigration	Law & order	Religious principles	Ethnic minorities	Regions
BE	0.73	1.36	1.00	1.36	0.67	0.33	1.75	2.80
PS	2.82	4.18	1.50	2.45	1.83	2.00	3.00	3.20
PSD	6.73	6.91	4.50	6.00	6.00	5.83	6.75	4.00
Chega	9.64	9.27	9.25	9.73	10.0	8.00	9.00	8.00

Chega is firmly on the extreme right of the Portuguese political spectrum. The party scores 9.64 on the Gal–Tan scale, reflecting a strongly traditionalist and authoritarian orientation, and 9.27 on the left–right scale, making it the most right-wing of the major parties. Chega is highly nationalist, extremely restrictive on immigration, and strongly law-and-order oriented. It also supports strict religious principles and opposes the expansion of minority rights, underscoring the centrality of nativism and authoritarianism in its platform. By contrast, PSD occupies a moderately right-wing position with more tempered stances. Chega’s consistently extreme scores highlight its sharp divergence from the established Portuguese party system.

This is reflected in Chega’s electorate. Its voters exhibit strong anti-immigration, anti-globalisation, and authoritarian attitudes, with high levels of democratic dissatisfaction and preference for strong leaders, while economic deprivation does not appear to decisively shape their preferences (Afonso, 2021; Heyne & Manucci, 2021; Lobo et al., 2024). Instead, feelings of political neglect – especially in rural areas – and distrust of democratic institutions are central to their support (Magalhães & Cancela, 2025). Chega’s voter profile has also evolved over time. Initially associated with young, religious men from rural areas with low education levels (Heyne & Manucci, 2021), religiosity has since lost predictive power, and Chega supporters are now less religious than those of other right-wing parties (Lobo et al., 2024). Similarly, although Chega has promoted an anti-feminist discourse from the outset, such attitudes are not a core feature of its electorate (Heyne & Manucci, 2021; Lobo et al., 2024).

The party has also distinguished itself through exclusionary rhetoric, particularly anti-Roma, which blends law-and-order concerns with welfare chauvinism and fosters discriminatory attitudes (Magalhães & Costa-Lopes, 2023). Chega’s appeal lies in merging socio-cultural grievances with socio-economic concerns, mobilising disaffected citizens across multiple dimensions (Manucci, 2024; Heyne et al., 2025). This strategy has been especially effective among abstentionists, with studies showing Chega’s growth stems less from attracting voters from other right-wing parties and more from *activating* previously disengaged groups (Lopes, 2023; Lobo et al., 2024; Santana-Pereira & Nina, 2024). The dynamic contributed to higher-than-expected turnout in 2024, reversing long-term abstention trends (Cancela et al., 2024).

Between 2022 and 2025, Chega experienced remarkable growth (Manucci, 2026). Its electorate has consolidated among men under fifty-five, particularly those without higher education, while older and

more educated voters remain more resistant (Cancela & Magalhaes, 2025). Simultaneously, support among women has risen, and the electorate now exhibits a less authoritarian and anti-democratic profile. This broadening has helped normalise Chega within the Portuguese party system while increasing right-wing polarisation and fragmentation (Heyne et al., 2025).

Figure 3 presents survey results from November–December 2023, just months before the March 2024 snap elections, collected for the POLAR project on authoritarian legacies in Spain and Portugal. I served as principal investigator for this study, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology and conducted at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon (March 2023–March 2025). The company IPSOS collected the data online using nationally representative samples in each country ($N = 1,500$) with quotas for age, education, gender, and region. The questionnaires and data are archived on the following Harvard Dataverse repository: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/UHTQUH>. More information about the data is provided in section 4.2.

Among the 1,500 Portuguese respondents, 292 were aged 18 to 34 (140 men, 152 women), 526 were 35 to 54 (246 men, 280 women), and 682 were 55 or older (268 men, 414 women). The descriptive data (Figure 3) show that, at the time of the survey and considering respondents' likelihood to vote, Chega was by far the strongest party among young men and, although within margins of error, women. By contrast, PS dominated

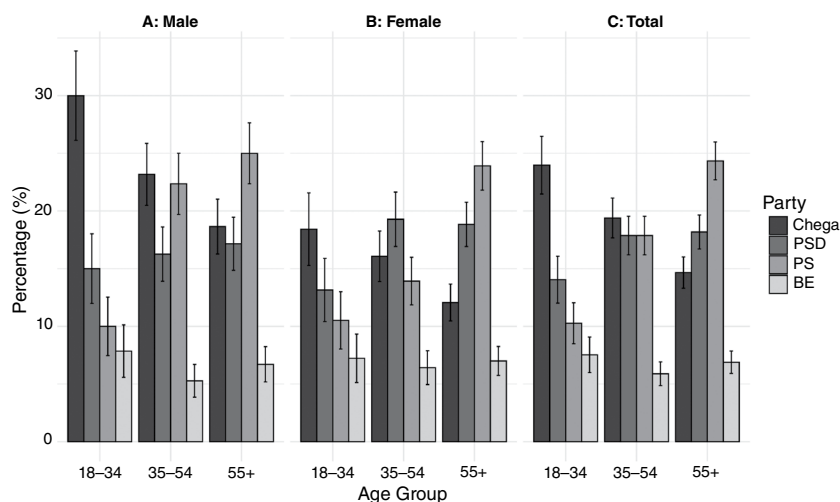


Figure 3 Gender and age in the vote for Chega

among the oldest respondents, and PSD performed particularly well among women aged thirty-five to fifty-four. All figures report 95 per cent confidence intervals, allowing readers to assess the statistical uncertainty associated with these descriptive patterns.

Regarding education, 597 respondents completed primary school or less, 450 completed secondary education, and 453 hold a university degree. Chega performs best among those with secondary education and remains relatively popular among the least educated (though less than PS), while its support is weakest among university-educated respondents. By contrast, established parties (PSD and PS) show a weaker performance among those with secondary education (see Figure 4).

How can we explain Chega's rapid rise and its ability to activate a previously dormant electorate? A key factor is mainstream media (Manucci & Narciso, 2026). Smaller parties rely heavily on media visibility to gain electoral traction, especially far-right parties facing social stigma that favourable coverage can alleviate (Cammaerts, 2018; Ellinas, 2018; Mondon & Winter, 2020). Media attention not only legitimises these parties but also amplifies their voices, signalling that their views are more widely shared than assumed and reshaping perceived social norms (Krzyżanowski, 2020; Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024; Bolet & Foos, 2025). This visibility reduces public alarm, facilitates recruitment, and provides the momentum necessary for electoral relevance (Devine & Murphy, 2020; de Jonge & Gaufman, 2022; Foos & Bischof, 2022).

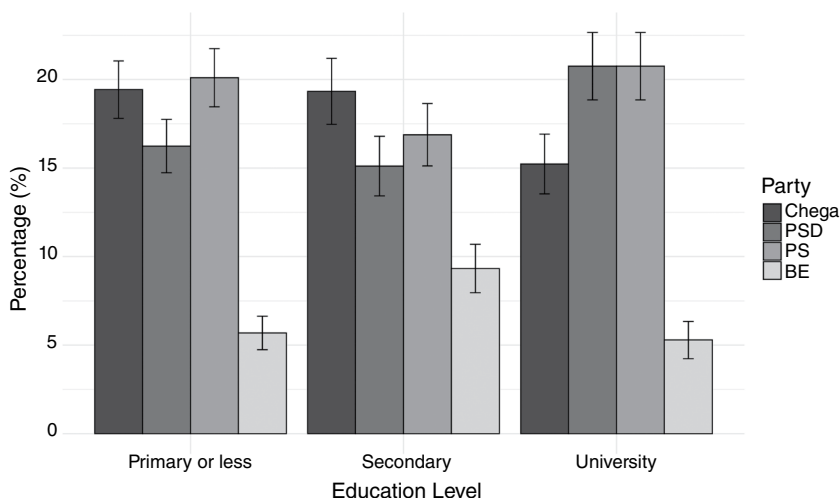


Figure 4 Education and vote for Chega

Chega's electoral breakthrough reflects the convergence of latent demand for far-right ideas, a skilled political entrepreneur in André Ventura, and a favourable media environment. Research shows that far-right parties succeed when nativist, authoritarian, and anti-establishment sentiments exist but require credible actors to activate them (Hawkins et al., 2020; Valentim, 2024). Ventura provided Chega with a 'reputational shield' that distinguished it from older parties tied to Salazarism, such as the PNR (Mendes & Dennison, 2021; Marchi, 2026). Unlike previous far-right actors, Chega was widely perceived as a 'normal' political force, benefitting from Ventura's mainstream pedigree and his ostensible distancing from extremist associations (Marchi & Lisi, 2021).

A key moment came during Ventura's 2017 candidacy in Loures, when his norm-breaking rhetoric against the Roma community – claiming some members were above the law and reliant on subsidies – sparked intense controversy, with the spokesperson of the Roma minority in Portugal likening his words to Hitler's rhetoric (Valentim, 2024). Despite this, the PSD did not withdraw its support, while the far-right PNR publicly welcomed Ventura, inviting him to join. Ventura recognised that such taboo-breaking discourse resonated with voters: his campaign delivered the PSD its best local result in two decades, and the intense media coverage signalled that addressing 'taboo topics' could be electorally rewarding. When Ventura left the PSD in 2018, he was quickly cast by the media as the face of the far right, using this visibility to launch Chega and secure its entry into parliament (Marchi & Lisi, 2021).

Ventura's dominance of the media agenda further amplified Chega's rise. Already a recognisable public figure as a football pundit and commentator on security and crime (Palma et al., 2021; J. Carvalho, 2022), his media-friendly style, communicative skills, and provocative rhetoric ensured extensive coverage. Chega received significantly more – and less negative – attention than the PNR and other far-right predecessors (Serrano, 2020; Mendes & Dennison, 2021; Serra-Silva & Santos, 2022; Pinhal, 2025). Further normalising Chega's far-right position, tabloids often described Ventura in terms such as 'populist' or 'conservative' (Gaio e Silva & Marinha, 2024; Manucci & Narciso, 2026).

Even before Chega's electoral breakthrough, Ventura was among Portugal's most interviewed politicians, often surpassing mainstream opposition leaders in TV appearances and audience reach (ERC, 2020, 2021). This visibility was crucial for disseminating and legitimising the party's ideas, shielding it from the stigma that constrained earlier far-right actors (Manucci, 2025). By mobilising latent demand with

norm-breaking rhetoric, exploiting controversies, and seizing unprecedented media attention, Ventura propelled Chega from a marginal start-up to Portugal's first electorally significant far-right party and, by 2025, the country's second-largest parliamentary force.

3.3 VOX

Santiago Abascal, VOX's founder and leader, was raised in the Basque Country in a family long aligned with the political right – his grandfather a Franco-era mayor and his father a PP deputy. He began his political career in the PP, serving as city councillor and regional deputy, before leaving the party in 2013 over what he viewed as its excessive moderation on Catalan separatism, national unity, and traditional values (Rama et al., 2021). That year, he co-founded VOX, drawing heavily from PP cadres and networks, which facilitated the party's entry into public debate and granted it unusual mainstream visibility (Mendes & Dennison, 2021). VOX is highly centralised around Abascal, who presents himself as the defender of the 'real Spain', framing politics in a Manichean struggle between patriots and 'anti-Spain' forces – mainstream parties, separatists, and feminists alike (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021).

A crucial precursor to VOX was the Foundation for the Defence of the Spanish Nation (DENAES), created in 2006 by Santiago Abascal and other activists. DENAES presented itself as a project aimed at renewing Spanish national symbols, historical narratives, and constitutional patriotism in response to growing separatist pressures. Many early VOX leaders emerged from this milieu, and a significant share of the party's early activism was rooted not in Francoist nostalgia per se, but in a key element of Francoism: militant anti-separatism and the defence of national unity.

VOX initially failed to gain parliamentary representation in the 2015 and 2016 national elections, but its breakthrough came in Andalusia in December 2018, winning 11 per cent of the vote and becoming pivotal in forming a right-wing government. Its rise accelerated quickly: in April 2019, VOX entered the *Cortes Generales* with 24 seats, increasing to 52 in November after capturing over 15 per cent of the vote, becoming Spain's third political force (see Table 3). Although it holds fewer seats today (33, following the 2023 elections), VOX remains an essential partner for PP-led governments across multiple regions and municipalities. Its ascent reshaped Spain's party system from imperfect bipartisanship into a polarised multiparty system, injecting a far-right agenda into the

Table 3 Electoral history of VOX

Date	Election	Vote share	Ranking	Seats
May 2014	European elections	1.56%	#11	0/54
December 2015	National elections	0.23%	#15	0/350
June 2016	National elections	0.2%	#13	0/350
April 2019	National elections	10.26%	#5	24/350
May 2019	Local elections	2.90%	#5	—
May 2019	European elections	6.20%	#5	4/59
November 2019	National elections	15.08%	#3	52/350
May 2023	Local elections	7.19%	#3	—
July 2023	National elections	12.38%	#3	33/350
June 2024	European elections	9.56%	#3	6/61

Note: The seats for the national elections concern the congress of deputies, not the senate. Moreover, regional elections are excluded to maintain the comparability with Chega.

mainstream and heightening ideological confrontation (Rama et al., 2021; Simón, 2021; Comellas Bonsfills & Torcal Lorient, 2025).

Similarly to Chega, ideologically and programmatically VOX is a classic far-right party. Since its foundation, it has promoted a platform combining authoritarianism, nativism, and Spanish nationalism with economic liberalism (Ferreira, 2019; Rama et al., 2021). While its discourse occasionally uses populist tropes, appeals to ‘the people’ are far less central than in other European cases (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021). Its 2019 manifesto broke with the post-transitional consensus, calling for the dissolution of Spain’s autonomous communities, the repeal of the 2007 Historical Memory Law, strict immigration restrictions, and the dismantling of gender equality frameworks (Manucci, 2024).

Culturally, VOX mirrors other far-right parties while reflecting Spanish specificities. It denounces feminism as a ‘feminist jihad’ and part of a ‘progressive dictatorship’, promotes traditional gender roles, and opposes abortion, same-sex marriage, and gender-affirming procedures (Ribera Payá & Martínez, 2021). VOX has ties with ultraconservative Catholic groups (Rama et al., 2021) and proposes measures such as a parental veto on LGBT+ inclusive education, a ban on rainbow flags on public buildings, and the repeal of anti-discrimination laws (Turnbull-Dugarte & Ortega, 2024).

At the core of VOX’s project is its nationalist interpretation of the centre–periphery cleavage (Manucci, 2024). The party’s rise is closely linked to the

politicisation of territorial conflicts, especially following the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. Unlike earlier far-right experiments, VOX positioned itself as the uncompromising defender of national unity (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020; Rama et al., 2021), reinforcing the territorial cleavage and expanding it into a broader cultural conflict that further heightened polarisation (Comellas Bonsfills & Torcal Lorient, 2025).

On socio-economic issues, VOX shows a clear commitment to market liberalism, reduced state intervention, and welfare retrenchment, combined with a welfare chauvinist stance that restricts benefits to immigrants and ‘undeserving’ groups (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020; Rama et al., 2021). The party proposes to limit healthcare for undocumented migrants, exclude abortion and gender-affirming surgery from coverage, and promote private provision in education and pensions.

CHES data (see Table 4) position VOX on the extreme right of the Spanish political spectrum. Scoring 9.50 on the Gal–Tan scale and 9.38 on the left–right scale, it is the most authoritarian and right-wing among major parties. VOX is highly nationalist, strongly hostile to immigration and minority rights, and emphasises law-and-order and religious principles, consolidating its culturally ultra-conservative profile. By contrast, the PP occupies a mainstream right position with more moderate stances. Compared with Chega, VOX shows a similar mix of authoritarianism and nativism but is even more radical on territorial politics, highlighting national unity as the core of its far-right agenda.

This ideological profile is reflected in its electorate, which is predominantly male, younger, and has medium-level education, with above-average income and assets, suggesting that economic deprivation is not the main driver of support (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020; Heyne & Manucci, 2021; Rama et al., 2021). Political dissatisfaction and negative views of the national situation strongly predict VOX support, especially when paired with a strong Spanish national identity. Territorial issues are particularly decisive, as opposition to Catalan independence and support for a centralised state significantly increase voting likelihood. VOX voters also show outright opposition to immigration, globalisation, and feminism (Anduiza & Rico, 2024).

VOX’s cultural-conservative positions – opposition to LGBT+ rights and gender equality policies – resonate strongly with its electorate. What sets VOX apart from other far-right parties, however, is the combination of these cultural grievances with a marked emphasis on national unity and centralisation (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020; Comellas Bonsfills & Torcal Lorient, 2025). Similar to Chega, VOX has mobilised previously

Table 4 Ideological positioning of VOX

Party	Gal–Tan	Left–Right	Nationalism	Immigration	Law & order	Religious principles	Ethnic minorities	Regions
Sumar	1.20	2.31	2.13	2.31	2.00	0.71	2.25	3.60
PSOE	2.94	3.81	4.13	4.19	3.29	2.43	3.00	3.60
PP	7.00	7.19	6.38	7.00	7.14	6.00	6.50	7.00
VOX	9.50	9.38	9.63	9.69	9.86	8.29	9.38	10.00

disengaged voters, boosting turnout in key elections (Anduiza et al., 2019; Pirro & Portos, 2020). Yet its support remains weaker among highly educated sectors, hinting at potential constraints on long-term electoral expansion (Rama et al., 2021).

Among the 1,500 Spanish respondents in the POLAR survey, 317 are aged 18 to 34 (159 men, 158 women), 624 are 35 to 54 (304 men, 320 women), and 559 are 55 or older (268 men, 291 women). The descriptive data show that VOX is strongest among young men (18–34), who prefer this party over the PP, while young women clearly lean towards established parties. Support for VOX declines with age, with the party considerably weaker among respondents over 55, who tend to favour the PP or PSOE (see Figure 5).

Of the 1,500 POLAR respondents, 610 completed primary education or less, 182 have secondary education, and 708 hold a university degree. VOX's support is consistent across these groups but is somewhat stronger among low-educated respondents and weaker among the highly educated (see Figure 6).

How can we explain VOX's rapid rise and its ability to mobilise previously silent voters? Much like Chega in Portugal, VOX's breakthrough relied heavily on media visibility. Its origins as a PP splinter shielded the party from the stigma that typically constrains far-right actors (Manucci, 2025). This reputational advantage allowed VOX to receive far greater coverage than previous Spanish far-right parties, such

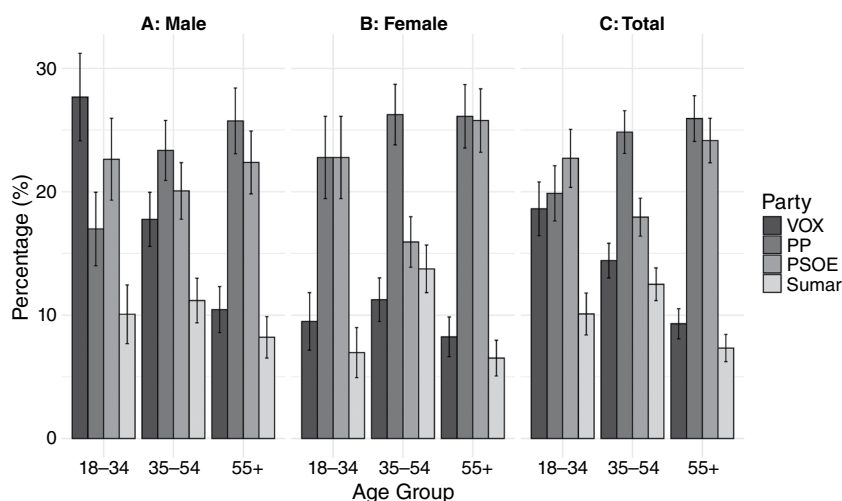


Figure 5 Gender and age in the vote for VOX

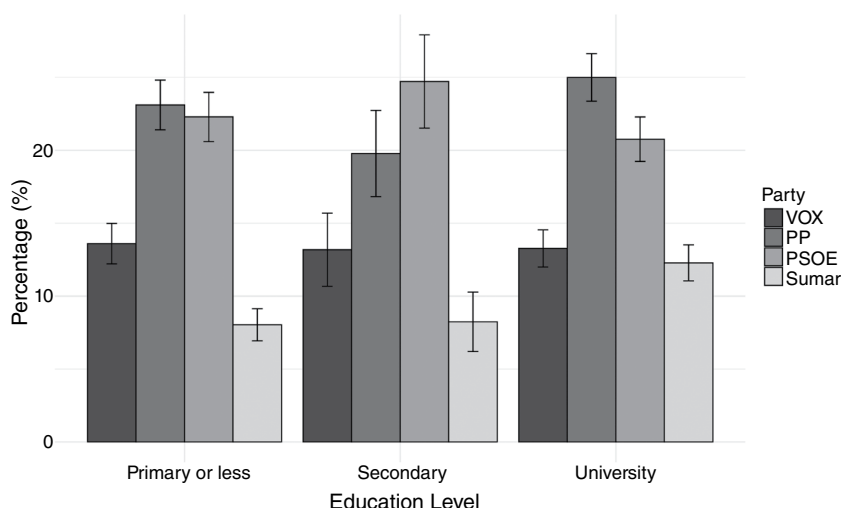


Figure 6 Education and vote for VOX

as *Democracia Nacional* or *España 2000*, whose extremist associations limited their visibility. Euphemistic labels like ‘right-wing’, ‘conservative’, or ‘populist’ further normalised both the party and its leader (Mendes & Dennison, 2021; Manucci & Narciso, 2026).

A crucial moment in VOX’s rise was the 2017 Catalan independence crisis. By positioning itself as a popular prosecutor of separatist leaders, VOX capitalised on widespread frustration with the PP and its perceived failure to defend national unity (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020). This triggered latent nationalist and authoritarian preferences (Dinas et al., 2024), creating a window of opportunity for the party’s political entrepreneurship (Valentim, 2024). As discussed in detail in the next section, the party also breached longstanding taboos regarding the Francoist past, signalling that such positions could now be publicly expressed (Villamil & Balcells, 2021; Xidias, 2021).

Like Ventura in Portugal, Abascal leveraged provocative rhetoric and high-profile events – such as meetings with European radical-right figures and Steve Bannon in 2017, or the 2018 rally at Madrid’s Vistalegre palace – to dominate the news agenda (Rama et al., 2021; Valentim, 2024). This visibility not only spread VOX’s ideas but legitimised the party and normalised its far-right positions (Manucci, 2025). By converting controversy into visibility and latent nationalist sentiment into votes, Abascal transformed VOX from a marginal splinter into a major political force capable of exploiting authoritarian nostalgia for electoral gain.

4 Authoritarian Nostalgia

The electoral success of VOX in Spain and Chega in Portugal marks the end of what scholars once called the ‘Iberian exception’ – the idea that the far right had no political space in the peninsula. As the previous section showed, this shift can be explained by a convergence of latent demand, credible political supply, and heightened media visibility. However, such factors alone cannot account for the sudden erosion of the powerful stigma that had long condemned far-right politics to irrelevance. What became of the widespread rejection of the authoritarian past? Do VOX and Chega fully embrace democratic principles, or do they legitimise Francoist and Salazarist legacies? And how do their voters position themselves in relation to this past?

This section addresses these questions by focusing on authoritarian nostalgia. It begins by defining the concept and illustrating its relevance beyond the Iberian context. It then examines how VOX and Chega present a positive image of the authoritarian past, showing that VOX does so more openly than Chega because the two countries experienced different types of democratic transitions. Finally, drawing on original survey data, the section demonstrates that both parties attract nostalgic electorates – remarkably, not only among older generations but also among younger citizens. The electoral breakthrough of VOX and Chega has thus provided an institutional channel for voters nostalgic for authoritarian rule.

These findings do not imply that VOX and Chega supporters would necessarily prefer authoritarianism over democracy. Nevertheless, they are significant and troubling. First, because they reveal the contemporary far right as a vehicle for the political afterlives of Iberia’s authoritarian regimes. And second, because they uncover the persistence – and even resurgence – of longing for a past defined by authoritarianism, cultural homogeneity, and traditional social roles. That such nostalgia is pronounced even among young people who never experienced these regimes raises pressing questions about memory, identity, and the future of democracy in the Iberian Peninsula and beyond.

4.1 Missing the ‘Good Old Days’

Memory is not simply a record of the past; it is a battleground for power, shaping who controls the present and who imagines the future. The stories societies choose to tell – or to silence – determine what is possible, permissible, and legitimate, while shaping collective identities. Nostalgia is a specific form of memory: it is a selective, positive remembrance of a portion of

the past. It can be personal, tied to individual life events, but its collective form is where nostalgia becomes politically powerful (Wildschut et al., 2014; Versteegen, 2024). Collective nostalgia has clear political implications. It strengthens in-group boundaries, legitimises contemporary discourse, and crystallises distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019; Lubbers & Smeekes, 2022).

This section focuses on a specific type of collective nostalgia: *authoritarian* nostalgia. It refers to an emotional attachment to past authoritarian regimes, characterised by a longing for strong leadership, social homogeneity, and hierarchical order, often combined with disappointment in contemporary democracy (Kang, 2016; Kim-Leffingwell, 2024; Colombo, 2025). Crucially, authoritarian nostalgia is mediated by social norms. Where the dominant narrative condemns authoritarianism and is widely shared, nostalgia is socially stigmatised; but where that narrative is weak or contested, nostalgia can thrive (Kuran, 1995; Bicchieri, 2017; Colombo, 2025).

Positive memories of the authoritarian past can be the result of historical revisionism, which recasts the past in a more favourable light, or it can originate from the persistence of material legacies of authoritarianism – such as economic privileges, welfare benefits, or social mobility once guaranteed by the regime. Nostalgia for an authoritarian past can be sustained through intergenerational transmission, which passes down positive memories within families and communities, but the media can also transmit memories across generations. These mechanisms allow authoritarian nostalgia to endure, even among those who never experienced dictatorship directly (Darden & Grzymała-Busse, 2006; Wildschut et al., 2018; Smeekes et al., 2021). Indeed, while citizens socialised under autocracies may initially resist authoritarian actors, this effect weakens as the democratic transition recedes into the past (Dinas & Northmore-Ball, 2020; Frantzeskakis & Sato, 2020).

Examples of authoritarian nostalgia and its disruptive impact abound worldwide. In Asia, campaigns for Bongbong Marcos Jr. in the Philippines and Park Geunhye in South Korea openly glorified the authoritarian rule of their fathers (Kim, 2014). In South Korea and Taiwan, state-led industrialisation under dictatorships fostered lingering support for regime successors (Chang et al., 2007; Kang, 2016; Hong et al., 2023). In Europe, parties like Germany’s AfD deploy nostalgic references to selective elements of the past, contrasting them with contemporary liberal failures (Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024). Even in the United States, a country without a history of fascist dictatorship, nostalgia correlates with support for political strongmen, contempt for institutions, and tolerance

of political violence (Goidel & Goidel, 2025). Comparable dynamics are visible in Chavismo's Bolivarian rhetoric in Venezuela, Ottoman nostalgia bolstering Erdogan in Turkey, and Soviet nostalgia driving leftist votes in Moldova (Hawkins, 2010; Elçi, 2022; Marandici, 2022).

Far from being a passive sentiment, authoritarian nostalgia actively shapes political behaviour. It strengthens attachment to authoritarian successor parties, amplifies outgroup bias, and influences electoral outcomes (Kim-Leffingwell, 2024; Manucci & Hauwaert, 2026). More than a simple longing for dictatorship, it resonates with wider narratives of cultural order: far-right actors frequently use it to champion traditional gender roles, exclude migrants, marginalise LGBTQ+ communities, and idealise a rigid, morally ordered society (Goidel & Goidel, 2025). Perceptions of economic, political, and cultural loss further heighten these impulses, as seen in the rise of Donald Trump in the United States and UKIP in Britain (Gest et al., 2018).

In sum, nostalgia bridges memory, identity, and political action. It can foster resilience and social cohesion (Wildschut & Sedikides, 2023), but authoritarian nostalgia also reveals the darker side of longing for the past: it converts selective memories of order and strength into political capital, legitimising authoritarian-leaning narratives across generations and borders. This dynamic is particularly evident in the Iberian Peninsula, where memories of Franco and Salazar remain politically salient, though mobilised with different intensity by VOX in Spain and Chega in Portugal.

While VOX and Chega surely reject *liberal* democracy, the crucial question is whether they repudiate democracy itself and if their voters are aligned with this assessment. Nostalgia for Franco or Salazar does not in itself provide a definitive answer, since one can idealise authoritarian regimes while still preferring to live under democratic rule. Nonetheless, the study of authoritarian nostalgia illuminates two critical dimensions. First, it reveals the extent to which the Iberian far right reproduces or adapts ideological elements of past authoritarianism – an important indicator of their substantive commitment to democracy. Second, it exposes whether their electorates resonate with such nostalgia, shedding light on whether references to authoritarian legacies constitute an electoral liability or, conversely, a strategic asset.

Given the stigma attached to authoritarian rule in the two Iberian countries, examining how VOX and Chega manage to overcome (or bypass) this stigma is particularly relevant. Understanding the success of far-right actors in a context where their ideas have been delegitimised for nearly half a century offers a privileged vantage point from which to study the

evolution of authoritarian legacies globally. If Chega and VOX engage in authoritarian nostalgia by embracing symbolic references to order, tradition, and identity directly linked to the past authoritarian regimes of Franco and Salazar, while downplaying or erasing memories of repression and violence, this signals that positive memories of the dictatorships may no longer be subject to social sanction.

The different paths of democratic transition in Spain and Portugal allow us to see how different types of democratic transition shape authoritarian legacies. In Spain, the *pacto del olvido* muted memories of dictatorship, creating both stigma and a vacuum where nostalgia could re-emerge. In Portugal, by contrast, the revolution is seen as a stronger barrier against such nostalgia. This, in turn, makes VOX more explicit in its positive references to the authoritarian past, and Chega more cautious.

Despite the enduring stigma attached to Franco and Salazar, VOX and Chega can still normalise selective, positive references to the authoritarian past. However, open and enthusiastic endorsements of the dictatorships typically provoke resistance and electoral marginalisation, so double-speak becomes a crucial strategy (Biscaia & Salgado, 2022). By employing covert language as well as dog-whistles, far-right politicians can appeal to mainstream publics while keeping core activists engaged. This communicative balancing act ensures that the parties' frontstage performance remains seemingly moderate and committed to the democratic order, even as their backstage discourse sustains ties to authoritarian legacies (Åkerlund, 2022; Brandmann, 2022; Blackington & Cayton, 2025).

Drawing on the blind spots left by official narratives of authoritarian rule and democratic transition (see section 2) and aided by the growing distance from the authoritarian past, VOX and Chega mobilise authoritarian nostalgia with different levels of explicitness depending on their audience, setting, and political moment. They do so through three interconnected strategies.

1. They echo the discourse of Franco and Salazar by depicting the nation as trapped in crisis and chaos, in need of a strong leader to restore order and traditional values, while attributing blame to progressive elites, feminists, immigrants, or multiculturalism, depending on the context.
2. They invoke symbolic images of the authoritarian past – longing for a time when the nation was culturally homogeneous, rooted in tradition, and respected internationally. These 'golden age' narratives need not be historically accurate; their function is to contrast a corrupt and decadent present with an idealised past.

3. They employ the most explicit strategy: direct positive references to the dictatorships themselves, though usually with calculated ambivalence to avoid being definitively branded as nostalgic parties – a label historically associated with electoral irrelevance.

4.1.1 *Chega and Saudosismo*

Chega has no direct ties to the *Estado Novo* (Cavichioli & Silveira, 2024), and is therefore not an authoritarian successor party (Loxton & Mainwaring, 2018). Compared to other far-right actors such as *Ergue-te*, it is more cautious in how openly it articulates authoritarian nostalgia (Marchi, 2026). Yet these caveats only partly obscure Chega's links to illiberal traditions: its members have maintained connections to extra-parliamentary fascist, identitarian, and alt-right organisations, both within its youth structures and its national executive (GPAHE, 2023; Marchi, 2023). A clear example is Ventura's right-hand and author of Chega's first manifesto, Diogo Pacheco de Amorim, a former member of the far-right terrorist organisation MDLP. Although Ventura attempted to block extremist infiltration in 2020 – after the party's initial electoral breakthrough – nostalgic elements remain visible. In 2025, for instance, a significant share of Chega's local candidates openly identified as 'Salazarists' (Malhado, 2025). Such cases may be dismissed as isolated episodes or the work of a few 'bad apples' but, ultimately, what matters is how the party and its leader themselves mobilise authoritarian nostalgia in their official discourse and political strategy.

The first parallel – and perhaps the most implicit echo of the authoritarian past – is Chega's use of a strategy already employed by Salazar: portraying the country as gripped by chaos and in need of a strong leader to redeem it. For Salazar, the instability of the First Republic justified his rule; for Chega, the source of national decline is the political system established by the Carnation Revolution. Ventura positions himself as a messianic leader capable of restoring Portugal's glory, transforming a corrupt system into a new moral and political order (Ferreira Dias, 2022; Pimenta et al., 2024). He depicts politics as a tool of salvation and presents Chega as a sacred mission (Pimenta et al., 2022). Ventura's messianism draws on his own Marian devotion and aligns with the political-religious tradition of Sebastianism (Zúquete, 2022) – a myth that foretells the king's return to redeem Portugal and restore its former greatness appropriated by Salazar himself (Zúquete, 2012).

Chega draws on Portugal's authoritarian past by framing the nation as under threat and positioning itself as the defender of the 'true' Portugal,

embodied by the *Portugueses de Bem*: the moral, law-abiding citizen against corrupting outsiders. Following this moral battle between good and evil, and in line with Salazar's example, Chega mobilises the myth of the *Reconquista* as a founding national narrative. Ventura has staged symbolic visits to historical landmarks, including Guimarães Castle, the tomb of Portugal's first king Afonso Henriques in Coimbra, and the Monastery of Batalha, site of the decisive victory over Castile in 1385, where he paid tribute to Nuno Álvares Pereira, the commander of Portuguese forces. These gestures tap into a narrative that regards the Middle Ages as the founding era of the Portuguese nation and the period when its defining (Christian) features assumed their purest form (Miguélez & Martins, 2023). Presenting himself as the guardian of this heritage, Ventura links Chega's contemporary political agenda to a mythic national past, invoking a Manichean struggle in which traditional Portuguese values must be defended against perceived internal and external threats.

Like Salazar invoked the First Republic as the cause of national 'chaos and degeneration', Chega identifies the Carnation Revolution – the very event that ended the *Estado Novo* – as the origin of Portugal's political misfortunes. In its 2019 manifesto, the party explicitly rejects the post-1974 order and the 1976 Constitution, framing them as the foundation of a 'tyranny' against property, life, and tradition. This order, according to Chega, rests on a Marxist mythology that produced only a 'limited democracy'. Consequently, the party calls for a rupture with the legacy of 25 April and the establishment of a 'Fourth Republic' (Manucci, 2024).

Chega's more recent manifestos sharpen this critique. The Left is denounced in the 2022 manifesto as a 'moral corpse' (*cadáver moral*), against which Chega pledges to restore 'the moral order of the Portuguese secular tradition'. Similarly, the 2024 manifesto depicts the post-1974 regime as corrupt, decadent, and anti-democratic – a 'dictatorship of influences' defined by cronyism, patronage, and the capture of state resources by interconnected elites. It is therefore unsurprising that Chega has sought to elevate 25 November – the date of the counter coup that curtailed the radical Left's influence in the revolution – to the status of a national holiday alongside 25 April. This proposal was rejected by the parliament in 2024.

Alongside its critique of the post-revolutionary order, Chega advances a vision of Portugal defined by rigid gender roles, ethnic homogeneity, and traditional hierarchies. The enemies blamed for national decline are feminism, multiculturalism, and progressive elites – characteristics embodied by Joacine Katar Moreira, a Black MP for the left-wing party

Livre, whom Ventura told to ‘go back’ to Guinea-Bissau. The Roma community has also been a consistent target: during the Covid-19 pandemic, Ventura accused them of spreading the virus and suggested confining them to ghettos, and in late 2025 a Lisbon court ordered Chega to take down campaign posters that singled out the Roma as lawbreakers after ruling the material discriminatory and potentially inciting hatred. Ventura has likewise stigmatised African-descendant communities: a Lisbon court found him guilty of defaming a family in the *Bairro da Jamaica*, forcing a public retraction after he called them ‘bandits’ on television.

Such incidents are not isolated but fit a broader pattern. Ventura has spoken of ‘demographic substitution’ in Europe and explicitly invoked the white supremacist ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy at an Identity and Democracy congress in Lisbon (GPAHE, 2023). The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance has recently raised concern over the discriminatory rhetoric employed by Chega’s representatives, noting their reliance on antigypsyism, anti-Muslim sentiment, anti-Black racism, and xenophobia as tools of political mobilisation (ECRI, 2025).

The past that Ventura valorises is not an explicit celebration of the *Estado Novo*, yet it overlaps with it in crucial ways – above all, in the glorification of Portugal’s colonial era, which Salazar sought to preserve. Chega laments the loss of Portugal’s ‘positions’ in Africa after 1975, defends the preservation of colonial-era names for streets and monuments and insists that national history should be taught free from ‘revisionist interferences’. The party has even called for a National Museum of the Discoveries – an initiative that, while framed as educational, effectively elevates Portugal’s imperial legacy under the guise of celebrating maritime achievements (Manucci, 2024).

This nostalgia surfaces most clearly when Ventura links the democratic transition to national decline. During the 2022 parliamentary celebrations of the Carnation Revolution’s anniversary, he described the post-1974 order as a failure, citing the dissolution of the empire as a key betrayal: ‘We failed in the justice we built, we failed in the empire that dissolved and left other countries at its mercy and families to their fate.’ Unsurprisingly, when debates over Portugal’s colonial past resurfaced in 2024 – after President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa suggested reparations to former colonies – Chega denounced the proposal as ‘treason of the fatherland’.

Finally, when it comes to the most explicit and open references to the authoritarian past, Chega remains cautious. Given the enduring legacy of the Carnation Revolution, nostalgia is instead expressed obliquely through dog-whistles, ironic asides, or remarks framed as jokes that allow

Ventura to test the waters while circumventing stigma. Since 2021, the party's motto has been almost identical to Salazar's during the *Estado Novo*: instead of the original *Deus, pátria e família* Chega added a fourth element, *Deus, pátria, família e trabalho* (God, fatherland, family, and work) – a symbolic echo that makes the reference unmistakable even if indirect. This strategy was already evident in Ventura's rhetoric: for example, in 2020 he joked that Portugal did not need 'a Salazar at every corner, but a Ventura', and during the 2025–2026 presidential campaign, he went further, invoking the need for 'three Salazars' to put the country 'in order' – a line that, while couched in populist hyperbole, unmistakably revived imagery associated with the *Estado Novo* and signalled a willingness to flirt with authoritarian iconography without overtly glorifying the dictator himself.

4.1.2 VOX and Franquismo

Like Chega, VOX is not an authoritarian successor party. Rather, it emerged as a splinter from the *Partido Popular* (PP), itself widely regarded as the organisational successor to sectors of the Francoist political elite. However, VOX's nostalgic references to Francoism are more explicit and less constrained by the reputational burdens that continue to shape the PP's relationship with the dictatorship's legacy (Rama et al., 2021; Martín et al., 2022; Valentim, 2024; Balcells et al., 2025). Indeed, VOX has clear links to Francoist networks, notably through figures such as Ortega Smith – VOX Secretary-General from 2014 to 2022 – and ideologue Jorge Buxadé – both admirers of José Antonio Primo de Rivera and former *Falange* militants (Sánchez Soler, 2022). In 2020, Abascal claimed contemporary socialist governments were worse than Franco's regime and, in 2024, MP Manuel Mariscal Zabala defended Francoism as a period of reconstruction, progress, and reconciliation. While these declarations and connections could be dismissed as isolated incidents – though they appear less so than in Chega – the crucial point is how VOX actively mobilises authoritarian nostalgia in both its discourse and political strategy.

VOX invokes echoes of Spain's authoritarian past by framing the nation as in crisis and positioning itself as the only saviour (Esteve-Del-Valle & Costa López, 2023). Under Franco, Spain was to be rescued from the 'chaos' of the Second Republic through a new *Reconquista*, a narrative used for decades as an indoctrination tool in schools (García Sanjuán, 2020). Presenting itself as the voice of 'real Spain' against its supposed enemies, VOX reuses the Francoist notion of *anti-España*, once

applied to Republicans, now directed at mainstream parties, separatists, immigrants, and feminists alike (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Rama et al., 2021). The moral language present in VOX's discourse echoes the dichotomies embedded in Francoist commemorative culture. The dictatorship's monuments and memorial rhetoric constructed a narrative of 'good Spaniards' who had 'fallen for God and for Spain' against internal enemies. Without the need to invoke Franco explicitly, the rhetoric of national betrayal, unity, and civilisational struggle articulated by VOX resonates with Franco's architecture of memory (del Arco Blanco, 2024). This discourse is closely tied to the party's opposition to liberalised attitudes towards religion, family, and gender, which echo Francoist reversals of divorce, abortion, and women's rights (Hepworth, 2023). In this Manichean struggle, Abascal casts his followers as the true patriots defending Spain's traditional values and past grandeur against those who threaten them (Ribera Payá & Martínez, 2021).

In this vein, the party frequently contests the so-called 'Black Legend', which portrays Spain as cruel and intolerant during the conquest of the Americas, instead highlighting the wealth and global influence gained through sixteenth-century imperial expansion. VOX combines anti-immigration policies and conservative moral values – while avoiding direct engagement with Francoist atrocities – under a broader promise to restore Spain's former greatness as a defender of Western civilisation. In response to international criticism of colonial violence, such as President Joe Biden's remarks on the devastation inflicted on Indigenous peoples, the party doubled down, portraying the conquest as a civilising and evangelising mission (Hedgecoe, 2021). Its 2023 manifesto explicitly rejects any apology for Spain's past and pledges to promote cultural initiatives countering the Black Legend.

Alongside this imperial nostalgia, the rhetoric of the *Reconquista* occupies a central place in VOX's symbolic arsenal. The party deliberately situates campaign launches in historic sites such as Covadonga – mythologised as the first Christian victory over Muslim forces in 711 – seeking to elevate the location into a sacred space of national rebirth. Iconic campaign imagery has reinforced this narrative, most famously a 2018 video in which Santiago Abascal, on horseback and accompanied by music from *The Lord of The Rings*, leads supporters across the Andalusian landscape (García Sanjuán, 2020). This performative invocation of *Reconquista* imagery proved electorally effective, particularly in Andalusia, where VOX later demanded that the regional holiday be shifted to 2 January to commemorate the fall of Granada in 1492. Through these strategies, VOX

intertwines imperial nostalgia and reconquest mythology, framing itself as the custodian of Spain's cultural identity and historical destiny.

Overall, to avoid direct celebrations of Franco's dictatorship, VOX mobilises earlier and less politically stigmatised historical narratives centred on the *Reconquista*, Catholic unity, and the so-called 'Golden Age' of the Spanish empire. These references evoke hierarchical, exclusionary, and authoritarian visions of national identity without directly invoking Francoism, allowing the party to articulate a form of authoritarian nostalgia that is symbolically linked to the dictatorship while remaining politically less costly. This strategy helps explain how authoritarian historical imaginaries can be reintroduced into mainstream discourse through older, ostensibly more respectable national myths.

However, at least until 2019, VOX has not only paid oblique homage to Franco by emphasising the Reconquest, Catholicism, and the 'Golden Age' of the Spanish empire (Casquete, 2023). The party has frequently made explicit positive references to the Franco regime, which are too numerous to summarise and have been widely documented in the literature. For example, the party continues to blame the Republicans for the outbreak of the Civil War and positions itself as a representative of those who fought on Franco's side, thereby reproducing one of the central narratives of the dictatorship (Valentim, 2024; Faber, 2025). Even more important is VOX's role in Spain's ongoing memory struggles: after decades of *pacto del olvido*, the 2007 Historical Memory Law reopened the public debate, and since its foundation VOX has consistently called for its repeal. The party frames its stance as a defence of Spain's 'national heroes', arguing that all who fought for the country deserve celebration – a position that, while never explicitly stating it, clearly encompasses those who fought for Franco (Manucci, 2024).

The breaking of the pact of silence repoliticised Spain's past and brought the centre-periphery divide back into sharp relief. While presenting the pact as a model of national concord, VOX simultaneously warned that challenging it could reopen historical conflicts – a tension the party skilfully exploits for political gain. In 2019, following recommendations from the 2007 Historical Memory Law and the 2011 Commission of Experts on the Valley of the Fallen, Franco's remains were exhumed and transferred to a private family crypt, an act that VOX – together with nostalgic organisations and the dictator's family – vocally opposed (Hepworth, 2023). Coupled with unrest in Catalonia, these developments heightened territorial and historical tensions, creating conditions that contributed to VOX's strengthened electoral performance (Simón, 2021).

An even stronger role was played by VOX in the ongoing process of transitional justice after 2022. Despite the 2007 Historical Memory Law, over 100,000 Civil War victims remained in unmarked mass graves, and demands for truth, justice, and reparations from victims of Francoist human rights violations persisted (Aguilar Fernández & Ramírez-Barat, 2014). These calls were fuelled not only by the law's limitations but also by the enduring effects of the 1977 Amnesty Law, which continues to shield Francoist crimes from legal accountability (Hepworth, 2023). In response, the socialist government passed the Democratic Memory Law in 2022, enabling investigations into Francoist crimes and mandating education on Spain's authoritarian past – measures VOX immediately vowed to repeal.

Its strong showing in the 2023 regional elections put the party in a position to influence conservative governments formed with the PP, promoting the replacement of existing regional memory laws with the euphemistically named 'concord laws', which propose to replace historical memory legislation with statutes framed around reconciliation and the equal recognition of all victims of twentieth-century political violence. These initiatives broaden the temporal scope of victimhood and avoid explicit reference to Francoist repression, a move critics argue dilutes the specific historical responsibility of the dictatorship. These initiatives in Aragon, Castile and León, and the *Generalitat Valenciana* immediately drew sharp criticism from UN experts, who stressed Spain's duty to preserve the collective memory of Francoist human rights violations and the Civil War. VOX's 2023 manifesto makes its agenda clear: history belongs to historians, and public authorities should prioritise national unity over confronting the past. By blaming the left for reopening historical wounds, VOX positions itself as the guardian of social cohesion – a guise that not only sanitises Francoism but also actively shields it from accountability, turning nostalgia for dictatorship into a political weapon.

4.2 Authoritarian Nostalgia and Voting Behaviour

As we just saw, VOX can draw on authoritarian nostalgia with little restraint, while Chega chooses to cloak it more carefully in ambiguity. But what about their voters? Do they look back fondly on the dictatorships of Franco and Salazar? And could the rise of VOX and Chega be linked, at least in part, to their success in stirring these nostalgic undercurrents within society? This section addresses these questions by examining the levels of authoritarian nostalgia among Spaniards and Portuguese.

We cannot know with certainty the precise degree of stigma attached to the authoritarian past in Spain and Portugal during the decades that followed their democratic transitions in the mid-1970s. Yet the persistent electoral weakness of the far right until 2019 strongly suggests that dominant social norms acted as a barrier to its political resurgence (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; Valentim, 2024). In this sense, the legacies of Francoism and Salazarism seemed to ‘inoculate’ both societies, granting them a temporary ‘immunity’ against far-right breakthroughs.

However, this immunity was neither absolute nor permanent. Positive assessments of the authoritarian past survived the process of democratisation: surveys over the years consistently show that segments of the population regarded the regimes of Franco and Salazar as having both good and bad effects, with a non-negligible minority evaluating them positively overall (Aguilar Fernández & Humlebaek, 2002; Aguilar Fernández, 2009; Lobo et al., 2016; Santana-Pereira et al., 2016). This pattern suggests that such sentiments remained politically dormant – maintained through family memories, intergenerational transmission, and symbolic attachment – but were largely suppressed in public expression due to the fear of social sanction.

The electoral breakthroughs of VOX and Chega signal that expressing authoritarian nostalgia has become increasingly acceptable, and that the stigma surrounding the authoritarian past and the far right has weakened (Manucci, 2025). In recent years, the Overton Window, namely the range of policies and ideas deemed acceptable in society, has widened in Iberia to accommodate far-right positions. While VOX openly champions authoritarian visions of society rooted in traditional gender norms, cultural homogeneity, and anti-pluralism, Chega mobilises similar ideas more discreetly. In both cases, positions once seen as unthinkable are now tolerated and, in certain cases, embraced as politically legitimate. How did this happen?

Existing research shows that positive orientations towards authoritarian pasts and broader forms of political nostalgia can shape contemporary political attitudes. Kim-Leffingwell (2023), for instance, identifies a ‘pro-dictator bias’ linked to the mode of democratic transition, while Steenvoorden and Harteveld (2018) conceptualise nostalgia more broadly as a generalised longing for a perceived better past. Building on these insights, recent studies have begun to explore whether nostalgia for authoritarian regimes may also be associated with support for contemporary far-right parties, including VOX and Chega (Manucci & Hauwaert, 2026).

Evidence suggests that authoritarian nostalgia can be observed both on the supply side, in the discourse and symbolic repertoire of these parties, and on the demand side, among segments of their electorate (Rama et al., 2021; Martín et al., 2022; Balcells et al., 2025; Neundorf & Pardos-Prado, 2025). Interestingly, it emerges from these studies that it is not only those who directly witnessed the authoritarian past that have a nostalgic vision of it but also younger generations who can only rely on mediated memories, confirming that the stigmatising effect has a limited duration and fades over time (Caramani & Manucci, 2019; Frantzeskakis & Sato, 2020).

Drawing on the POLAR data introduced in section 2, we can examine the prevalence of authoritarian nostalgia among Iberian electorates. Figures 7 and 8 present responses to three survey items designed to capture favourable recollections of the former regimes. Specifically, they measure respondents' endorsement of statements – merging the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' categories – asserting that Franco and Salazar were among the greatest statesmen in their countries' history, that the dictatorship should be remembered as a period with more positive than negative aspects, and that adherence to Franco's or Salazar's ideas today would allow Spain or Portugal to recover international stature. As the survey was conducted online, respondents faced minimal social pressure to disguise their preferences.

Although similar operationalisations appear in the literature, important conceptual differences require clarification. Kim-Leffingwell (2024) conceptualises pro-authoritarian orientations primarily as regime evaluation biases shaped by the mode of democratic transition, rather than as nostalgia per se. Steenvoorden and Hartevelde (2018), by contrast, employ a broader notion of political nostalgia oriented towards a vaguely defined 'better past', without reference to a specific authoritarian regime.

Building on earlier work using POLAR data (Manucci & Hauwaert, 2026), this study adopts a regime-specific conception of authoritarian nostalgia, understood as a historically anchored orientation combining positive evaluations of the authoritarian period, symbolic admiration for its leadership, and the perceived contemporary relevance of its ideas. Unlike studies relying on indirect proxies (Chang et al., 2007; Prusik & Lewicka, 2016) or single indicators (Kang, 2016), this measure combines explicit and more implicit items, reducing social desirability bias and capturing nostalgia as a multidimensional latent orientation. Although this operationalisation includes prospective elements, these are interpreted as expressions of nostalgia insofar as they reflect the enduring normative appeal of a past political order, consistent with scholarship on the future-oriented uses of the past in post-dictatorial contexts.

Data were collected by IPSOS at the end of 2023 through professional online panels in both countries using quota sampling to approximate national distributions of age, gender, education, and region. Post-stratification weights were computed and tested; although weighted and unweighted results did not differ substantively, the analyses presented here rely on weighted data. Standard quality checks were implemented, including attention filters, minimum completion times, and the removal of inconsistent responses. Completion and drop-out rates were monitored throughout fieldwork and remained within the expected range for online surveys on sensitive political topics. The company achieved 1,670 complete surveys in Portugal and 1,700 in Spain, pushing around 10,500 invites per country, resulting in 1,500 final responses per country. The questionnaire was pretested to evaluate comprehension and the sensitivity of items related to authoritarian legacies and political memory. The survey questionnaire was approved by the Ethics Commission of the author's institution. The wording of all items is available in Spanish, Portuguese, and English in the survey questionnaires archived on a Harvard Dataverse repository: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/UHTQUH>.

The data reveal the expected partisan divide: whereas left-wing voters express minimal (but non-negligible) traces of authoritarian nostalgia, this characterises substantial minorities of Chega and VOX supporters (see Figures 7 and 8). Although none of these values exceeds the 50 per cent threshold, they remain striking given the explicit nature of

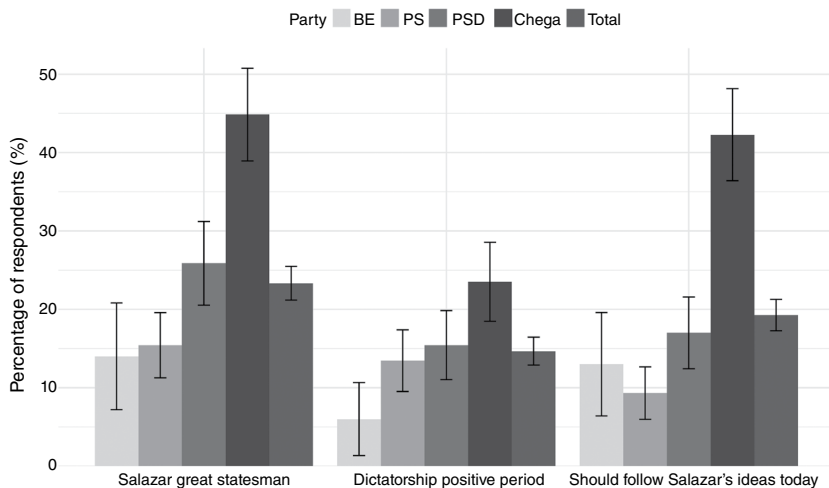


Figure 7 Authoritarian nostalgia in Portugal

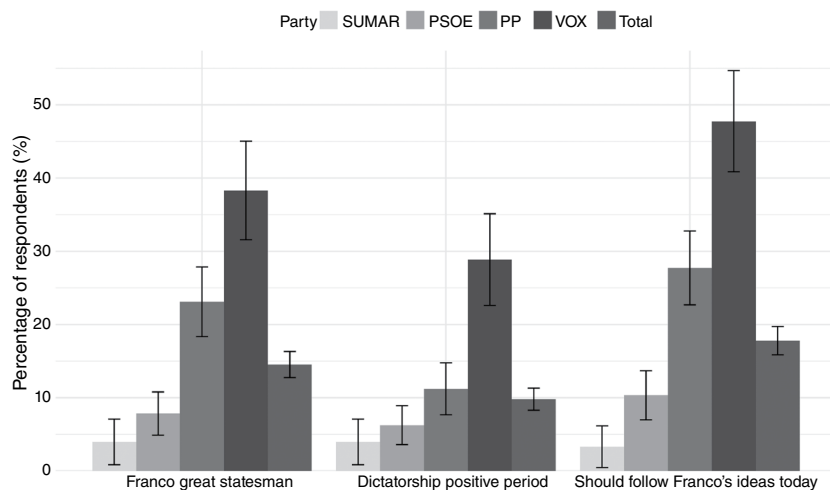


Figure 8 Authoritarian nostalgia in Spain

the questions. Chega voters display levels of nostalgia roughly twice the national averages, while VOX voters' approach or exceed three times. Furthermore, and connected to the previous point, Portuguese respondents register consistently higher levels of authoritarian nostalgia than Spaniards, a pattern that may be linked to the stronger association of Francoism with civil war and political violence.

The non-negligible levels of agreement among BE voters with explicitly Salazar-related items also require attention. While clearly far below the levels observed among Chega voters, these figures indicate that authoritarian nostalgia is not entirely confined to the far right but exists at low levels across the electorate. This pattern reinforces the need for a multi-item measure: isolated agreement with one statement about the authoritarian past does not necessarily translate into a coherent nostalgic orientation, which only emerges when several regime-specific attitudes converge. The presence of such responses across ideological groups suggests that references to the authoritarian past can resonate beyond traditional political divides, albeit with very different intensity and meaning.

Interestingly, the comparison between PSD and PP voters is particularly revealing. Despite the PP's status as an authoritarian successor party, its voters do not appear more distant from VOX than PSD voters are from Chega. This pattern can be better understood through the different nature of the two democratic transitions. In Portugal, the revolutionary overthrow of the regime produced a strong moral and symbolic break with Salazarism that even mainstream right-wing actors had to internalise. In Spain, by

contrast, the negotiated transition allowed elements of Francoism to be normalised as part of the democratisation process. As a result, expressions of positive evaluation of Franco's regime remain less socially taboo among PP voters than comparable references to Salazar among PSD voters. These findings illustrate how the mode of transition continues to shape the boundaries of legitimate political memory decades later.

All figures report 95 per cent confidence intervals, allowing readers to assess the statistical uncertainty associated with these descriptive patterns. While these descriptive patterns cannot establish causality, the fact that these attitudes are specifically anchored in evaluations of the Franco and Salazar regimes supports their interpretation as manifestations of authoritarian nostalgia rather than diffuse pessimism.

Figures 9 and 10 focus on less direct measures of authoritarian nostalgia, capturing the extent to which Spaniards and Portuguese romanticise the pre-democratic past. The first two items assess social decline since the start of the democratic transition (1974 in Portugal, 1975 in Spain), implicitly signalling the end of the dictatorships without naming them, by asking whether community ties have weakened and whether the country was better when traditional values and national identities prevailed. The other two items explore myths of the authoritarian period: that Portugal and Spain were relatively benevolent colonial powers (what in Portugal is known as *Luso-tropicalismo*), and that the dictatorships offered more personal freedoms than today's liberal democracies, sometimes disparaged as 'dictatorships of political correctness' or 'cancel culture'.

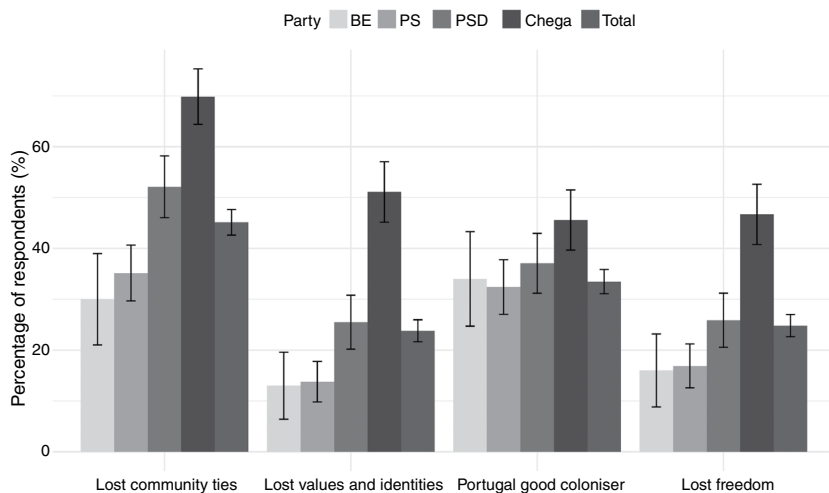


Figure 9 Mythical past in Portugal

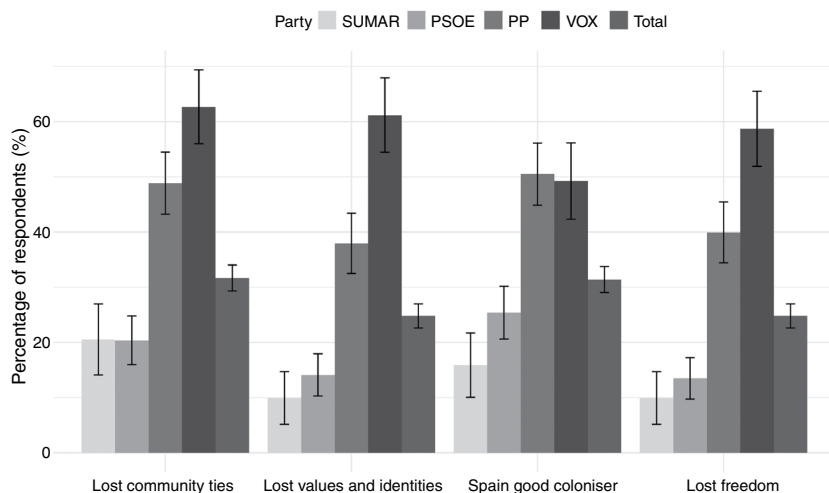


Figure 10 Mythical past in Spain

As these items are less direct, higher levels of nostalgia emerge compared with explicit measures. Roughly a third of respondents express positive views of the pre-democratic past, with unexpectedly high left-wing support (especially in Portugal). VOX and Chega supporters show very high levels of nostalgia, especially regarding stronger community ties, traditional identities and values, and the perception that the authoritarian regime allowed more personal freedoms. Finally, concerning the perception that Spain and Portugal were particularly human colonisers, it is possible to observe that myth is widespread well beyond the far right.

The patterns in [Figures 9 and 10](#) suggest that the erosion of stigma does not operate solely through explicit nostalgia for Franco or Salazar, but also through a broader climate of mythical interpretations of the national past. In line with broader conceptions of political nostalgia (e.g., Steenvoorden & Hartevelde, 2018; Wohl et al., 2020; Lubbers & Smeekes, 2022), these findings indicate that authoritarian nostalgia may be embedded within a more generalised form of past-oriented national pride. What distinguishes Chega and VOX voters is therefore not the presence of nostalgic attitudes per se, but the intensity and the regime-specific direction of those attitudes.

[Figures 11 and 12](#) present evaluations of the democratic transitions that followed decades of right-wing authoritarian rule. The first item measures agreement with the view that the transition should be remembered as a period with more positive than negative aspects. The results highlight the legacies of very different transitions in the two countries: in Portugal,

positive evaluations of the democratic transition are concentrated among PS voters and the left, whereas in Spain they are higher among PP voters and the right. Overall enthusiasm appears modest, particularly in Portugal, where the Carnation Revolution is generally considered a positive and consensual milestone. However, not only must we consider the eighteen months of social tensions that followed the revolution, but also the fact that roughly half of the population in both countries sees the transition as balanced between positive and negative aspects (49.3% in

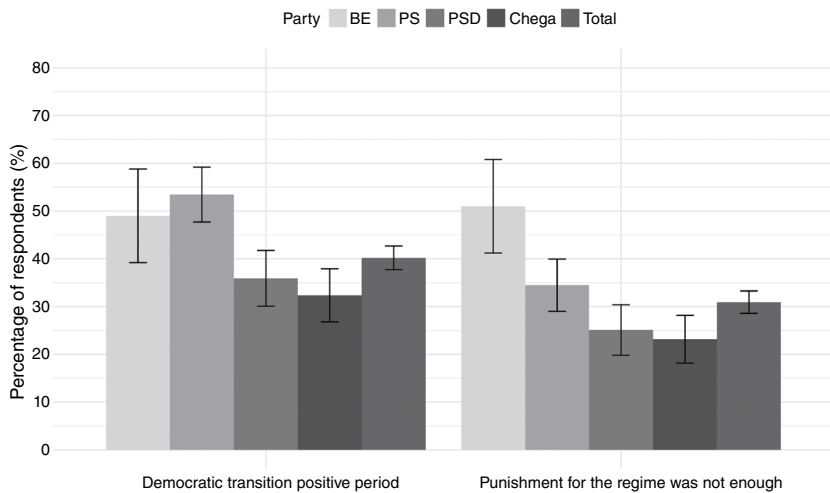


Figure 11 Evaluation of the democratic transition in Portugal

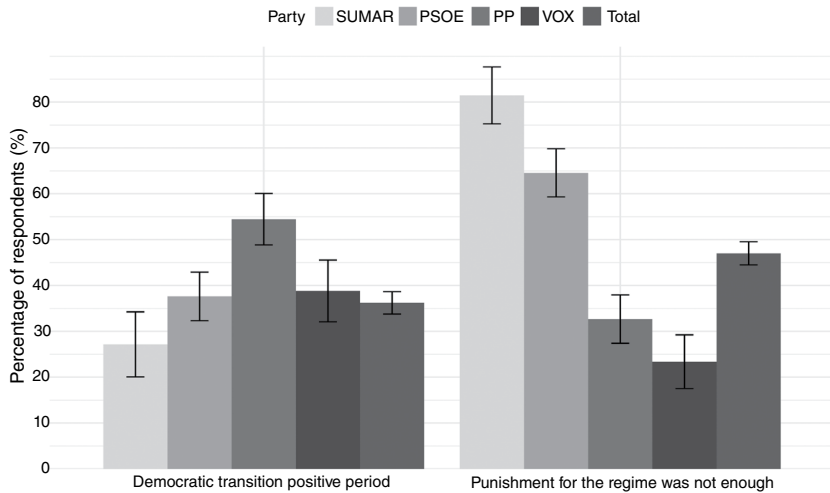


Figure 12 Evaluation of the democratic transition in Spain

Portugal, 51.4% in Spain). Importantly, among those viewing the transition negatively (not reported in the figures), most Portuguese respondents (86.6%) vote for Chega or PSD, while in Spain only a small share of negative assessments comes from PP or VOX supporters (16.1%).

The second item measures agreement with the view that the country should have done more to punish members of the previous regime. Differences between Spain and Portugal are again striking, but far from unexpected; in Portugal, the Carnation Revolution is largely seen as having settled the scores fairly, whereas in Spain the issue is more divisive, with a wider gap between left- and right-wing voters. Among left-wing parties not included in the figures, 58% of communist (PCP) voters in Portugal believe more should have been done, while in Spain the share is even higher among left-wing nationalist parties – 72.2% for Republican Left of Catalonia and 87.5% for EH Bildu, two parties advocating for the independence of Catalonia and the Basque Country, respectively. Conversely, in Portugal, opposition to harsher punishment is concentrated among right-leaning voters – 33.8% of Chega and 24.4% of PSD – while lower shares of BE (13%) and PS (21.7%) voters share this view. In Spain, the pattern is similar but more polarised: only a small minority of left-wing voters (7.8% PSOE, 7.3% SUMAR) oppose harsher punishment, whereas support among right-wing voters is much higher (34.3% PP, 41.3% VOX), reflecting the contrasting nature of the two countries' democratic transitions.

Figures 13 and 14 examine authoritarian nostalgia through the lens of anti-democratic tendencies. The first item measures whether VOX and Chega are seen as a threat to democracy. In both countries, virtually all left-wing voters – almost 90% in Portugal and over 90% in Spain – perceive the far right as dangerous, and nearly 56% of Portuguese PSD voters agree. By contrast, only a small minority of VOX and Chega supporters view their own party as a threat. These results are expected and in line with the fact that the contemporary far right is stigmatised and seen negatively. The second item assesses the extent to which VOX and Chega are seen as embodying the ideas of Franco and Salazar, respectively. As shown in previous sections, due to the different types of democratic transitions that occurred in the two Iberian countries, VOX is much more explicit in its positive references to Francoism than Chega is to Salazarism: Abascal and other VOX leaders openly endorse the authoritarian past, whereas Ventura relies on veiled references and dog-whistles. This difference is reflected in the results: in Spain, 81% of PSOE voters perceive VOX as aligned with Franco's ideas, whereas in Portugal, only 42% of PS voters

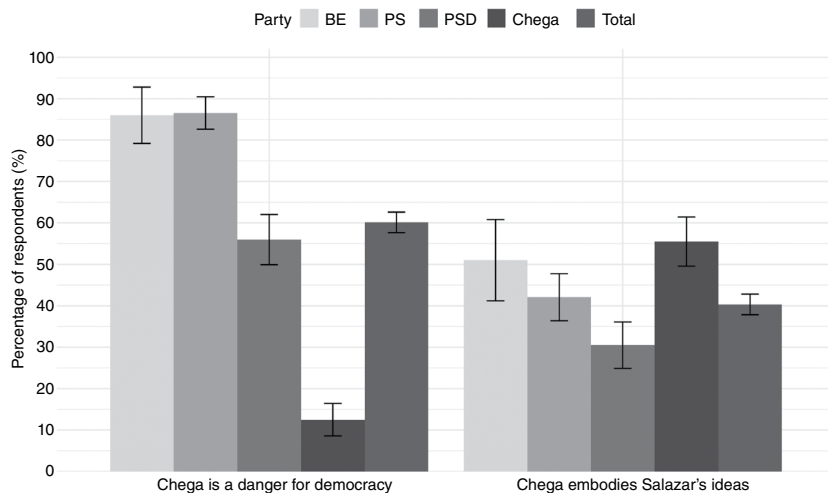


Figure 13 Chega and democracy

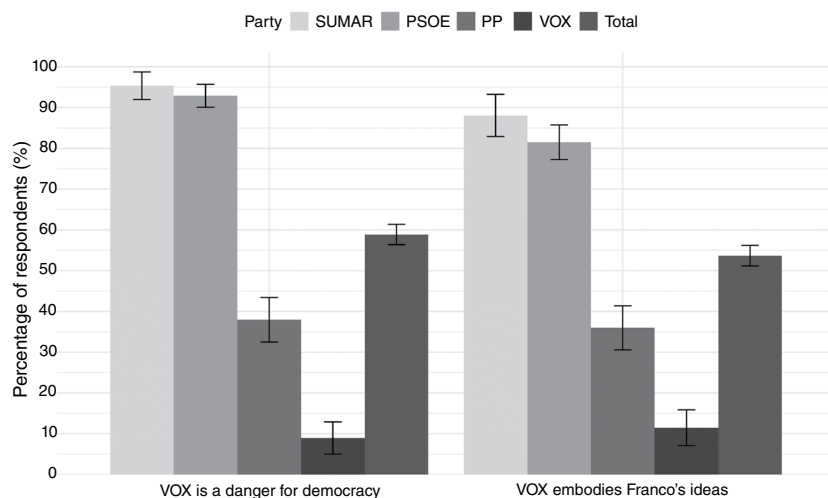


Figure 14 VOX and democracy

see Chega as linked to Salazar (the figure rises slightly to 51% among BE voters but stands at 88.08% among Sumar voters).

This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that VOX's association with Franco's ideas is linked, in the minds of respondents, to perceptions of democratic threat, whereas Chega appears threatening for reasons that extend *beyond* its (less explicit) connection to Salazar. Indeed, on the Portuguese left, many regard Chega as a danger to democracy without necessarily viewing it as a continuation of Salazarism. This

is in line with the party strategies described earlier: VOX openly endorses Franco, while Chega relies on ambiguity and dog-whistles that leave its authoritarian lineage less immediately visible. However, looking at the self-perceptions of their electorates, an unexpected layer emerges.

Surprisingly, VOX supporters largely downplay any continuity with Franco (just around 11% acknowledge it), while Chega's voters are the keenest to claim continuity with Salazar (over 55%), even more so than left-wing voters. What makes these findings particularly striking is that the parties seem to pursue the opposite strategies from those pursued by their voters. This paradox may reflect the parties' rhetorical choices: Chega's evasiveness may encourage its supporters to embrace the connection more openly, while VOX's open references to Francoism make its voters more cautious. But it may also be rooted in history. Franco's dictatorship was bloodier, born of a devastating civil war that left lasting scars, making its legacy far more divisive. Salazar's regime, though repressive, was less violent, enabling Chega voters to reclaim its heritage with fewer inhibitions. This surprising mismatch warrants further research to better understand the mechanisms at play.

Finally, [Figures 15 and 16](#) present levels of authoritarian nostalgia across age groups, measured through the average values across three dimensions already explored: (1) positive evaluations of Franco, Salazar, and their regimes ([Figures 7 and 8](#)); (2) belief in a mythical past preceding the democratic transition, followed by a decline in values and identity ([Figures 9 and 10](#)); and (3) perceptions that VOX and Chega embody authoritarian ideas and threaten democracy ([Figures 13 and 14](#)).

Three patterns emerge. First, the oldest respondents in both Spain and Portugal are the *least* nostalgic, probably reflecting the fact that they lived under Francoism and Salazarism and remember the lack of freedom, civil and political rights, and severe repression. Second, while nostalgia peaks in Spain among those aged 35 to 54, raised in the post-authoritarian transition, in Portugal this generation is less nostalgic than the youngest respondents, likely reflecting the enduring symbolic legacy of the 1974 Carnation Revolution. Third, views of contemporary threats also diverge: whereas younger Spaniards are the least likely to see VOX as linked to Francoism or dangerous for democracy, in Portugal this scepticism is strongest among the 35 to 54 cohort. In both countries, however, it is the oldest respondents that most clearly recognise this link. Overall, authoritarian nostalgia persists across generations, but its transmission is increasingly accompanied by a weakening of the stigma attached to the authoritarian past.

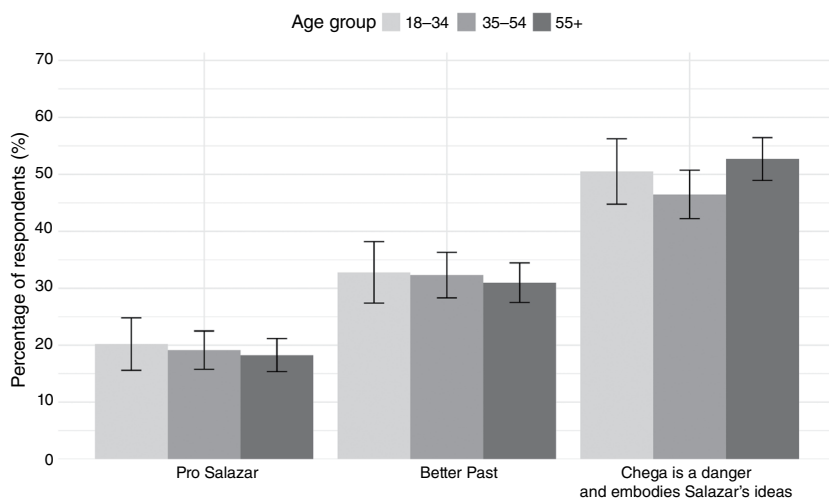


Figure 15 Authoritarian nostalgia by age in Portugal

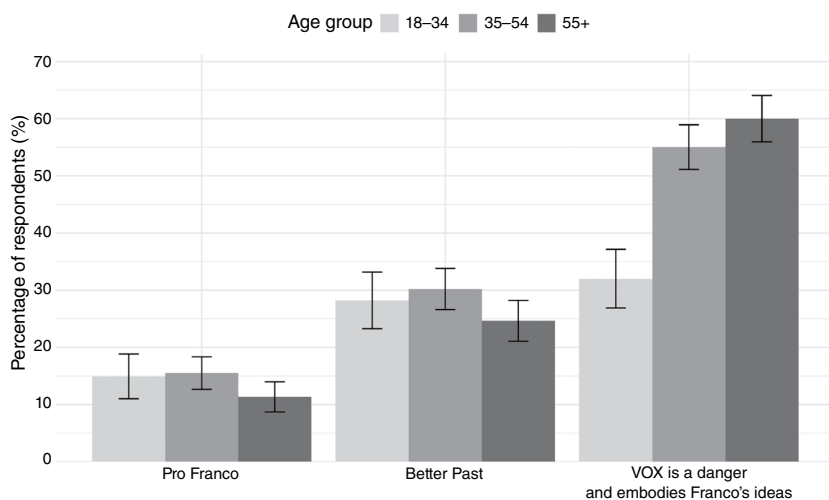


Figure 16 Authoritarian nostalgia by age in Spain

5 Conclusions

This Element has shown how Portugal and Spain, long considered resistant to the far right, have experienced its rapid electoral breakthrough. Portugal embraced a heroic narrative of the Carnation Revolution, while Spain institutionalised silence through the pact of forgetting. These memory regimes shaped political opportunities for decades, stigmatising the far right and constraining its growth. However, despite these different trajectories, both proved unable to contain the far right's return, as

the rise of Chega and VOX demonstrates. The type of collective memory a country develops about its authoritarian past can suppress the far right in the short term and may even do so for several decades. But memory evolves, stigma diminishes, and opportunities shift; the far right can achieve electoral relevance when persistent demand for authoritarian ideas coincides with far-right political entrepreneurs with broadly perceived democratic credentials and intense media visibility. The original survey evidence provided in the analytical section showed how authoritarian nostalgia remains present across generations and is disproportionately concentrated among Chega and VOX voters.

The findings should, however, be interpreted within the limits of the research design. The analyses rely primarily on cross-sectional survey evidence from two countries and are descriptive rather than causal. While the patterns observed are consistent with the argument that authoritarian nostalgia constitutes an attitudinal reservoir that far-right actors can mobilise, the data do not allow us to determine the direction of causality or to generalise mechanically beyond the Iberian cases. Longitudinal data, experimental designs, and comparative analyses across a wider range of countries would be necessary to test the broader applicability of these mechanisms.

Within these limits, the evidence nevertheless points to a consistent pattern: nostalgia for the dictatorships of Franco and Salazar did not vanish with democratic transition but persisted as a latent attitudinal resource. It has been transmitted across generations and now resonates even with younger voters. This means that different memory regimes can delay the electoral breakthrough of the far right but cannot prevent it entirely. Democratic transitions do not erase these legacies. If the past is not critically examined and responsibly transmitted to future generations, it remains available for political mobilisation, with lasting consequences for the quality of democracy (Cesarini & Hite, 2004, p. 17).

Spain and Portugal still struggle to confront their authoritarian pasts. In Portugal, museums addressing dictatorship have only recently been established, and a memorial to slavery approved in Lisbon's 2017–2018 budget remains unbuilt. Spain, meanwhile, has yet to create a museum offering a comprehensive account of the Civil War. Without such spaces, robust curricula, and cultural engagement, new generations risk inheriting simplified or whitewashed narratives. This is especially urgent in a political climate where nostalgic appeals to a 'glorious' past fuel cultural wars. Authoritarian nostalgia can offer false comfort amid anxieties over immigration, European integration, and shifting values around family, gender, and social norms (Tillman, 2021).

Similar struggles over memory and the interpretation of the past are visible well beyond Iberia. Disputes over statues, museums, school curricula, and sites of remembrance have intensified across continents as societies confront the legacies of colonialism and authoritarianism (Montanari, 2024; Thatcher, 2025). In Argentina and Brazil, movies and TV shows have reignited debates over past dictatorships at the same time as political leaders downplay or dismantle remembrance institutions. In Russia, new monuments to Stalin and constitutional references to the Second World War illustrate how selective historical narratives can legitimise present-day political projects. In Germany, far-right actors increasingly challenge established memorial practices surrounding the Holocaust. Across these diverse contexts, collective memory has become a terrain of political struggle in which the past is reinterpreted, sanitised, or weaponised to support contemporary agendas.

Younger generations, in particular, may idealise a past they never experienced – a phenomenon known as *anemoia* (Koenig, 2012). They are also less likely than older cohorts to condemn undemocratic behaviour and express weaker support for liberal democracy (Frederiksen, 2024; van der Brug et al., 2025). Such nostalgia does not necessarily imply a desire to restore dictatorship, but it does expose dissatisfaction with contemporary democracy. Research shows that in polarised contexts, voters may prioritise preferred policies over democratic principles (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Fossati et al., 2022; Lewandowsky & Jankowski, 2023). Support for parties like VOX and Chega may therefore reflect a search for representation as much as regime preferences (Saikkonen & Christensen, 2023).

In this context, the battle over memory shapes how far-right actors consolidate influence and mobilise support. Democratic consolidation depends not only on internalising democratic values but also on establishing a shared collective memory that stigmatises authoritarian nostalgia. For decades, the memory of fascism and dictatorship acted as a moral firebreak: the Holocaust and the Second World War functioned as normative boundaries defining legitimate politics. Postwar Europe, to paraphrase Tony Judt (2006), was built on the legacy of the Shoah, with fascist violence serving as a negative yet paradigmatic *lieu de mémoire* anchoring a fragile democratic consensus (Berger, 2010). That consensus is now weakening as revisionist narratives and selective silences erode the stigma once attached to authoritarian ideas.

The growing success of far-right actors worldwide, coupled with increasingly open references to authoritarian pasts and the mobilisation

of nostalgia, may point to the early contours of what could be understood as a *fifth wave of the far right*. The fourth wave, which began at the turn of the century, saw far-right parties become normalised and mainstream (Mudde, 2019), often softening their rhetoric and avoiding explicit references to authoritarian legacies (Mammone, 2009). By contrast, this emerging phase appears characterised by the resurgence of openly nostalgic elements which, rather than being a burden, function as mobilising tools (Manucci & Hauwaert, 2026). Portugal and Spain, which initiated the third wave of democratisation in the 1970s, offer an instructive vantage point for observing these dynamics.

If this emerging phase can be understood as a fifth wave of the far right, it is inseparable from struggles over how the past is remembered, interpreted, and transmitted across generations. Two caveats therefore matter. First, every narrative about the past is, to some degree, mythical, selective, and partial. The ‘good old days’ never truly existed, as the epigraph from the Wu-Tang Clan at the beginning of this Element suggests. Engaging critically with history – acknowledging its contradictions and injustices – is essential if societies are to imagine more inclusive futures rather than retreat into mythical ones. Second, fully grasping this struggle over memory requires looking beyond this Element’s scope, including the role of mainstream parties and the global diffusion of these dynamics outside the electoral arena, through online networks, media, and transnational cooperation. Across continents, nostalgic appeals reinforce authoritarian attitudes and challenge liberal democratic norms.

‘The various groups that compose society are capable at every moment of reconstructing their past’ (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 182). History, therefore, is not a monolithic, immutable force, but a malleable construct shaped through narratives and shared memories passed down across generations. The true challenge lies in ensuring that the lessons of history remain relevant.

In April 1944, when the Second World War had reached new heights of violence and uncertainty, J. R. R. Tolkien reflected on the fleeting nature of memory in a letter to his son Christopher: ‘so short is human memory and so evanescent are its generations that in only about 30 years there will be few or no people with that direct experience which alone goes really to the heart. The burnt hand teaches most about fire’. Tolkien’s words capture the central concern of this Element. When societies allow memory to fade – when the past is simplified, sanitised, whitewashed, or left unexamined – authoritarian nostalgia and ambition can fill the void, and the fragile freedoms democracies inherit may be quietly surrendered to those who promise comfort in a mythical past.

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