

Latent Populists Activated? Party Membership Switching to the Radical Right

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Abstract

Populist radical right (PRR) parties are expanding their grassroots despite widespread membership decline elsewhere. Yet little is known about who joins them and the implications of recruitment from other parties. This article compares former members of other parties (“switchers”) with first-time members in Portugal’s Chega, drawing on an original survey of thousands of members. The findings reveal a broadly homogeneous grassroots united around ideology and core PRR values. Differences between switchers and first-time members stem from the predominance of former right-wing partisans among switchers rather than from switching itself. Nonetheless, legacy effects persist in out-group affect: former right-wing members rate right-wing parties more positively and left-wing parties more negatively than former left-wing members, who display the opposite pattern. Overall, the results suggest that many switchers may have been ideologically predisposed toward the PRR and were activated by the emergence of a viable organizational supply. They also have important implications for understanding how PRR grassroots perceive party competition and coalition strategies in multiparty systems.

Keywords: party membership, switching, populist radical right, Chega, Portugal

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1 Introduction

Populist radical right (PRR) parties have emerged as exceptions to the broader trend of declining party membership across established democracies. While mainstream parties continue to experience long-term erosion in their membership numbers (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010; Whiteley, 2011; van Biezen et al., 2012; van Haute et al., 2018), PRR parties continue to attract new adherents (Bardi et al., 2017; Albertazzi et al., 2025). Despite often being portrayed as leader-centric organizations (Mudde, 2019), many PRR parties actively invest in grassroots activism, a strong collective identity to build organizational legitimacy, and extensive grassroots mobilization as resources to overcome media hostility and enhance electoral competitiveness (Albertazzi and van Kessel, 2024; Favero and Zulianello, 2024; Ammassari, 2025b). Consequently, several PRR parties have successfully built large activist networks reminiscent of the post-war mass-party model (Albertazzi et al., 2025). This surge in PRR memberships raises questions about who these new members are and what their arrival means for party cohesion at the grassroots level.

Recent scholarship has begun to examine the profile, motivations, and behavior of PRR grassroots members (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2013; Whiteley et al., 2021; Ammassari, 2024, 2025a), and what sets them apart from members of other party families (Dassonneville and McAllister, 2023). In the literature, a distinction concerns prior partisan experience: some members join as their first-ever engagement in party politics (*first-time members*), while others are former members of different parties who have switched their affiliation to the PRR (*switchers*). In Europe, switchers represent a substantial share of PRR grassroots (Mudde, 2019: 73–75), and the inflow of such recruits is proportionally greater in PRR parties than in other party families (Webb and Bale, 2023). Yet, the extent to which switchers differ from first-time members remains underexplored.

Understanding these differences matters for both theory and practice. New parties seek to expand their ranks but must also guard against risks to ideological cohesion and alignment with their electorate. Switchers may bring organizational skills and activist experience, but also ideological legacies from their prior partisan homes. Such legacies could disturb internal unity, ideological consistency, and attitudes toward other parties — with implications for recruitment strategies, coalition bargaining, and spatial competition.¹

Existing work on grassroots switching in Britain and Germany finds only modest ideological differences between former members of other parties and first-time joiners (Springer et al., 2021; Collignon et al., 2023; Webb and Bale, 2023). This pattern may reflect the role of a “substitute” party, which attracts previously discontented members from established parties by offering them an opportunity to exit and voice their grievances elsewhere (Hirschman 1970; see also Nonnenmacher and Rohrbach 2019). In the case of the PRR, this mechanism would also speak to the “normalization” of PRR ideas and the activation of latent demand once a suitable supply emerges (e.g., Valentim, 2024). At the same time, it remains unclear how far these findings travel to other party families, particularly with respect to the core dimensions of PRR ideology and regime orientations. Political socialization theory suggests that prior partisan experience can leave lasting ideological, attitudinal, and affective imprints on switchers that first-time PRR members lack (Green et al., 2004; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Bankert et al., 2017). I argue that, if these legacy effects carry over, we should observe member heterogeneity across ideological dimensions, orientations toward the political system, and affect toward out-groups. Such differences, in turn, could shape the extent to which the party’s base hangs together.

To address this gap, I ask: *How do switchers differ from first-time members in their*

¹ In this paper, party cohesion is understood as the extent to which party members can be observed to share the same ideological goals (see Downs, 1957; Özbudun, 1970).

ideological positions, political orientations, and out-group affect? In answering this question, I examine left-right economics preferences and the core dimensions of PRR ideology — populism, nativism, and authoritarianism — as well as broader orientations toward the political system, cognitive mobilization, and affect toward other parties and leaders. I also assess how the ideological origins of switchers (left- versus right-wing prior affiliation) shape these patterns. The theoretical framework sets up a tension between two perspectives: one predicting similarity between switchers and first-timers (driven by self-selection to a common platform) and another predicting differences (due to legacy effects from political socialization).

Empirically, I draw on an original, large-N survey ($n = 3,163$) of grassroots members of Chega, Portugal’s PRR party. Chega offers a compelling case: it emerged from a split within the mainstream center-right, disrupted four decades of stable two-party dominance (Ferrinho Lopes, 2025; Pimenta and Magalhães, 2025), and reached 23.74% of the national vote in just six years. Before Chega’s emergence, viable PRR alternatives were historically absent from Portugal’s political system, contributing to exceptional levels of partisan loyalty and stability (Jalali, 2007; Lisi, 2015; Carreira da Silva and Salgado, 2018) despite widespread populist attitudes among the population (Santana-Pereira and Cancela, 2020). Chega shares the populist, authoritarian, and nativist appeals (Mendes, 2021) of the PRR observed elsewhere (Mudde, 2007), and its voters tend to exhibit the same hallmark attitudes found among PRR constituencies elsewhere (Heyne and Manucci, 2021). Its sudden viability provided discontented activists from other parties with a “substitute party” in Hirschman’s (1970) sense, creating fertile ground for exits from other parties and entries into the PRR.

This study makes four contributions. First, it documents, using original survey data, the degree of ideological and attitudinal homogeneity between switchers and first-time members within a fast-growing PRR party. Second, the modest differences between switchers and first-time members — such as greater authoritarianism, higher trust in

institutions, and stronger political engagement among switchers — are not inherent to switching per se. Rather, they largely reflect the composition of the inflow: most switchers come from right-wing parties, and it is these former right-wing members who drive the observed gaps. Third, it demonstrates that legacy effects persist in the form of potential mobilization advantages and asymmetric out-group affect. Fourth, it contributes to the broader puzzle of why PRR parties are experiencing grassroots renewal while mainstream parties decline, offering new evidence on how membership inflows sustain PRR growth without necessarily undermining cohesion.

The results suggest that self-selection holds for ideology, while legacy effects hold for out-group affect. Both groups broadly share core PRR attitudes, consistent with the idea that many switchers were latent PRR sympathizers activated by the emergence of a suitable populist supply. Apparent differences — greater authoritarianism, higher trust in institutions, and stronger political engagement among switchers — stem from the right-skewed composition of the inflow, rather than inherent disparities between the two groups. Yet the ideological origins of switchers relates to out-group affect: they remain warmer toward their origin camp and colder toward its opposite, both relative to each other and to first-time members.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical background and develops hypotheses on the differences between PRR party members with and without prior partisan experience. I then present the Chega case, describe the survey data, and detail the empirical strategy. The subsequent section reports and interprets the findings. The study concludes by discussing their implications and suggesting avenues for future research.

2 Political socialization and legacy effects

Party members remain central to democratic representation and to the vitality of party organizations. As Scarrow (1994) notes, their contributions extend far beyond numerical support: they mobilize voters, raise funds, campaign, and act as “ambassadors” for their parties (see also van Haute and Gauja, 2015; Bale et al., 2020). Even in an era of leadership-centered politics, rank-and-file members sustain legitimacy and organizational capacity in ways party elites alone cannot achieve (Bawn et al., 2012; Eriksson and Vernby, 2021). Yet, despite reforms that expanded members’ formal influence over leadership and candidate selection (Cross and Blais, 2012; Poguntke et al., 2016), mainstream parties across advanced democracies have experienced a long-term decline in grassroots membership (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010; Whiteley, 2011; van Biezen et al., 2012; van Haute et al., 2018).

In stark contrast, PRR parties have bucked this trend, retaining and expanding sizable memberships even as traditional party organizations wither (Bardi et al., 2017). They often place particular value on rank-and-file members as central to their projects, investing in local branches, youth wings, and grassroots activism to mobilize supporters, foster a collective identity, and overcome media or establishment hostility (see Albertazzi, 2016; Heinisch and Mazzoleni, 2016; Ammassari, 2024; Favero and Zulianello, 2024; Albertazzi et al., 2025; McDonnell et al., forthcoming). These efforts, aimed at asserting themselves as representatives of “the people” (Ammassari, 2025b), have produced memberships and structures more akin to the post-war mass party model than their contemporary competitors (Heinisch and Mazzoleni, 2016; Albertazzi et al., 2025). Examples include Italy’s League, Austria’s FPÖ, and Estonia’s EKRE, all of which developed locally rooted cadres to socialize members and sustain activism while mainstream competitors retrenched from the ground (Mair, 2013; Saarts et al., 2021).

Counter to the expectation that PRR parties mainly recruit the most marginal or

“left-behind” citizens, cross-national evidence suggests that their members look similar to those of other parties on many socio-demographic traits: predominantly male, somewhat younger, and lower middle class rather than working class (Esser and van Holsteyn, 1998; Mudde, 2019; Ammassari, 2025a). Dassonneville and McAllister (2023) find that European populist party members have similar education, political interest, and attitudes to mainstream members, being only slightly less affluent and less religious, but they are not significantly more politically alienated or socially peripheral. Case studies confirm, however, that PRR members and supporters embrace the core ideological tenets of the PRR: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Goodwin et al., 2013; Heyne and Manucci, 2021; Marchi and Zúquete, 2024; Oliveira, 2025).

Why, then, do PRR parties continue to grow while mainstream party organizations wither? Qualitative evidence points to a combination of grievances and political efficacy. Many PRR members describe a trigger moment that fueled bitterness toward the status quo — a sense that mainstream parties and elites had failed or betrayed the people — followed by a newfound belief that the PRR offered a viable vehicle for change (Ammassari, 2024). In short, PRR growth can be seen as a supply-side activation of latent demand: citizens already inclined toward populist and nativist ideas were mobilized once a viable PRR organization became available. This pattern aligns with Hirschman’s (1970) “exit–voice–loyalty” framework, in which the PRR provides an effective outlet for “exit” from prior affiliations and a channel to voice grievances. It also resonates with the “normalization” thesis: many people long held radical-right attitudes privately but refrained from political expression until such views became normalized by the emergence and success of PRR parties (Valentim, 2024).

Within this growing membership, two groups stand out: *first-time members*, who had never been a card-carrying member of any party until signing up with the PRR, and *switchers*, former members of other parties who have left their party and later joined the PRR. Switchers make up one of the largest segments of PRR grassroots (Mudde,

2019: 73–75), with a share than in other party families (Webb and Bale, 2023). Yet little research has examined whether they differ systematically from first-timers once inside the PRR.

Most existing studies of PRR membership rely on qualitative data (e.g., Klandermans and Mayer, 2005; Goodwin, 2010; Stockemer, 2017; Ammassari, 2024), likely due to the difficulty of surveying PRR members (Gauja and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2021; Whiteley et al., 2021: 647). Quantitative work tends to focus on reasons for joining (Goodwin et al., 2013), participation in PRR organizations (Whiteley et al., 2021; Ammassari, 2025a), differences between populist and non-populist members (Dassonneville and McAllister, 2023), or experiences of stigmatization (Ammassari, 2023). However, they largely overlook the specific subset of members who switched from other parties.

While little work addresses this topic, adjacent scholarship on party membership and organizational and behavioral economics offers useful theoretical guidance. Building on Hirschman's (1970) framework, dissatisfied members face a choice between "exit," "voice," or "loyalty," with the availability of a credible substitute party shaping exit decisions (see also Nonnenmacher and Rohrbach, 2019). Even so, the "exit" pathway — particularly exit followed by entry into another party — has received less systematic attention than "voice" or "(dis)loyalty" (e.g., van Haute and Carty, 2012; Polk and Kölln, 2018; de Vet et al., 2019; McDonnell et al., 2025). Identifying and surveying party leavers is inherently difficult: early studies often measured intentions to leave (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2016; Kölln and Polk, 2017) without tracking whether members ultimately followed through, and many such intentions likely never materialize (Webb et al., 2017). Analyses of actual exits remain limited (Wagner, 2017; Nonnenmacher and Rohrbach, 2019; Springer et al., 2021; Barnfield and Bale, 2022), and research specifically on members who both exit and switch is rarer still (Collignon et al., 2023; Webb and Bale, 2023) — despite evidence that switching is relatively common (Webb and Bale, 2023) and that PRR parties are major beneficiaries of mainstream party losses

(Mudde 2019: 73–75; Webb and Bale 2023: 249).

This line of work suggests that members leave and join parties for similar reasons, including ideological disagreements (Wagner, 2017; Bale et al., 2020), dissatisfaction with leadership (Whiteley et al., 2019; Barnfield and Bale, 2022), or perceived declines in intra-party democracy (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2016). Spatial theories of party competition predict that switches tend to occur between ideologically proximate parties (Downs, 1957). Empirical studies support the role of left–right orientation, libertarian–authoritarian preferences, radicalism, and member–party incongruence (Wagner, 2017; Barnfield and Bale, 2022; Collignon et al., 2023; Webb and Bale, 2023). In Britain, Webb and Bale (2023) show that a non-trivial minority of members “shop around” for better alignment, with flows between major and niche or radical parties more common than previously assumed. Such moves are often triggered by specific policy or leadership disagreements — for example, divergences over social liberalism, authoritarianism, or Brexit (see also Whiteley et al., 2019; Barnfield and Bale, 2022). Similarly, Collignon et al. (2023) find that viable alternatives increase the likelihood of exit: among British Greens, members motivated by a mainstream issue (e.g., social justice) were more likely to return to Labour once that issue was championed by its leader, whereas those driven by core niche concerns (e.g., environmentalism) were less likely to defect. These examples illustrate a broader pattern: switching is often facilitated by the availability of an appealing substitute party (Hirschman, 1970; Nonnenmacher and Rohrbach, 2019) and often reflects continuity in key beliefs rather than wholesale conversion. Many recruits are thus “partial converts” who retain elements of their former party’s ideological profile even after switching.

Applied to PRR parties, this literature suggests that many switchers may already hold PRR-compatible attitudes while still embedded in their former organizations. If they join a PRR party because it better represents their views, these preferences likely pre-dated their move — making them resemble “latent” PRR supporters who were po-

litically housed elsewhere until the right organizational opportunity arose (Carvalho, 2023; Valentim, 2024). Evidence from Britain and Germany supports the idea of minimal ideological gaps: scholars have observed relatively minor differences in left–right self-placement between grassroots switchers and non-switchers (Springer et al., 2021; Collignon et al., 2023; Webb and Bale, 2023). This often reflects continuity in core beliefs rather than radical change. As Webb and Bale (2023) note, the prevalence of “shopping for a better deal” across the ideological spectrum undermines the idea that only ideologues or extremists “jump ship.”

While this evidence points to a null hypothesis — that PRR switchers and first-timers are largely similar because both are attracted by the same party platform in the same context — theories of political socialization and organizational imprinting lead to an alternative expectation. Prior partisan experience can leave attitudinal imprints that persist for a long time (Panebianco, 1988; Green et al., 2004; Gerber et al., 2010; Dinas, 2012; Dinas et al., 2024). Party identities and organizational cultures shape what members learn, internalize, and practice, and even adults can acquire and retain “party-induced” orientations through elite cues, norms, and routine activism (Green et al., 2004; Gerber et al., 2010). In organizational sociology, imprinting processes describe how early experiences in one institutional milieu shape dispositions long after actors move on (Stinchcombe, 1965). Transposed to PRR grassroots, this implies that switchers — who have spent part of their political lives in another party, absorbing its ideology, elite cues, and organizational culture — may retain traces of those formative environments. First-time members, by contrast, enter as “blank slates” in partisan terms, unencumbered by prior attachments that might temper their adoption of the PRR’s identity and ideology.

These competing perspectives — one expecting similarity due to common attraction to the PRR (*null hypothesis*), the other predicting divergence from *legacy effects* — motivate the empirical analysis. The aim is not to explain why people leave or switch,

but to assess whether prior partisan socialization leaves an imprint on PRR grassroots or whether the party attracts a largely homogeneous base despite varied political backgrounds. Both switchers and first-timers share a core affinity for the PRR's agenda, yet subtle differences may matter: they can influence cohesion, rhetoric, coalition preferences, and mobilization. For example, switchers from the mainstream right may favor cooperation with their former party, while first-timers shun the establishment; ex-left switchers may show greater hostility toward right-wing rivals. The following hypotheses outline how such *legacy effects* could manifest.

3 Hypotheses: legacy effects

Prior partisan socialization can temper radical intensity. Members who “cut their teeth” in another party are likely to have internalized some of its ideology or pragmatism, leading to a more moderate stance than those whose first partisan home is the PRR. Party organizations shape beliefs through partisan socialization and organizational imprinting (Panebianco, 1988; Green et al., 2004; Gerber et al., 2010), and these orientations often persist long after defecting (Stinchcombe, 1965; Dinas, 2012; Dinas et al., 2024). Mainstream parties, in particular, promote heterogeneous, coalition-compatible positions that may dilute ideological intensity (Katz and Mair, 2002; Bale and Bergman, 2006; Somer-Topcu, 2015), whereas activists starting in niche or radical parties are typically more tightly sorted on core tenets (Adams et al., 2006; Abou-Chadi, 2016). Some switchers also join niche parties for single-issue motivations rather than blanket extremism (Collignon et al., 2023).

Consequently, switchers may retain residual preferences — such as greater support for state intervention, more pluralist rhetoric, or softer nativism — that temper the radical intensity of their views, resulting in a comparatively milder ideological profile even

while backing the PRR agenda. First-time members, by contrast, arrive without prior partisan commitments that might moderate their ideological alignment — often because no mainstream party was ever appealing to them, precisely due to their more right-wing or populist attitudes. Choosing the PRR as a first partisan home likely reflects and reinforces a strong pre-existing affinity with its hallmark traits. They are therefore more likely to include the most ideologically intense “true believers” in the grassroots (Goodwin et al., 2013; Oliveira, 2025), whereas switchers tend to exhibit comparatively milder expressions of PRR ideology.

H1a. *Switchers will place themselves closer to the center on the state–market preferences scale than first-time members.*

H1b. *Switchers will report lower levels of PRR values (populism, nativism, and authoritarianism) than first-time members.*

Political parties are not only vehicles for policy preferences but also important agents of regime socialization: they teach members how politics works, familiarize them with democratic procedures, and often cultivate loyalty to the political system in which they operate (Easton, 1965; Patterson, 2002; Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). This process aligns with broader theories of political learning showing that early political experiences leave lasting attitudinal imprints on regime support (e.g., Neundorff, 2010). Switchers have, by definition, a baseline acceptance of democratic rules. Even if they became disillusioned and left that party for the PRR, their choice to remain engaged through another party rather than withdraw from politics altogether suggests a continuing belief in formal political participation and in the value of democratic rules. First-time members are less likely to have had such exposure, and research shows PRR members often display lower trust in institutions, greater dissatisfaction with democracy, and higher anti-system attitudes (e.g., Norris and Inglehart, 2019). For these members, joining the PRR may function less as a reaffirmation of democratic engagement

and more as a channel for expressing frustration with “politics as usual” (Whiteley et al., 2021; Ammassari, 2024). Thus, prior partisan experience should translate into comparatively higher regime support among switchers, even within a PRR context.

H2. *Switchers will display higher support for the regime (political trust, satisfaction with democracy, and democratic support) than first-time members.*

Switchers often enter with political skills, organizational know-how, and networks from previous parties, which can enhance their interest, confidence, and activism. Political mobilization reflects resources, engagement, and recruitment (Verba et al., 1995), and prior partisan exposure — whether through active campaigning, attending meetings, or simply being embedded in a party’s environment — can build familiarity with political processes and lower barriers to participation (see Klandermans and Mayer, 2005; Art, 2011; Huddy et al., 2015). This resonates with the broader concept of cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 1984), whereby political skills and interest developed through previous partisan involvement enhance members’ capacity for activism. Choosing to remain in politics after leaving a party signals the set of skills and interest that facilitate participation, even if they do not directly measure observed behavior. Evidence from Austria and Germany shows that continuing members report higher cognitive mobilization than leavers (Wagner, 2017; Nonnenmacher and Rohrbach, 2019; Springer et al., 2021), and although these studies do not focus exclusively on switchers, they suggest that reaffiliates are among the most potentially mobilized activists. Research on populist parties reinforces this view, finding that their members are as politically interested as those in other parties (Dassonneville and McAllister, 2023), and that efficacy plays a key role in sustaining PRR activism (Goodwin, 2010; Ammassari, 2025a). Switchers may therefore combine the motivational drivers common to all PRR activists with the political interest and efficacy developed in previous partisan homes, giving them a potential mobilization edge over first-time members, who lack compara-

ble prior experience.

H3. *Switchers will be more cognitively mobilized than first-time members, displaying higher levels of political interest and internal efficacy.*

Partisanship is a durable social identity that shapes affect toward political in-groups and out-groups (Green et al., 2004; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Bankert et al., 2017), and such affective orientations tend to be stable over time (Greene, 2002). Research on affective polarization shows that citizens evaluate ideologically proximate parties more positively and distant parties more negatively (Druckman et al., 2021; Wagner, 2021; Garzia et al., 2023), and similar patterns hold for leaders (Reiljan et al., 2024). The ideological distance traveled when switching should therefore shape current affective orientations asymmetrically: long-distance switchers (e.g., from the left to the PRR) may retain residual sympathy toward their origin camp and greater hostility toward its opposite, while short-distance switchers (e.g., from the right) are likely to display the reverse. In short, greater party-level ideological distance should produce warmer evaluations of the origin camp and colder evaluations of the opposing camp, extending the “legacy effect” from ideology to out-group affect.

H4. *Among switchers, greater party-level ideological distance traveled to join the PRR will be associated with warmer evaluations of the origin camp and colder evaluations of the opposing ideological camp.*

4 Empirical strategy

4.1 Chega and the emergence of an “exit” option

Portugal’s Chega party offers an ideal case to examine differences between switchers and first-time members at the grassroots of the PRR, in light of the emergence of an

available substitute party in [Hirschman](#)’s terms ([1970](#)). Until recently, Portugal’s party system was exceptionally stable and immune to PRR challengers. The 1974 democratic transition stigmatized such politics ([Carreira da Silva and Salgado, 2018](#); [Manucci, 2025](#)), and for four decades no PRR party entered parliament. Despite widespread populist attitudes among the Portuguese population ([Santana-Pereira and Cancela, 2020](#)), discontented partisans lacked any “exit” option provided by a substitute party on the right, reinforcing loyalty to established parties ([Ferrinho Lopes and Lisi, 2025: 8-9](#)) even during the financial crisis ([Jalali, 2019](#)).

This changed in 2019 when Chega — emerging from a split within the mainstream center-right — won a parliamentary seat, ending Portugal’s PRR “exceptionalism”. In just six years, its vote share rose from 1.3% to 23.73%, marking a structural break in a once-predictable two-party system ([Ferrinho Lopes, 2025](#)). Such growth mirrors the disruptive impact of new PRR parties observed elsewhere in Europe, but in Portugal the change was especially pronounced given the country’s long-standing two-party dominance ([Jalali, 2007](#); [Lisi, 2015](#)). Chega’s ascent from one to 62 MPs not only broke this duopoly but also displaced the Socialist Party (PS) as the second-largest parliamentary party, becoming leader of the opposition ([Mendes, 2025](#)).

In substantive terms, Chega shares the core features of its PRR counterparts across Western Europe. Its platform combines populist, authoritarian, and nativist appeals ([Mendes, 2021](#)), and its supporters display attitudes consistent with broader PRR trends. The party draws disproportionately from disillusioned, young educated male voters — often in rural areas — who express strong anti-immigration and anti-globalization views ([Afonso, 2021](#); [Heyne and Manucci, 2021](#); [Mendes and Dennison, 2021](#); [Costa et al., 2025](#); [Magalhães and Cancela, 2025](#)). Organizationally, it follows the leader-centric model typical of the PRR, while still granting grassroots members some influence over the agenda — occasionally prompting internal divisions and exits when demands go unmet ([Marchi and Lisi, 2021](#)). These parallels enhance the comparability

and external validity of the Portuguese case.

Somewhat consistent with normalization accounts (Valentim, 2024), Chega capitalized on a breach in the supply side of party competition (Mendes and Dennison, 2021; Carvalho, 2023). Its rise positioned it as a viable alternative for disillusioned voters and even established party members: it enabled large-scale exit from traditional parties followed by entry into a new PRR organization. Chega attracts support from several ideological backgrounds: not only center-right voters and abstainers (Santana-Pereira and Nina, 2024), but also segments of the left (Cancela and Magalhães, 2025; Espírito-Santo et al., 2025; Pimenta and Magalhães, 2025). Preliminary evidence indicates a substantial share of its grassroots are former members of other parties (Marchi and Zúquete, 2024), suggesting that once a substitute appeared, many previously loyal party members seized the opportunity to switch.

Studying Chega therefore allows me to observe how these switchers integrate into a PRR organization alongside first-time activists. It offers a compelling setting to analyze ideological and attitudinal differences inside a rapidly expanding grassroots movement, in a context where a long-entrenched party system was suddenly disrupted by a PRR challenger. In doing so, this study contributes to understanding the grassroots renewal of the PRR amidst the membership decline of mainstream parties. I contribute to the literature on party membership and the PRR by providing the first survey-based evidence of ideological heterogeneity between members with different political experiences within a PRR party's grassroots. More broadly, the case also speaks to debates on party-system realignment and membership volatility: Chega's rise illustrates how a new PRR entrant can realign a stable party system by mobilizing both political newcomers and defectors from existing parties.

4.2 Survey and sample

To investigate whether switchers and first-timers within Chega differ in their ideology and political attitudes, an original survey of the party's rank-and-file was fielded. The survey was administered online from May 24 to June 16, 2021, a pivotal period shortly after Chega's parliamentary entry and just after its strong performance in the January 2021 presidential election. The party headquarters emailed a survey invitation to all registered Chega members with an email address, following standard practice in party membership research (e.g., van Haute and Gauja, 2015; Bale et al., 2020). This yielded 4,078 responses — a very substantial sample by comparative standards. Given Chega's growth from ≈ 700 members in mid-2019 to an officially reported $\approx 25,000$ by May 2021 (Marchi and Alves, 2022), the response rate is about 16.3%. However, this likely underestimates true participation, as parties often inflate their membership figures (Mair and van Biezen 2001: 7; Scarrow and Gezgor 2010; Gauja and Kosiara-Pedersen 2021: 9). Therefore, the actual share of active members who responded is probably higher (precise calculation is infeasible without verified membership rolls). I analyze the 3,163 complete questionnaires (after dropping partial responses, as the main variable of interest was placed at the end of the questionnaire), which still represent an unprecedented sample of party members in Portugal. Moreover, this is, to the best of my knowledge, the third largest survey sample ever collected with grassroots members of a single PRR party after Whiteley et al. (2021), who report 14,833 responses from UKIP members, and Ammassari (2025b), who surveyed 9,154 members of the Sweden Democrats and also 1,223 members of the Italian League. Notably, the survey timing — less than two years after Chega's founding — helps to mitigate concerns about internal socialization biasing members' responses: early joiners had relatively little time within the party to have their views homogenized, so differences observed likely reflect prior orientations rather than extensive post-entry socialization.

As with most party membership surveys, there are inherent limitations. No official demographic statistics on Chega's membership were made available by the party at the time of the survey. As such, the demographic representativeness of the sample cannot be directly verified. Moreover, the sample is self-selected and not a random cross-section of all members. Respondents chose to participate, which raises possible self-selection bias (e.g., more active or committed members might be overrepresented). This is a common challenge long acknowledged by party membership scholars (e.g., van Haute and Gauja, 2015; Kölln and Polk, 2017) and especially with "hard-to-reach" groups like PRR parties (Ellinas, 2023; Ammassari, 2025a), since many such parties are wary of cooperating with researchers (Gauja and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2021; Whiteley et al., 2021: 647). The findings must therefore be interpreted with caution, mindful of potential differences between respondents and non-respondents. Finally, I do not apply post-stratification weights. Given the lack of a known population profile (and the non-random nature of the sample), weighting could yield biased results (Gelman, 2007). Reassuringly, prior membership surveys that analyzed unweighted data have proven quite accurate in predicting outcomes — for example, YouGov member surveys closely predicted actual leadership election results (Webb and Bale, 2023: 249).

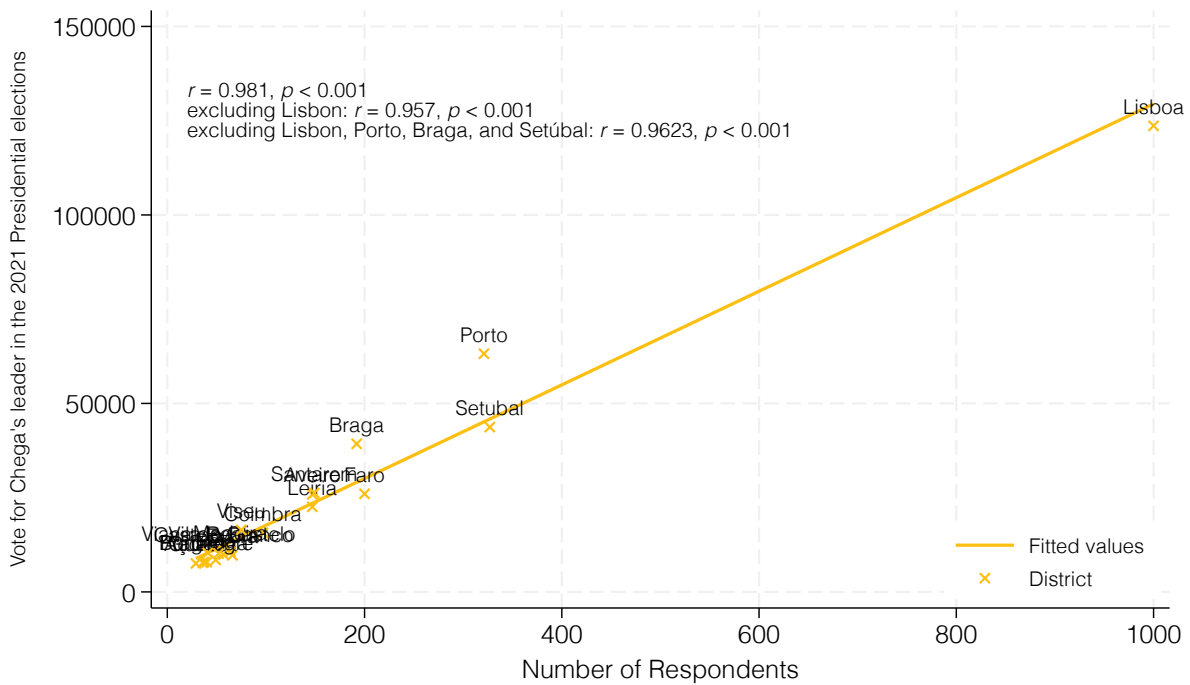
Nonetheless, several considerations suggest the data are broadly representative of Chega's grassroots. First, the sample size and scope: to my knowledge, this is the largest-ever survey of a single party's members in Portugal (cf. Lisi and Cancela, 2019), and it even surpasses typical response numbers for major mainstream parties in other countries (cf. van Haute and Gauja, 2015; Polk and Kölln, 2018; Bale et al., 2020). It is also comparable to recent surveys of other PRR parties' memberships, which likewise report on the order of up to a few thousand respondents (cf. Ammassari, 2025b). In short, the dataset seems to be on par with the comparative studies of party members in terms of scale. Following Mair and van Biezen's (2001) dictum that "any membership figures, even if inflated or crudely estimated, are better than none," this survey

provides valuable evidence on a party base rarely accessible to researchers. Second, the responses exhibit broad geographical coverage. Participants were obtained from all electoral districts of Portugal, reflecting Chega’s national presence (see [Table A3](#)). The distribution of respondents across districts closely mirrors Chega leader’s actual support patterns: the number of survey responses per district correlates almost perfectly ($r = 0.981, p < 0.001$) with André Ventura’s vote share in the 2021 presidential election ([Figure 1](#)).² In other words, the sample’s geographic profile tracks the party’s strongholds in the South and rural interior as well as its weaker support areas in the urbanized North (see Afonso, [2021](#)). This near-one-to-one correspondence gives me confidence that the fieldwork did not unintentionally oversample any particular region of the party’s base. Third, the sociodemographic composition of respondents aligns with established profiles of both party members in general and PRR party members in particular. Chega’s rank-and-file is overwhelmingly male, roughly two-thirds are middle-aged (between 35 and 64), relatively educated, mostly employed, and non-religious practitioners, which is consistent with prior research on party members more broadly (van Haute and Gauja, [2015](#); Heidar and Wauters, [2019](#); Bale et al., [2020](#)). At the same time, their characteristics mirror well-documented patterns among PRR members across countries. For example, the proportion of women is lower than in most other political parties (only 16% of respondents), yet comparable to [Whiteley et al.’s \(2021\)](#) finding of 16% among UKIP members and to what [Ammassari \(2025b\)](#) reports for the Sweden Democrats and the Italian League (25%). Esser and van Holsteyn ([1998](#)) found similar results for the Center Democrats in the Netherlands. Moreover, most respondents report less than tertiary education, again in line with PRR membership patterns observed elsewhere (Mudde, [2019](#); Whiteley et al., [2021](#); Dasson-

² The correlation is the same when using the share of votes in each district relative to the national total against the share of respondents in each district relative to the sample total ([Figure A1](#)). Additionally, it remains very high when excluding Lisbon ($r = 0.957, p < 0.001$; [Figure A2](#)) or other major districts ($r = 0.962, p < 0.001$; [Figure A3](#)).

neville and McAllister, 2023; Ammassari, 2025b). As Mudde (2019: 77) puts it, PRR party members “seem to be almost exclusively white, predominantly male, and lower middle class rather than working class”.³ These similarities suggest that the sample is not demographically anomalous. While some degree of bias cannot be ruled out, the evidence indicates that the survey captures a credible cross-section of Chega’s membership.

Figure 1: *Geographic respondent coverage near-perfectly correlates with support for Chega’s leader.*



Notes: Each marker represents a Portuguese electoral district, plotting the number of survey respondents against the number of votes received by Chega’s leader in the 2021 presidential election. The line shows fitted values from a linear regression.

4.3 Operationalization

The binary outcome variable equals 0 for first-time party members and 1 for switchers (i.e., had a prior party). I further classify respondents into first-timers, former left-wing party members, and former right-wing party members based on the side of the

³ See Table A2 for a description of respondents’ profile.

political spectrum from which switchers originated. This allows me to probe whether ex-left and ex-right switchers bring different legacies into Chega. The modeling strategy includes (1) ideological preferences and PRR values, (2) orientations toward the political regime, (3) cognitive mobilization, and (4) socio-demographic attributes.

First, left-right ideological positions and PRR values are assessed using composite indexes covering economic state–market and libertarian–authoritarian preferences, attitudes toward immigration, and populist attitudes. Each is constructed as a multi-item scale.

Left-right economic preferences (state-market) are measured using respondents' agreement, on a 5-point scale, with the following statements: the primary goal of the government should be to ensure a stable social safety net for the population; the government should take measures to reduce income inequality; governments should intervene in the economy; education and healthcare should primarily be guaranteed by the state; current levels of social protection should be maintained, even if it means higher taxes; income and wealth should be redistributed to the common citizen; and no more public companies should be privatized ($\alpha = 0.737$). Libertarian–authoritarian positions are measured using respondents' ratings (1 = never justified, 10 = always justified) for the acceptability of consuming marijuana, having an abortion, divorcing, supporting the death penalty, practicing euthanasia, and using artificial insemination ($\alpha = 0.706$). Attitudes toward immigrants are measured using respondents' agreement that: immigrants are good for the country's economy; the country's culture is harmed by immigrants; immigrants increase the crime rate; and immigrants are a burden on the social security system (5-point scale). Responses are reverse-coded and rescaled so that higher values indicate stronger anti-immigrant attitudes ($\alpha = 0.821$). In turn, based on [Akkerman et al. \(2014\)](#), populist attitudes are measured as the mean of six items: (1) the politicians in parliament need to follow the will of the people; (2) the people, and not politicians, should make the most important policy decisions; (3) the

political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people; (4) I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician; (5) elected officials talk too much and take too little action; and (6) what people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out one’s principles ($\alpha = 0.612$). Lower values across these variables indicate leftist, libertarian, pro-immigrant, and non-populist attitudes, while higher values correspond to right-wing, authoritarian, anti-immigrant, and populist attitudes.

Second, regime orientation includes trust in political institutions, satisfaction with democracy, and support for democracy. Trust in political institutions is measured as the mean score of confidence in parliament, the justice system, the police, politicians, political parties, the church, and the Head of State (0 = no trust, 10 = full trust; $\alpha = 0.791$). Democratic satisfaction is assessed on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). Democratic support captures the extent to which respondents agree with the statement, “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government” (1–5 scale).⁴

Cognitive mobilization is measured using two indicators: (1) interest in politics (1 = not interested at all, 4 = very interested) and (2) internal political efficacy, assessed on a 1–5 Likert scale measuring respondents’ perceived difficulty in understanding politics (see Wagner, 2017).

Finally, sociodemographic variables capture characteristics such as age, gender, education level (1 = none, 5 = Master’s/PhD), and religious practice (1 = never, 7 = every day). Additionally, employment status (1 = full-time employed, 0 = otherwise) and income level are included to represent indicators of civic resources, which are associated with political participation and party exit (see Wagner, 2017; Springer et al., 2021).

⁴ Correlations between the ideological dimensions, as well as between the trust in institutions and populism indexes, are weak in magnitude ($r \leq 0.32$), indicating that these measures tap empirically distinct attitudinal constructs (Table A5).

Finally, to facilitate the comparison of coefficients for variables with different scales, all independent variables are standardized by dividing them by two standard deviations (Gelman, 2008). Summary statistics for all variables are provided in [Table A1](#) in the [Supplemental Materials](#).

5 Results

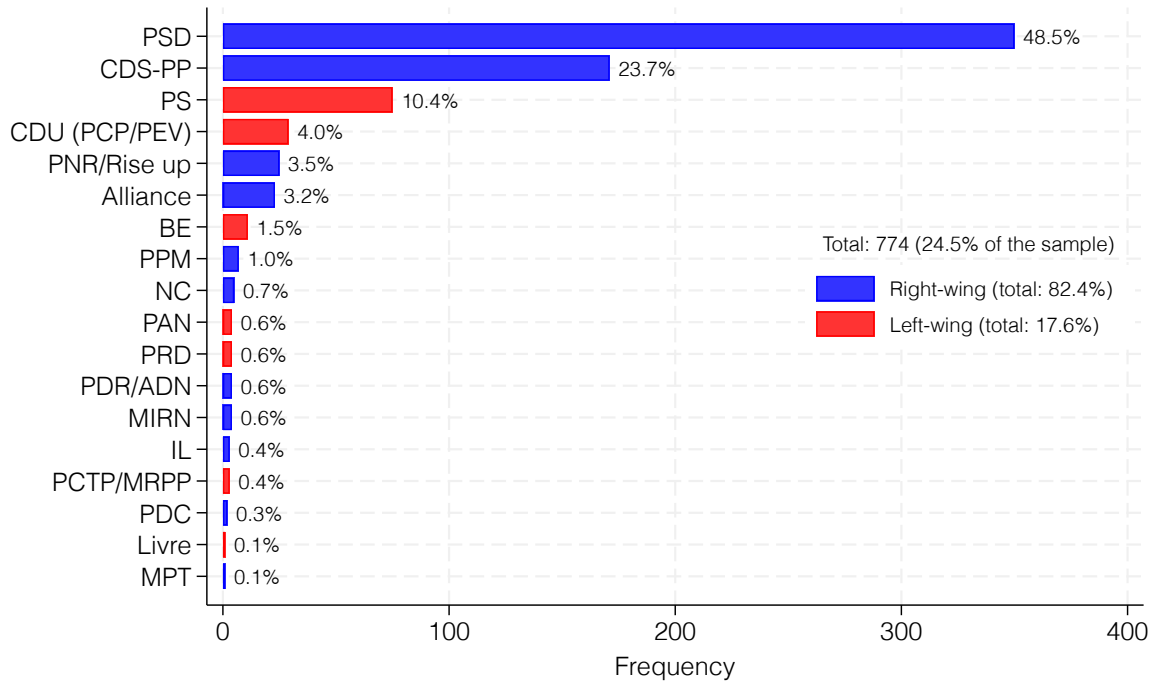
[Figure 2](#) displays the distribution of Chega members who had prior membership in another political party. In the sample, about 24.5% of members (774 respondents) are switchers, while the remainder are first-time joiners. This proportion is consistent with recent evidence showing that grassroots switching is more common than conventional wisdom suggests and that PRR parties often attract recruits from other parties (Mudde, 2019; Webb and Bale, 2023).⁵

In line with the Downsian model of spatial competition (Downs, 1957), the distribution of switchers is heavily right-skewed: 82.4% previously belonged to right-wing parties, while only 17.6% came from the left. Nearly three-quarters of all switchers originated from Portugal's two mainstream center-right parties: 48.5% from the PSD (Social Democratic Party) and 23.7% from the CDS-PP (People's Party). A further 3% came from the Alliance, the PSD split created in 2018, which can also be included in this share (Marchi and Zúquete, 2024: 9). A smaller share of switchers (3.5%) had belonged to the extreme-right PNR/Rise Up. On the left, the PS (Socialist Party) accounts for the largest proportion (10.4%), followed by a non-negligible number of former Communists from the PCP/PEV coalition (4%). The remaining switchers come from several small parties.⁶

⁵ Webb and Bale (2023) report that 34.2% of the Brexit Party/UKIP grassroots were switchers. However, their data refer to party supporters rather than formal members.

⁶ While remarkably similar, the shares reported in this article differ slightly from those in Marchi and Zúquete (2024: 9), likely due to list-wise deletion used here (excluding respondents with missing

Figure 2: Previous party affiliation of Chega switchers.



Notes: Bars show the distribution of switchers by last party affiliation before joining Chega, with colors distinguishing prior right-wing (blue) and left-wing (red) memberships. Percentages indicate the share of all switchers ($n = 774$; 24.5% of the sample).

This composition suggests that Chega’s recruitment base is concentrated among established right-wing parties but also includes a non-trivial minority of former Socialist and Communist members. This finding speaks directly to ongoing debates about whether Chega is making inroads into constituencies traditionally aligned with the Portuguese left. Unlike right-origin switchers – whose move into Chega is facilitated by ideological proximity and the emergence of a viable PRR supply – and unlike the pattern observed among some younger, economically insecure Socialist voters who have drifted toward the radical right since 2024 seeking protection and welfare chauvinism (Espírito-Santo et al., 2025), the transition from the radical left likely reflects different structures of competition. Aggregate-level data suggest that Chega has begun to draw support in traditionally Communist strongholds, mostly rural areas where voters cast

data on individual-level independent variables applied in the statistical analyses that follow).

a ballot for the PRR because they feel politically neglected (Magalhães and Cancela, 2025). However, individual-level surveys show minimal direct vote-switching between PCP/PEV and Chega (Russo, 2025: Appendix IV). At the party grassroots level, further research is needed to clarify the mechanisms underlying membership switching from the radical left. As shown in the analyses that follow, this right-skewed composition of switchers helps explain the limited attitudinal differences observed within Chega's grassroots.

To assess how ideological preferences and PRR values (H1), orientations toward the political regime (H2), and cognitive mobilization (H3) relate to membership status, I estimate a series of binomial logistic regression models predicting the log-odds of being a switcher (as opposed to a first-time member), with all continuous independent variables standardized following Gelman (2008). The results, presented in Table 1, are robust to alternative specifications, including OLS and probit estimators (see Table A7 and Table A8).

The results in model 5 show that switchers and first-time members are broadly similar across most ideological dimensions. In particular, there are no significant differences in economic left-right self-placement, anti-immigrant attitudes, or populist orientations. The only ideological dimension with a meaningful gap is the libertarian-authoritarian scale: switchers place themselves significantly more on the authoritarian pole of the scale. Substantively, a two-standard deviation increase in authoritarian preferences is associated with a 4.6 percentage point increase in the predicted probability of being a switcher ($\beta = 0.267$, $AME = 0.046$, $p < 0.05$).⁷ This finding runs counter to H1, which anticipated greater ideological moderation among switchers. As shown later, this gap is largely driven by the predominance of former right-wing members among switchers, rather than switching per se.

Evidence for H2 is also limited. Switchers are, on average, 7.8 percentage points

⁷ The Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) for all predictors are reported in Table A4.

Table 1: *What distinguishes switchers from first-time members?*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
State-market	0.195* (0.082)				-0.161 (0.121)
Libertarian-authoritarian		0.271** (0.086)			0.267* (0.127)
Anti-immigrant attitudes		-0.094 (0.087)			0.041 (0.117)
Populist attitudes		0.033 (0.085)			-0.092 (0.123)
Trust in political institutions			0.364*** (0.100)		0.448** (0.137)
Satisfaction with democracy			-0.164 (0.103)		-0.133 (0.141)
Democratic support			-0.096 (0.086)		-0.153 (0.116)
Political interest				0.710*** (0.098)	0.721*** (0.127)
Internal political efficacy				0.282** (0.087)	0.292* (0.120)
Age					0.780*** (0.117)
Female					-0.312** (0.113)
Education					0.666*** (0.122)
Religious practice					0.162 (0.117)
Full-time employed					0.167 (0.118)
Income					0.028 (0.119)
Constant	-1.130*** (0.041)	-1.127*** (0.042)	-1.131*** (0.042)	-1.165*** (0.043)	-1.252*** (0.059)
Log-likelihood	-1755.546	-1749.829	-1739.706	-1710.334	-1048.623
AIC	3515.092	3507.659	3487.412	3426.669	2129.246
BIC	3527.209	3531.878	3511.616	3444.829	2218.853
Observations	3161	3149	3137	3145	1999

Notes: Entries are estimated coefficients from binomial logistic regression models with robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

more trusting of political institutions than first-time members ($\beta = 0.448$, $AME = 0.078$, $p < 0.01$), a result that moderates the well-documented tendency of PRR electorates to exhibit low institutional trust (Norris, 2005). However, consistent with Dassonneville and McAllister (2023), there are no differences in satisfaction with democracy or support for democracy. These findings align with voter-level studies showing that dissatisfaction with the regime is a key driver of switching to PRR parties (Stockemer et al., 2018), including in Portugal (Heyne and Manucci, 2021), but also suggest that while prior partisan experience may sustain a degree of attachment to political institutions, the broader PRR-typical distrust is shared across both group.

Support is found only for H3. Switchers are more likely than first-time members to report high political interest and greater internal political efficacy. A two-standard deviation increase in political interest is associated with a 12.5 percentage point higher likelihood of being a switcher, while higher political efficacy increases the likelihood by 5.1 percentage points (see Table A4). These results are consistent with the idea that switchers are more politicized and confident in their political abilities.

Regarding sociodemographic characteristics, age, gender, and education differentiate the two groups: switchers are older, more likely to be male, and have higher educational attainment, even within Chega's already male-dominated grassroots. These findings are consistent with Webb and Bale (2023) and Wagner (2017), who also identify age and gender gaps among switchers and leavers, and with Webb and Bale's (2023) finding that switchers are more likely to hold university degrees. By contrast, no significant differences are found in religious practice, employment status, or income — variables that tend to distinguish populist from non-populist party members (Springer et al., 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister, 2023) but not subgroups within PRR parties, as Table 1 indicates.

Given these patterns, the next step is to examine whether the attitudinal differences observed in Table 1 hold once switchers are disaggregated by ideological origin. This

is the purpose of the multinomial logistic regression models reported in [Table 2](#), which allow me to assess whether the observed gaps are legacy effects or compositional artifacts driven by the predominance of former right-leaning members among switchers.⁸

Table 2: *Multinomial logistic regression models of left- and right-wing prior party membership.*

	Ref.: First-time member	
	Former left-wing party	Former right-wing party
State-market	-0.613* (0.298)	-0.106 (0.129)
Libertarian-authoritarian	-0.124 (0.298)	0.368** (0.138)
Anti-immigrant attitudes	-0.007 (0.263)	0.021 (0.127)
Populist attitudes	0.174 (0.286)	-0.182 (0.133)
Trust in political institutions	0.295 (0.266)	0.496** (0.152)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.091 (0.291)	-0.146 (0.157)
Democratic support	0.145 (0.270)	-0.192 (0.125)
Political interest	0.248 (0.281)	0.797*** (0.140)
Internal political efficacy	0.264 (0.291)	0.300* (0.130)
Age	0.405 (0.282)	0.816*** (0.126)
Female	-0.700* (0.315)	-0.245* (0.121)
Education	0.564* (0.256)	0.665*** (0.133)
Religious practice	0.373 (0.277)	0.125 (0.127)
Full-time employed	-0.054 (0.270)	0.214 (0.129)
Income	-0.747* (0.321)	0.140 (0.127)
Constant	-3.231*** (0.142)	-1.501*** (0.066)
Log-likelihood	-1197.835	
AIC	2459.670	
BIC	2638.448	
N	1972	

Robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

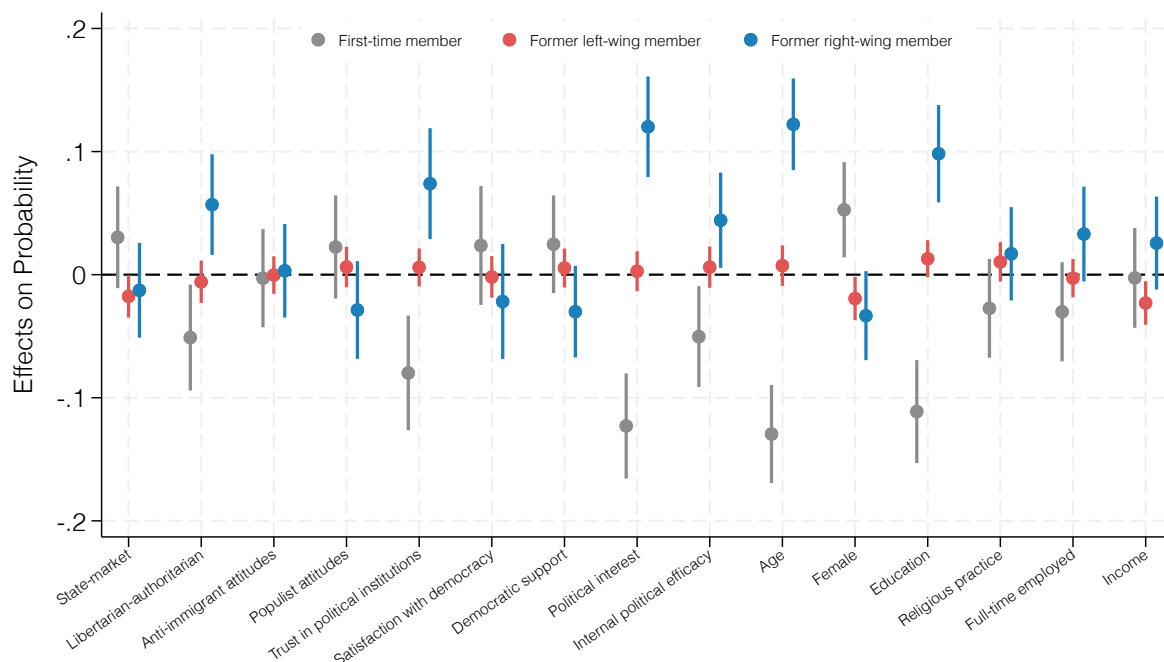
The results, plotted in [Figure 3](#), confirm that most of the differences observed are driven primarily by former right-wing party members. The authoritarianism gap is driven by former right-wing switchers. Members from left-wing parties are more economically leftist than first-timers,⁹ while right-wing switchers are indistinguishable

⁸ The number of observations in [Table 2](#) (1,972) is slightly smaller than in the [Table 1](#) (1,999) because a small subset of switchers did not indicate which party they had previously belonged to and thus could not be assigned an ideological origin.

⁹ These patterns remain robust when replacing the economic left-right scale with respondents' self-placement on the conventional 11-point left-right scale (see [Table A9](#)).

from first-timers on economic issues but score higher on authoritarianism. This pattern underscores that the small differences seen in [Table 1](#) are compositional in nature.

Figure 3: *Marginal effects at the means (MEMs) on the probability of being a former left- or right-wing party member, compared to first-time members (95% CIs).*



Notes: Estimates are marginal effects at the means (MEMs) from multinomial logistic regression models (reference category: first-time member) predicting whether PRR newcomers are former left-wing or right-wing party members. Points represent percentage-point changes in the predicted probability associated with a two-standard deviation increase in each independent variable, holding all other variables at their means. Horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals with robust standard errors, as reported in [Table 2](#).

The combination of higher authoritarianism and comparatively higher trust in political institutions among former right-wing switchers is an intriguing finding. Yet this pattern is not necessarily contradictory: members who exit a mainstream party but choose to re-enter the party system (i.e., switchers) are likely to retain higher levels of institutional trust than those who exit and disengage from partisan politics altogether. Their higher authoritarianism may therefore coexist with comparatively higher trust in state institutions associated with stability and order.

This interpretation also aligns with the finding that switchers report higher politi-

cal interest and internal efficacy. Politically engaged members are more likely to hold well-structured and crystallized ideological attitudes, which may heighten the salience and expression of authoritarian preferences. Rather than reflecting anti-institutional motivations, the attitudinal profiles of former right-wing switchers are consistent with predispositions that may already have been broadly aligned with the PRR.

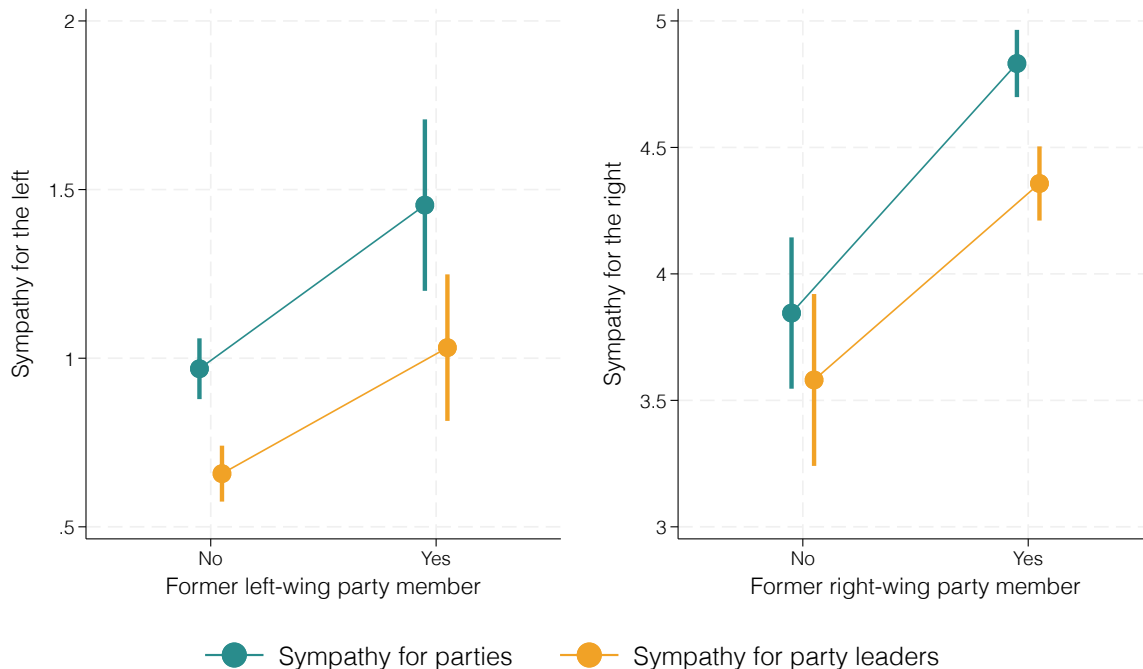
Sociodemographic differences follow a similar logic. Former left-wing members are more likely to be male, have higher education, and report lower incomes than first-timers. Former right-wing members show higher trust in institutions, greater political interest, and stronger political efficacy. Age and gender patterns also stand out: younger members are disproportionately first-timers, and women are less likely than men to have prior partisan experience. These sociodemographic patterns are not incidental.

Overall, the results show that the heterogeneity observed in [Table 1](#) is largely a compositional artifact: most of the earlier differences are driven by the predominance of former right-wing members among switchers. Once ideological origin is accounted for, disparities on most attitudinal dimensions largely disappear, suggesting that prior partisan background — rather than the mere fact of switching — underlies much of the observed heterogeneity. This indicates that membership inflows do not fragment the party’s base but may reinforce attitudinal traits already present within the PRR. These findings are consistent with evidence that membership flows often reflect *issue alignment* rather than wholesale ideological conversion (Collignon et al., [2023](#); Webb and Bale, [2023](#)), as well as with accounts of demand activation through the “normalization” of PRR ideas (Carvalho, [2023](#); Valentim, [2024](#)).

Finally, I turn to affective orientations toward out-parties ([H4](#)). [Figure 4](#) shows mean sympathy scores (0–10) toward left- and right-wing parties and leaders by prior partisan affiliation. Two patterns emerge. First, there is a clear legacy effect: former left-wing switchers are warmer toward the left and colder toward the right, while former

right-wing switchers display the reverse. Second, all groups — including first-timers — show relatively low sympathy toward the opposing camp, indicating a high baseline of out-group hostility.

Figure 4: Mean sympathy toward left- and right-wing parties and leaders, by members' prior partisan affiliation.



Notes: Means and 95% confidence intervals of feeling thermometer scores (0–10) toward parties and their leaders from the left and right, by members' prior partisan affiliation.

Table 3 confirms these descriptive patterns. Compared to former right-wing members, former left-wing switchers score 0.36–0.54 points higher in sympathy toward left parties and leaders and 0.81–1.20 points lower toward the right. Similar patterns emerge when first-time members serve as the reference category (**Table A6**) and when prior affiliation is replaced with the ideological distance traveled to join Chega, measured using either Manifesto Project (**Table A10**) or ParlGov data (**Table A11**). These findings support **H4**: the greater the ideological distance traveled, the more asymmetric the affect — warmer toward the origin camp and colder toward the opposite. At the same time, the overall low out-group sympathy across all categories suggests that

integration into Chega reinforces a shared PRR identity that sustains high affective polarization regardless of prior partisan background (see [Figure 4](#)).

Table 3: *Sympathy toward left- and right-wing parties and leaders among PRR switchers, by prior partisan affiliation.*

	Sympathy for left-wing				Sympathy for right-wing			
	Parties		Leaders		Parties		Leaders	
Former left-wing party	0.485*** (0.137)	0.537** (0.179)	0.361** (0.117)	0.438** (0.147)	-0.987*** (0.166)	-1.196*** (0.209)	-0.813*** (0.189)	-0.893*** (0.230)
Constant	0.969*** (0.046)	1.371* (0.565)	0.654*** (0.042)	0.022 (0.461)	4.832*** (0.068)	4.115*** (0.609)	4.366*** (0.075)	2.878*** (0.692)
Controls	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Observations	712	502	720	508	713	502	721	508
Adjusted R^2	0.023	0.096	0.015	0.128	0.048	0.161	0.026	0.160

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variables measure sympathy toward parties and leaders on a 0–10 feeling thermometer scale. Reference category: former right-wing party member. Models control for age, gender, education, religious practice, political interest, and trust in political institutions (where indicated).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

6 Discussion

This article examined whether prior partisan experience shapes the attitudes and orientations of grassroots members in a fast-growing PRR party. Building on scholarship on party switching, political socialization, and PRR mobilization, I compared switchers with first-time members in Portugal’s Chega, drawing on an original survey of thousands of PRR members.

Switchers make up a substantial share of Chega’s membership: roughly one in four members is a switcher. Consistent with spatial theories of party competition (Downs, 1957), the distribution of switching into the radical right is strongly skewed toward the right, with more than 80% of switchers arriving from right-leaning parties. The Portuguese case illustrates how the emergence of a PRR party in a previously stable party system can reshape political competition and membership flows.

Once ideological origin is taken into account, the “converted” and the “convinced”

are more alike than different. The findings depict a largely homogeneous grassroots united around ideology and core PRR values, suggesting that many switchers were “PRR sleepers” within their previous parties. This pattern resonates with [Hirschman’s \(1970\)](#) framework, in which the supply of a credible substitute party prompts members to exit their original organization and voice grievances elsewhere (see also Nonnenmacher and Rohrbach, [2019](#)), and with accounts of PRR “normalization” and latent demand activation ([Carvalho, 2023](#); [Valentim, 2024](#)). Apparent differences — higher authoritarianism, greater trust in institutions, and stronger cognitive mobilization among switchers — largely reflect the predominance of former right-wing members in the inflow rather than intrinsic disparities between the two groups. For example, while first-time members tend to be more economically liberal, switchers from left-leaning parties are more moderate, favoring greater state intervention in the economy, whereas switchers from right-leaning parties display stronger authoritarian preferences. Given the right-skewed composition of switcher inflows, continued recruitment from right-leaning parties could modestly increase the authoritarian profile of PRR grassroots.

Legacy effects emerge most clearly in the domain of out-group affect. Switchers retain affective traces of their partisan pasts: the party-level ideological distance traveled to join the PRR strongly predicts warmer evaluations of the origin camp and colder evaluations of the opposing camp. Ex-right members are warmer toward right-wing parties and colder toward the left, while the reverse holds for ex-left members. These patterns mirror the durable influence of partisan identity on out-group affect documented elsewhere ([Green et al., 2004](#); [Iyengar and Westwood, 2015](#); [Bankert et al., 2017](#)), and are consistent with insights from motivated reasoning and social sorting research (e.g., [Mason, 2018](#)), which highlight how long-standing group attachments bias evaluations of political opponents. Taken together, they suggest that while PRR recruitment integrates members from different backgrounds into a shared organizational identity, enduring loyalties and antipathies persist beneath the surface.

Why does prior party membership relate to feelings toward political rivals but not beliefs about populism or nativism? The implicit answer seems to be that agreement on core ideology is a prerequisite for switching in the first place, while affective ties are a more durable, identity-based residue. These results have several implications for the study of PRR parties and party organization more broadly. First, they nuance accounts of intra-party cohesion in the radical right: the inflow of members coming from mainstream parties need not fragment the grassroots and may even reinforce existing ideological tendencies, thereby reducing the risk of internal fragmentation. Second, the potential political mobilization advantage of switchers underscores their strategic value. Leaders aiming to expand capacity for campaigning, activism, and candidate recruitment may find politically experienced members particularly valuable — as illustrated by Chega’s use of switchers as candidates for public office. Third, the persistence of legacy-based affect toward out-parties may influence coalition strategies and inter-party relations in multiparty systems, where PRR parties must consider alliances to reach office.

A final point concerns the extent to which these findings travel beyond the Portuguese case. In many respects, Chega resembles most Western PRR parties: it combines rapid electoral growth with strong nativist, populist, and authoritarian appeals (Mendes, 2021), a personalized leadership style that nonetheless leaves room for member influence (Marchi and Lisi, 2021), and mass-mobilization channels (Heinisch and Mazzoleni, 2016; Albertazzi et al., 2025) that attract politically disillusioned, younger, and predominantly male voters—often from rural areas—with strong attitudes against immigration and globalization (Afonso, 2021; Heyne and Manucci, 2021; Mendes and Dennison, 2021; Magalhães and Cancela, 2025). At the same time, Portugal also displays features that make Chega’s rise distinctive. Although comparable in some respects to Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom in the Netherlands or to the Sweden Democrats, Chega followed an unusually rapid trajectory compared to other Western

European PRR parties such as Alternative for Germany, VOX in Spain, or Brothers of Italy, which may have amplified switching patterns during the party's early life-cycle (when the fieldwork took place). Additionally, Portugal's post-authoritarian legacy weighed on right-wing parties: exposure to right-wing authoritarian rule tends to produce more left-leaning electorates after democratization (Dinas and Northmore-Ball, 2020), although elements of authoritarian nostalgia persist among segments of today's radical right (Manucci and Van Hauwaert, 2025). This created a supply-side opportunity structure (Carvalho, 2023), mirroring developments in other contexts such as Spain and Germany (Valentim, 2024: 2–3). Taken together, while the scale and speed of Chega's organizational change are likely context-dependent, the patterns observed in this study are expected to travel to other settings where a new PRR supply emerges early in its life-cycle in previously unreceptive or weakly structured radical-right environments.

The study also has limitations that point to avenues for further work. The cross-sectional design captures a snapshot early in Chega's organizational life, before prolonged internal socialization could blur or intensify pre-existing differences, and does not allow causal inference. Longitudinal data would allow researchers to assess whether legacy effects fade, persist, or intensify over time. Future work should also consider the timing of entry into the PRR, as members who join early in the party's life cycle may differ from late joiners in both motivation and integration, potentially interacting with legacy effects. Survey experiments would be valuable for exploring the attitudes of first-time members and party elites toward switchers, as well as whether switchers experience (or perceive themselves to experience) lower levels of stigmatization for their membership. Moreover, incorporating behavioral measures — such as reasons for joining, campaigning, or satisfaction with intra-party democracy and leadership — would help determine whether attitudinal legacies translate into organizational behavior. Finally, identifying the precise timing of switchers' departures

from their former parties would improve understanding of the interplay between PRR growth and inter-party membership flows.

In short, the analysis shows that PRR grassroots renewal is not a simple story of ideological conversion. Instead, it reflects the convergence of switchers and first-timers: politically experienced recruits who bring skills and subtle attitudinal residues from prior partisan homes, and first-time activists whose engagement begins within the PRR itself. Together, they sustain the growth of PRR parties that have defied the long-term decline of grassroots membership in contemporary democracies — and, in doing so, challenge established theories of party organizational decline and the assumption that recruitment from ideologically diverse origins necessarily undermines party cohesion at the grassroots level.

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Latent Populists Activated? Party Membership Switching to the Radical Right

Supplemental Materials

November 15, 2025

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A	Description of the sample	A2
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A Description of the sample

Table A1: *Descriptive statistics of the variables used in the statistical analyses (explanatory variables standardized by dividing by two standard deviations).*

	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Former party	3162	0.245	0.430	0.000	1.000
Type of new member	3110	0.423	0.792	0.000	2.000
Libertarian-authoritarian	3158	0.000	0.500	-1.716	1.371
Anti-immigrant attitudes	3155	0.000	0.500	-1.449	0.932
Populist attitudes	3163	0.000	0.500	-0.920	2.476
Trust in political institutions	3162	0.000	0.500	-0.603	2.404
Satisfaction with democracy	3163	0.000	0.500	-0.475	1.800
Democratic support	3138	0.000	0.500	-1.295	0.524
State-market	3162	0.000	0.500	-1.242	1.501
Political interest	3163	0.000	0.500	-2.158	0.425
Internal political efficacy	3145	-0.000	0.500	-0.922	0.717
Age	3129	0.000	0.500	-1.202	1.588
Female	3162	0.000	0.500	-0.214	1.170
Education	3127	-0.000	0.500	-1.284	1.012
Religious practice	2141	0.000	0.500	-0.651	1.340
Full-time employed	3159	-0.000	0.500	-0.617	0.405
Income	3032	0.000	0.500	-0.964	0.987

Table A2: *Profile of Portuguese PRR party members compared to mainstream party members (%).*

		Chega	BE	PS	PSD	CDS-PP	Total
Gender	Male	84.45	68.86	75.35	82.75	72.73	74.21
	Female	15.55	31.14	24.65	17.25	27.27	25.79
Age	≤ 34	13.17	26.05	16.94	25.64	14.03	19.65
	35-59	65.40	53.29	54.38	59.29	74.21	57.84
	≥ 60	21.43	20.66	28.68	15.06	11.76	22.51
Education	Up to nine years	16.14	10.39	9.40	2.88	2.81	7.87
	High school	47.81	23.04	26.03	16.99	20.14	23.36
	BA	23.46	39.76	44.30	57.05	52.46	45.92
	Master's or PhD	9.60	26.81	20.28	23.08	24.59	22.85
Professional status	Unemployed	8.64	15.06	7.69	3.33	5.10	8.55
	Permanent disability	1.50	0.48	0.31	0.00	0.24	0.30
	Retired	14.10	16.48	22.00	8.33	5.83	16.61
	Student	3.28	6.50	3.31	3.00	3.16	4.01
	Domestic	1.11	0.16	0.15	0.67	0.24	0.23
	Liberal	—	6.50	10.85	23.67	27.43	13.85
	Part-time	3.14	2.69	0.85	1.00	2.43	1.55
	Full-time	68.23	52.14	54.85	60.00	55.58	54.90
Religious practice	Hardly ever or never	49.74	85.31	48.78	19.17	13.36	48.68
	A few times per year	31.31	10.19	34.97	46.01	36.64	30.50
	A few times per month	13.42	1.65	8.17	17.25	21.89	9.78
	Every week	5.53	2.85	8.09	17.57	28.11	11.05

Notes: Data from non-radical right party members from Ferrinho Lopes and Lisi (2025: Table A1). The “Liberal” option is not available in the questionnaire used to survey radical right members. These respondents likely selected the “Full-time” option.

Table A3: District-level breakdown of respondents and support for Chega's party leader in the 2021 Presidential elections.

District	# Respondents in the sample	% Respondents of total sample	# Votes in the Presidential elections	% Vote in the Presidential elections	% Votes of national total
Azores	29	0.92	7,560	9.38	1.53
Aveiro	147	4.67	25,894	9.62	5.25
Beja	49	1.56	8,490	16.19	1.72
Braga	194	6.17	39,281	10.70	7.97
Bragança	37	1.18	7,939	17.61	1.61
Castelo Branco	57	1.81	9,920	13.95	2.01
Coimbra	98	3.12	15,682	13.01	3.18
Évora	66	2.10	9,720	16.76	1.97
Faro	201	6.39	26,023	16.69	5.28
Guarda	36	1.14	7,737	14.33	1.57
Leiria	148	4.71	22,576	12.50	4.58
Lisboa	1,008	32.05	123,644	12.85	25.07
Madeira	64	2.03	10,642	9.85	2.16
Portalegre	41	1.30	7,908	20.04	1.60
Porto	322	10.24	63,194	8.42	12.81
Santarém	149	4.74	26,260	15.76	5.32
Setúbal	329	10.46	43,720	12.86	8.86
Viana do Castelo	52	1.65	10,177	11.38	2.06
Vila Real	41	1.30	10,347	13.70	2.10
Viseu	77	2.45	16,446	13.16	3.33
Total	3,145	100	493,160	100	100

Figure A1: Geographic respondent coverage near-perfectly correlates with support for Chega's leader. Complement to Figure 1 (using vote shares relative to the national total instead of absolute figures).

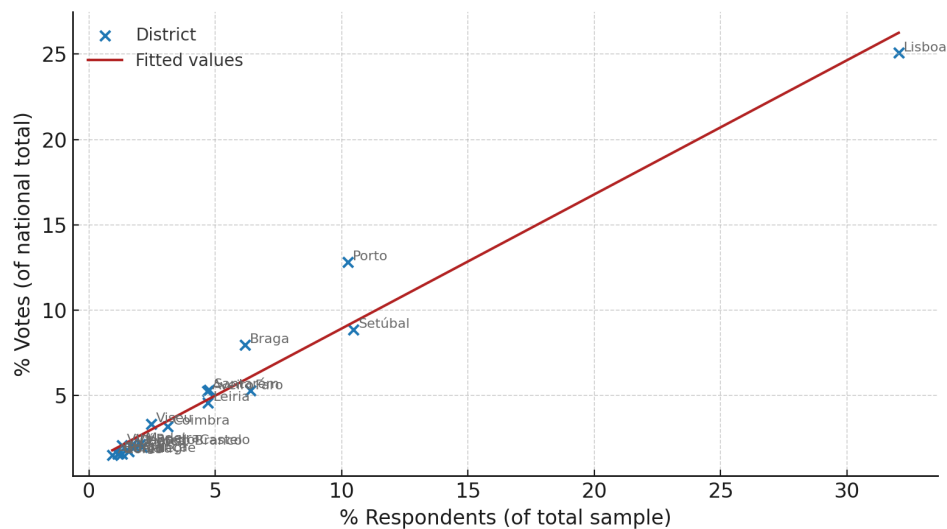


Figure A2: Geographic respondent coverage near-perfectly correlates with support for Chega’s leader.
Complement to *Figure 1* (excluding Lisbon).

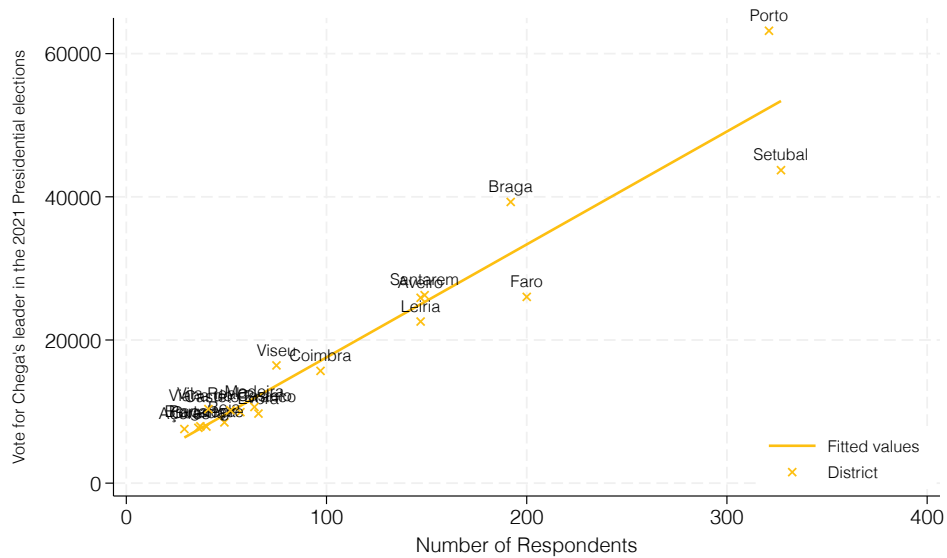
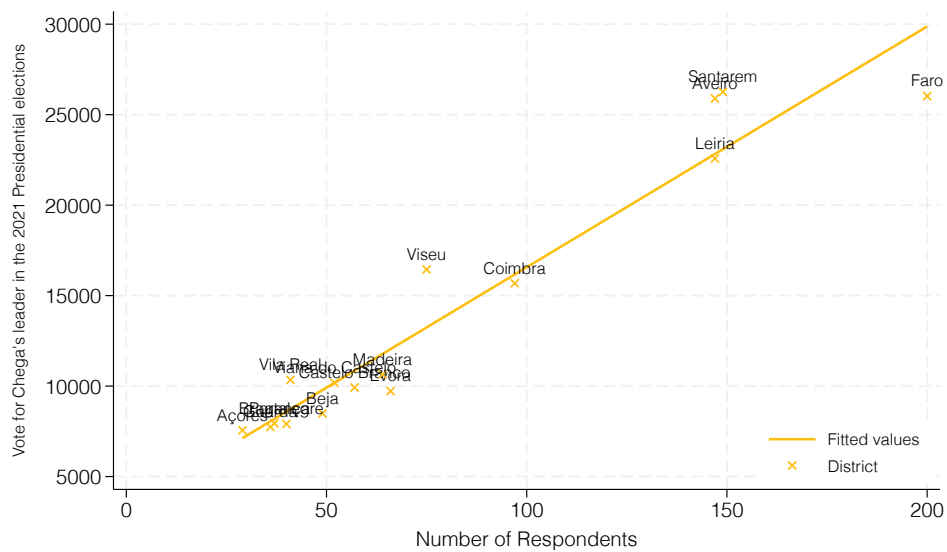


Figure A3: Geographic respondent coverage near-perfectly correlates with support for Chega’s leader.
Complement to *Figure 1* (excluding major districts).



B Additional analyses

Table A4: *Average marginal effects (AMEs) on probability of being a switcher. Complement to Table 1 model 5.*

	AME
State-market	-0.028 (0.021)
Libertarian-authoritarian	0.046* (0.022)
Anti-immigrant attitudes	0.007 (0.020)
Populist attitudes	-0.016 (0.021)
Trust in political institutions	0.078** (0.024)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.023 (0.024)
Democratic support	-0.027 (0.020)
Political interest	0.125*** (0.021)
Internal political efficacy	0.051* (0.021)
Age	0.135*** (0.020)
Female	-0.054** (0.020)
Education	0.116*** (0.021)
Religious practice	0.028 (0.020)
Full-time employed	0.029 (0.020)
Income	0.005 (0.021)
Observations	1999

Robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A5: Correlation matrix.

	State-market	Libertarian-authoritarian	Anti-immigrant attitudes	Populist attitudes	Trust in political institutions
State-market	1.000				
Libertarian-authoritarian	0.112***	1.000			
Anti-immigrant attitudes	-0.038**	0.225***	1.000		
Populist attitudes	0.126***	-0.045**	-0.168***	1.000	
Trust in political institutions	-0.008	-0.116***	-0.219***	0.318***	1.000

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table A6: Sympathy toward left- and right-wing parties and leaders among all PRR members, by prior partisan affiliation. Complement to Table 3.

	Sympathy for left-wing				Sympathy for right-wing			
	Parties		Leaders		Parties		Leaders	
Former left-wing party	0.246 (0.132)	0.377* (0.176)	0.257* (0.111)	0.319* (0.138)	-0.476** (0.156)	-0.852*** (0.199)	-0.423* (0.178)	-0.780*** (0.216)
Former right-wing party	-0.240*** (0.054)	-0.137* (0.064)	-0.105* (0.048)	-0.092 (0.056)	0.510*** (0.077)	0.290*** (0.086)	0.390*** (0.085)	0.099 (0.096)
Constant	1.208*** (0.028)	1.924*** (0.256)	0.759*** (0.023)	0.857*** (0.206)	4.321*** (0.037)	2.972*** (0.307)	3.976*** (0.041)	2.580*** (0.338)
Controls	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Observations	3068	2045	3100	2064	3062	2041	3099	2063
Adjusted R^2	0.006	0.099	0.003	0.124	0.017	0.125	0.008	0.127

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variables measure feeling thermometer scores (0–10) toward parties and their leaders. Reference category: first-time member. Models control for age, gender, education, religious practice, political interest, and trust in political institutions (where indicated).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

C Robustness checks

Table A7: Replication of *Table 1* using OLS regression instead of logistic regression models.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
State-market	0.036* (0.015)				-0.028 (0.021)
Libertarian-authoritarian		0.050** (0.016)			0.046* (0.021)
Anti-immigrant attitudes		-0.017 (0.016)			0.007 (0.020)
Populist attitudes		0.006 (0.016)			-0.019 (0.022)
Trust in political institutions			0.068*** (0.019)		0.079** (0.024)
Satisfaction with democracy			-0.030 (0.019)		-0.022 (0.024)
Democratic support			-0.018 (0.016)		-0.030 (0.021)
Political interest				0.118*** (0.015)	0.119*** (0.019)
Internal political efficacy				0.051*** (0.015)	0.050* (0.020)
Age					0.140*** (0.020)
Female					-0.053** (0.018)
Education					0.122*** (0.022)
Religious practice					0.029 (0.021)
Full-time employed					0.027 (0.020)
Income					0.006 (0.021)
Constant	0.245*** (0.008)	0.245*** (0.008)	0.245*** (0.008)	0.245*** (0.008)	0.245*** (0.009)
Observations	3161	3149	3137	3145	1999
Adjusted R^2	0.001	0.002	0.004	0.025	0.080

Standard errors in parentheses

Standard errors are robust.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A8: Replication of *Table 1* using probit regression models instead of binomial logistic regressions.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
State-market	0.115* (0.049)				-0.099 (0.071)
Libertarian-authoritarian		0.159** (0.050)			0.147* (0.073)
Anti-immigrant attitudes		-0.055 (0.051)			0.038 (0.068)
Populist attitudes		0.019 (0.050)			-0.050 (0.072)
Trust in political institutions			0.213*** (0.058)		0.256** (0.079)
Satisfaction with democracy			-0.095 (0.060)		-0.068 (0.081)
Democratic support			-0.056 (0.050)		-0.089 (0.068)
Political interest				0.403*** (0.055)	0.411*** (0.072)
Internal political efficacy				0.163** (0.051)	0.169* (0.069)
Age					0.470*** (0.069)
Female					-0.182** (0.065)
Education					0.405*** (0.071)
Religious practice					0.101 (0.068)
Full-time employed					0.101 (0.069)
Income					0.008 (0.069)
Constant	-0.693*** (0.024)	-0.691*** (0.024)	-0.693*** (0.025)	-0.707*** (0.025)	-0.752*** (0.033)
Log-likelihood	-1755.542	-1749.825	-1739.773	-1711.043	-1048.312
AIC	3515.084	3507.649	3487.547	3428.086	2128.624
BIC	3527.202	3531.869	3511.751	3446.247	2218.230
N	3161	3149	3137	3145	1999

Standard errors in parentheses

Standard errors are robust.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A9: Replication of *Table 2* using respondents' self-placement on the conventional 11-point left-right scale instead of the state-market index.

	Ref.: First-time member			
	Former left-wing party		Former right-wing party	
Left-right self-placement	-0.687***	(0.190)	0.176	(0.140)
Libertarian-authoritarian	-0.213	(0.293)	0.347*	(0.138)
Anti-immigrant attitudes	0.062	(0.264)	-0.006	(0.129)
Trust in political institutions	0.434	(0.271)	0.498**	(0.152)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.097	(0.308)	-0.138	(0.155)
Democratic support	0.058	(0.278)	-0.203	(0.125)
Populist attitudes	0.091	(0.284)	-0.194	(0.134)
Political interest	0.243	(0.271)	0.771***	(0.141)
Internal political efficacy	0.210	(0.283)	0.294*	(0.130)
Age	0.482	(0.269)	0.821***	(0.125)
Female	-0.662*	(0.316)	-0.243*	(0.121)
Education	0.418	(0.260)	0.652***	(0.130)
Religious practice	0.460	(0.273)	0.119	(0.127)
Full-time employed	0.011	(0.265)	0.226	(0.130)
Income	-0.868**	(0.320)	0.131	(0.126)
Constant	-3.239***	(0.143)	-1.503***	(0.066)
Log-likelihood	-1196.007			
AIC	2456.013			
BIC	2634.726			
N	1968			

Robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A10: *The greater (smaller) the ideological distance switchers traveled to join Chega, the more (less) they sympathize with parties and leaders distant to Chega, and vice-versa (Manifesto Project data). Complement to Table 3.*

	Sympathy for left-wing				Sympathy for right-wing			
	Parties		Leaders		Parties		Leaders	
Former party $\times$ Distance (log)	0.417*** (0.123)	0.409** (0.138)	0.182 (0.110)	0.130 (0.126)	-0.736*** (0.171)	-0.597** (0.195)	-0.626*** (0.188)	-0.450* (0.203)
Constant	-0.524 (0.456)	0.311 (0.757)	0.035 (0.412)	-0.383 (0.682)	7.413*** (0.642)	5.724*** (1.010)	6.622*** (0.704)	4.332*** (1.135)
Controls	$\times$	✓	$\times$	✓	$\times$	✓	$\times$	✓
Observations	635	449	642	454	636	449	643	454
Adjusted R^2	0.016	0.080	0.003	0.106	0.026	0.121	0.015	0.137

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variables measure feeling thermometer scores (0–10) toward parties and their leaders. Models control for age, gender, education, religious practice, political interest, and trust in political institutions (where indicated).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A11: *The greater (smaller) the ideological distance switchers traveled to join Chega, the more (less) they sympathize with parties and leaders distant to Chega, and vice-versa (ParlGov data). Complement to Table 3.*

	Sympathy for left-wing				Sympathy for right-wing			
	Parties		Leaders		Parties		Leaders	
Former party $\times$ Distance (log)	0.255*** (0.068)	0.265*** (0.078)	0.137* (0.060)	0.115 (0.069)	-0.448*** (0.092)	-0.385*** (0.108)	-0.394*** (0.101)	-0.313** (0.111)
Constant	0.880*** (0.058)	1.600** (0.605)	0.639*** (0.054)	0.124 (0.500)	4.975*** (0.088)	3.809*** (0.662)	4.539*** (0.095)	2.975*** (0.744)
Controls	$\times$	✓	$\times$	✓	$\times$	✓	$\times$	✓
Observations	658	466	665	471	659	466	666	471
Adjusted R^2	0.021	0.083	0.006	0.109	0.033	0.125	0.021	0.138

Notes: OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variables measure feeling thermometer scores (0–10) toward parties and their leaders. Models control for age, gender, education, religious practice, political interest, and trust in political institutions (where indicated).

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$