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Polarisation and Political Communication in Portugal: Discursive Strategies of Political Actors on X During the 2024 Legislative Electoral Campaign

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the Portuguese political system has undergone significant transformations linked to economic, social and representational challenges, alongside changes in party competition and campaign communication practices. Although Portugal has traditionally been characterised as a case of comparatively low political polarisation, the growing centrality of digital platforms in electoral campaigning raises questions about the forms and intensity of political conflict articulated in the online public sphere. This article analyses political communication on X during the 2024 Portuguese legislative election campaign, focusing on how polarisation is discursively constructed by parties and political leaders. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic, narrative and sentiment analysis, complemented by social network analysis of interaction patterns. The analysis examines communicative activity, thematic priorities, narrative strategies, affective tone, and the use of interactional affordances across key political actors. The findings reveal a moderately polarised communicative environment, characterised by thematic plurality, a predominance of positive affect and low levels of direct interaction. Polarisation is not absent but highly actor-specific: confrontational narratives and negative emotional framing are concentrated primarily in the communication of Chega and its leader André Ventura, while mainstream parties and leaders rely predominantly on strategic, identitarian and programmatic frames, alongside affirmative emotional appeals. Interaction networks are very sparse, suggesting that X functions mainly as a space for discursive positioning rather than relational exchange. Overall, the Portuguese case illustrates how digital political communication can accommodate personalisation and emotionalisation without producing systemic polarisation. By foregrounding discursive strategies, affective tone and interaction dynamics, this article contributes to research on political communication and polarisation by offering a nuanced account of contemporary electoral conflict in a political context traditionally considered moderate.

Keywords

political communication, polarisation, crisis, digital political communication, Portugal

Polarização e Comunicação Política em Portugal: Estratégias Discursivas dos Atores Políticos no X Durante a Campanha Para as Eleições Legislativas de 2024

Resumo

Nas últimas décadas, o sistema político português passou por transformações significativas, impulsionadas por desafios económicos, sociais e de representação política, bem como por mudanças na competição partidária e nas práticas de comunicação em campanhas eleitorais. Apesar de Portugal ser tradicionalmente considerado um caso de baixa polarização política, a crescente centralidade das plataformas digitais nas campanhas eleitorais levanta questões sobre as formas e a intensidade do conflito político articulado na esfera pública online. Este artigo examina a comunicação política no X durante a campanha para as eleições legislativas portuguesas de 2024, com foco na construção discursiva da polarização por parte de partidos e líderes políticos. Recorrendo a uma abordagem metodológica mista, o estudo integra análise quantitativa de conteúdo com análise temática, narrativa e de sentimento, de natureza qualitativa, complementadas pela análise de redes sociais dos padrões de interação. A investigação incide sobre a atividade comunicativa, as prioridades temáticas, as estratégias narrativas, o tom afetivo e a utilização das possibilidades de interação pelos principais atores políticos. Os resultados indicam um ambiente de comunicação moderadamente polarizado, caracterizado por uma pluralidade temática, predomínio de afetos positivos e baixos níveis de interação direta. A polarização não está ausente, mas manifesta-se de forma muito diferenciada consoante os atores políticos: as narrativas de confronto e os enquadramentos emocionais negativos concentram-se sobretudo na comunicação do Chega e do seu líder, André Ventura, enquanto os partidos e líderes políticos estabelecidos recorrem predominantemente a enquadramentos de natureza estratégica, identitária e programática, a par de apelos emocionais afirmativos. As redes de interação são muito pouco densas, o que sugere que o X funciona sobretudo como um espaço de posicionamento discursivo, mais do que como um espaço de interação entre os atores políticos. De modo geral, o caso português demonstra que a comunicação política digital pode promover dinâmicas de personalização e emocionalização sem necessariamente gerar polarização sistémica. Ao destacar estratégias discursivas, tom afetivo e dinâmicas de interação, este artigo contribui para a investigação sobre a comunicação política e a polarização, oferecendo uma análise aprofundada do conflito eleitoral contemporâneo num contexto político tradicionalmente moderado.

Palavras-chave
comunicação política, polarização, crise, comunicação política digital, Portugal

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, European democracies have been shaped by overlapping economic, social and political challenges that have affected both patterns of political competition and modes of political communication. In this context, political conflict has become increasingly mediated and publicly visible, not only through institutional arenas and traditional media, but also across digital platforms embedded within hybrid communication systems (Moreno-Felices et al., 2021). Electoral campaigns, public debates and political narratives now unfold in environments where political actors, media organisations and audiences interact asymmetrically, reshaping the conditions under which political confrontation is articulated.

Within this broader context, political polarisation has emerged as a central concern in research on political communication. While polarisation has traditionally been examined in terms of ideological distance or partisan alignment, more recent scholarship has emphasised its communicative and discursive dimensions (Klinger & Koc-Michalska, 2022), highlighting the role of framing strategies, narrative constructions and media logics in shaping political conflict. From this perspective, polarisation is not understood solely as an outcome of disagreement, but as a process that is actively produced through communication practices, symbolic opposition and affective appeals.

Portugal constitutes a particularly relevant case for examining these dynamics. Commonly portrayed as a political system characterised by moderate competition and comparatively low levels of polarisation, the country has nonetheless experienced significant transformations in recent years (Alonso-López et al., 2021). Party system fragmentation, changes in patterns of political representation and the growing centrality of digital communication have altered the strategic environment in which political actors operate (Perloff, 2021). Rather than assuming either the absence or the intensification of polarisation, the Portuguese case invites closer examination of how political conflict is articulated through communication, and whether distinct forms of discursive polarisation emerge within an otherwise moderate system.

The 2024 Portuguese legislative elections provide an especially suitable context for this analysis. Conducted amid political uncertainty and heightened public debate, the campaign unfolded within a hybrid media system in which digital platforms played an increasingly visible role. Among these platforms, X served as a key arena for elite political communication (Ferro-Santos et al., 2024), enabling parties and leaders to disseminate messages directly, frame issues strategically and position themselves symbolically in relation to competitors. Rather than assuming high levels of interaction or dialogue, campaign communication on X offers insight into how political actors use the platform primarily for visibility, framing and discursive positioning (Gelado-Marcos et al., 2019).

Against this background, this article analyses the political communication of major parties and political leaders on X during the 2024 Portuguese legislative election campaign, focusing on how discursive strategies, narrative choices, affective tone, and engagement patterns contribute to articulating political conflict. Polarisation is approached not as a binary condition, but as a communicative phenomenon that may vary in intensity, form, and distribution across actors. This perspective allows for the identification of actor-specific dynamics, including the selective use of confrontation, emotionalisation, and populist styles within the digital public sphere.

By focusing on Portugal, this study contributes to debates on political communication and polarisation by challenging simplified assumptions of either depolarisation or systemic escalation. The analysis demonstrates how digital political communication can accommodate personalisation and emotional appeals without producing generalised polarisation, while still enabling specific actors to articulate confrontational and polarising discourses. In doing so, the article offers a nuanced account of contemporary electoral conflict in a context traditionally considered moderate, highlighting the importance of examining who polarises, how, and through which communicative resources.

2. The Evolution of Public Sphere, Political Communication, Digital Platforms and Discursive Polarisation

The original "public sphere" defined by Habermas (1962/1981) has transformed drastically in recent years. The press, industrialisation, the popularisation of the printed press, and advertising funding, along with the social changes around them, led to the thoroughly studied concept of "mass society" (Wolf, 1985/1996). In this context, newspapers and leaflets became essential tools for political mobilisation.

Later, propaganda, radio, and the era of political and media consensus, and television and the era of show-biz politics evolved into political marketing (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). The fourth era in political communication (Blumler, 2016), with digitalisation at its centre, was impacted by social media, changing the dynamics of political communication: it was no longer organised primarily through traditional media institutions, but it became horizontal, immediate, interactive, and fragmented.

Political communication constitutes a central dimension of democratic systems, as it structures the circulation of political meanings, the visibility of actors and the dynamics of electoral competition (Mazzoleni, 1998/2010). Electoral campaigns are not merely moments of persuasion, but arenas of symbolic struggle in which political actors compete to impose interpretations of reality, define political problems and delimit legitimate alternatives (Schumpeter, 1942). From this perspective, communication does not simply transmit political conflict, but it actively contributes to its construction and intensification.

The current information ecosystem is characterised by decentralised public discourse, which has introduced alternative platforms and sources, such as social media and digital influencers, gaining strong influence, especially among younger audiences (Palacios López et al., 2023). Youth increasingly favour authentic, informal, emotionally charged, and visually engaging political content over more traditional mass-communication channels. This has not only weakened the gatekeeping role of traditional media, but also their reliability — the latest *Digital News Report* confirmed an all-time low in trust in the media (Egan et al., 2026).

In Portugal, political communication has traditionally been characterised by institutional mediation, party-centred campaigning and comparatively moderate political discourse (Jalali, 2019; Salgado, 2017). However, this configuration has been progressively transformed by digitalisation, changes in media consumption and the reconfiguration of the party system. As Jalali (2019) argues, recent fragmentation of party competition has altered both representative dynamics and communicative strategies, increasing incentives for differentiation, visibility and confrontation, particularly during electoral campaigns.

These transformations must be understood within the broader evolution of political communication systems. Martínez Nicolás (2011) offers a critical account of how media-centred democracies have generated structural distortions in political representation, reinforcing personalisation, spectacle and strategic communication at the expense

of deliberation. This diagnosis remains highly relevant in the digital era, where platform logics further intensify these tendencies. Rather than correcting earlier imbalances, digital communication environments often amplify them by privileging immediacy, emotional resonance and competitive visibility.

Contemporary political communication unfolds within hybrid media systems in which traditional media, digital platforms and interpersonal networks coexist and interact (Chadwick, 2013). In Portugal, this hybridisation has expanded social media's role as an arena for political communication, without displacing legacy media entirely (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2021). Platforms such as X enable political actors to disseminate messages directly, bypass journalistic gatekeeping and engage in continuous communicative competition, especially during electoral campaigns. This environment reshapes power relations between political actors and media while intensifying competition for attention.

A defining feature of this digitalised communication environment is the fragmentation of audiences into segmented publics. While selective exposure has long been recognised as a key mechanism shaping media effects (Klapper, 1960), algorithmic personalisation reinforces this tendency by prioritising content aligned with users' preferences. These dynamics contribute to filter bubbles and echo chambers, communicative environments that amplify consonant viewpoints and marginalise or delegitimise dissent (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). As recent literature notes, echo chambers do not imply total isolation, but rather asymmetrical exposure that reinforces political identities and intensifies perceptions of antagonism (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Within this fragmented media ecology, polarisation can be conceptualised as a communicative and discursive process, rather than solely as ideological distance or electoral behaviour. Political polarisation is articulated through framing strategies, narrative simplification and symbolic opposition that divide political space into antagonistic camps (Stroud, 2010). Platform logics that reward engagement and emotional intensity create structural incentives for conflict-oriented communication, encouraging political actors to emphasise confrontation, moralisation and identity-based appeals.

This approach is particularly relevant for the Portuguese context. While Portugal has often been described as weakly polarised at the ideological level (Jalali, 2019), research suggests that discursive polarisation has increased, especially in digital environments and electoral campaigns (Salgado, 2017; Serrano, 2002). Rather than assuming the absence of polarisation, a communicative perspective allows identification of forms of polarisation that emerge through campaign messaging, framing practices and platform-specific styles of communication.

Crisis narratives play a central role in these dynamics. Political actors mobilise crisis as an interpretive frame to simplify political conflict, assign responsibility and legitimise antagonistic positioning (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). In the Portuguese case, crisis framing has been particularly salient since the economic and political crises of the 2010s, intersecting with party-system change and the emergence of new political actors (Jalali, 2019). In digital environments, crisis narratives are frequently articulated through

digital populist communication styles, characterised by anti-elitist framing, emotional language and direct appeals to "the people" (Marchi & Alves, 2023). These styles are well adapted to fragmented publics and echo-chambered environments, where emotional resonance and identity affirmation drive engagement.

Taken together, these perspectives support an understanding of polarisation as a communicative outcome of digital political communication in crisis contexts. Analysing campaign messages published on X during the 2024 Portuguese legislative elections allows for the examination of how political actors frame crisis, deploy populist and conflict-oriented styles, and articulate antagonistic narratives within a fragmented public sphere. This theoretical framework provides the conceptual basis for a mixed-methods analysis that captures both dominant communicative patterns and the discursive strategies through which polarisation is constructed.

3. Method

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to analyse political communication on social media during the 2024 Portuguese legislative election campaign[1], examining how conflict and discursive forms of polarisation are articulated through campaign messaging amid political and representational challenges. The empirical focus is placed on X, a platform that remains central to elite political communication, agenda setting, and symbolic confrontation in the Portuguese digital public sphere.

The *corpus* consists of all original posts published on X by the most-voted Portuguese political parties and their leaders — Partido Socialista (Socialist Party; PS) and Pedro Nuno Santos; Aliança Democrática (Democratic Alliance; AD) and Luís Montenegro; Chega and André Ventura — during the official campaign period (25 February–9 March 2024). To establish an objective, replicable criterion for case selection, political forces were included if they obtained at least 1 million votes or secured at least 10 seats. The unit of analysis is the individual post, understood as a discrete communicative act through which political actors make strategic decisions regarding framing, tone, narrative orientation and interaction. Following established criteria, retweets were excluded from the analysis, as they primarily introduce amplification dynamics — particularly between parties and their leaders — that interfere with examining original communicative production.

After excluding retweets and non-original content, the final dataset comprises 543 messages from the Portuguese electoral campaign. These units are distributed across political actors as follows: AD ($n = 132$), PS ($n = 218$), Chega ($n = 85$), Luís Montenegro ($n = 23$), Pedro Nuno Santos ($n = 26$) and André Ventura ($n = 59$). This configuration captures both party-level and leader-level communication, allowing for the analysis of strategic differentiation and personalisation during the campaign.

Drawing on the theoretical framework developed in the previous sections, the analysis is structured around the following research objectives (RO) and hypotheses, as the existing literature provides a strong basis for defining specific ROs and deriving hypotheses on political digital campaigns.

[1] Based on Poch Butler (2026).

3.1. Research Objective 1: To Analyse the Level of Communicative Activity and User Reactions Generated by Political Actors During the Campaign

In hybrid communication systems, electoral campaigns are characterised by informational abundance and intensified activity around key political moments (Blumler, 2016). Research on normalisation and equalisation suggests that major parties tend to dominate in volume, while certain actors — particularly those using emotionally charged or populist styles — may generate higher engagement.

- Hypothesis 1: major parties (PS and AD) will publish a higher volume of posts than emerging parties.
- Hypothesis 2: parties and leaders associated with more populist or confrontational communication styles will generate higher levels of user interaction (likes, replies, comments, and quotes) than non-populist actors.

3.2. Research Objective 2: To Examine Differences in Communicative Style and Language Use Between Parties and Political Leaders

Studies on digital personalisation indicate that leaders tend to employ more direct, personal and individualised language, while parties maintain more institutionalised communication styles (López-Meri et al., 2017).

- Hypothesis 3: political leaders will use more personalistic language than party accounts, including first-person references and direct appeals to users.
- Hypothesis 4: emerging parties and their leaders will display a more negative and confrontational tone than established governing actors.

3.3. Research Objective 3: To Identify the Dominant Thematic Orientations (Issues) Present in Campaign Communication

The literature distinguishes between "policy issues", "political" or "ideological issues", "campaign-related issues" and "personal issues" (López-García et al., 2016; Patterson, 1980). In digital environments such as X, political and campaign issues often gain prominence due to their immediacy and conflictual potential.

- Hypothesis 5: Major parties will prioritise policy issues related to governance and public policy, while emerging parties will focus more strongly on political and identity-related issues.

3.4. Research Objective 4: To Explore the Narrative Strategies Through Which Campaign Messages Are Articulated

Digital political narratives are constructed through framing, hashtags and symbolic oppositions, and may be classified as "programmatic", "identitarian", "personalist", "strategic" or "confrontational" (López-García et al., 2016; Papacharissi, 2015).

- Hypothesis 6: programmatic narratives will be more frequent in messages addressing policy issues, whereas political and identity-related issues will be associated with identitarian and confrontational narratives.

3.5. Research Objective 5: To Assess the Affective Polarity of Campaign Messages

Research on selective exposure and echo chambers suggests that negativity plays a central role in digital polarisation, particularly among actors positioned at the ideological extremes (Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2017).

- Hypothesis 7: actors located at the ideological extremes will exhibit higher levels of negative sentiment than governing or centrist actors.

3.6. Research Objective 6: To Analyse Interaction Patterns Through Mentions to Assess Levels of Fragmentation and Coordination

Echo-chamber theory suggests that political communication on social media tends to develop within relatively closed interaction circuits (Sunstein, 2017).

- Hypothesis 8: campaign communication on X will display fragmented interaction patterns, with limited cross-actor engagement and a predominance of intra-group communication.

3.7. Research Objective 7: To Examine the Centrality of Political Leaders Relative to Party Accounts in the Network of Mentions

The personalisation of digital politics assigns leaders a prominent role as focal points of attention and interaction (Langer, 2009; López-Meri et al., 2017).

- Hypothesis 9: political leaders will occupy more central positions in the network of mentions than party accounts.

3.8. Methodological Approach and Analytical Procedures

Methodologically, the analysis combines quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic and narrative analysis. Quantitatively, posts were coded using a structured codebook capturing variables related to actor, timing, thematic focus, narrative orientation, and affective polarity. This phase enables the identification of dominant patterns and systematic differences across actors. Intercoder reliability was assessed on a subsample of the *corpus*, yielding satisfactory agreement levels for the key variables.

The qualitative analysis focuses interpretating narratives, frames, and symbolic oppositions, with particular attention to personalisation, antagonistic positioning and populist communication styles. In addition, a manual sentiment analysis was conducted to classify posts according to their dominant affective orientation (positive, neutral, or negative), ensuring interpretive accuracy in a political context where irony and strategic ambiguity are common. Finally, interaction data derived from mentions were analysed using social network analysis techniques to explore patterns of visibility, centrality and fragmentation within the campaign communication space.

4. Results

The analysis of political communication on X during the 2024 Portuguese legislative election campaign reveals a communicative environment characterised by moderate activity levels, a clear differentiation between party and leader strategies, and comparatively contained dynamics of interaction and polarisation.

4.1. Activity Patterns and Engagement

The *corpus* comprises 543 original posts, distributed mainly between the PS (40.15%, *n* = 218) and AD (24.31%, *n* = 132), followed by Chega (15.65%, *n* = 85) and the personal accounts of André Ventura (10.87%, *n* = 59), Pedro Nuno Santos (4.79%, *n* = 26) and Luís Montenegro (4.24%, *n* = 23). Overall, the results confirm that institutional party accounts dominate in terms of publication volume, whereas leaders intervene more selectively.

Temporal analysis reveals a moderate and largely stable publication pattern throughout the Portuguese campaign period (25 February–8 March 2024). Institutional party accounts (see Figure 1) concentrate the highest levels of activity, with the PS (@psocialista) standing out clearly. Its communication intensifies toward the end of the campaign, peaking at 34 posts on 8 March, which coincides with the official campaign closing. AD (@ALIANCAD2024) and Chega (@PartidoCHEGA) show lower but more regular activity, with daily peaks of 17 and eight posts, respectively, maintaining a consistent presence without the sharp intensification seen in the PS account.

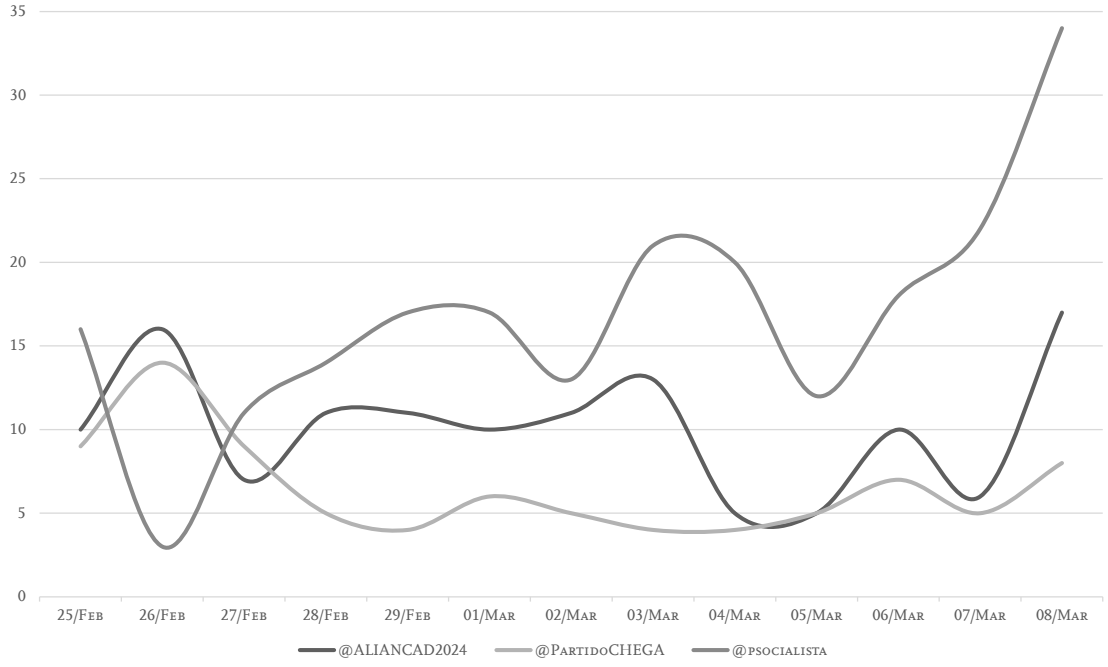


Figure 1. *Number of messages on X by the main political parties during the 2024 Portuguese election campaign*

Personal accounts (see Figure 2) exhibit a more limited and uneven pattern of activity. Both Luís Montenegro (@LMontenegropm) and Pedro Nuno Santos (@PNSpedronuno) show low and irregular publication frequencies, with several days without activity and no clearly identifiable peaks. By contrast, André Ventura (@AndreCVentura) maintains greater continuity and relative visibility, combining days of higher activity with periods of lower intensity. This pattern positions Ventura between institutional party accounts and the more restrained communication strategies adopted by the other leaders.

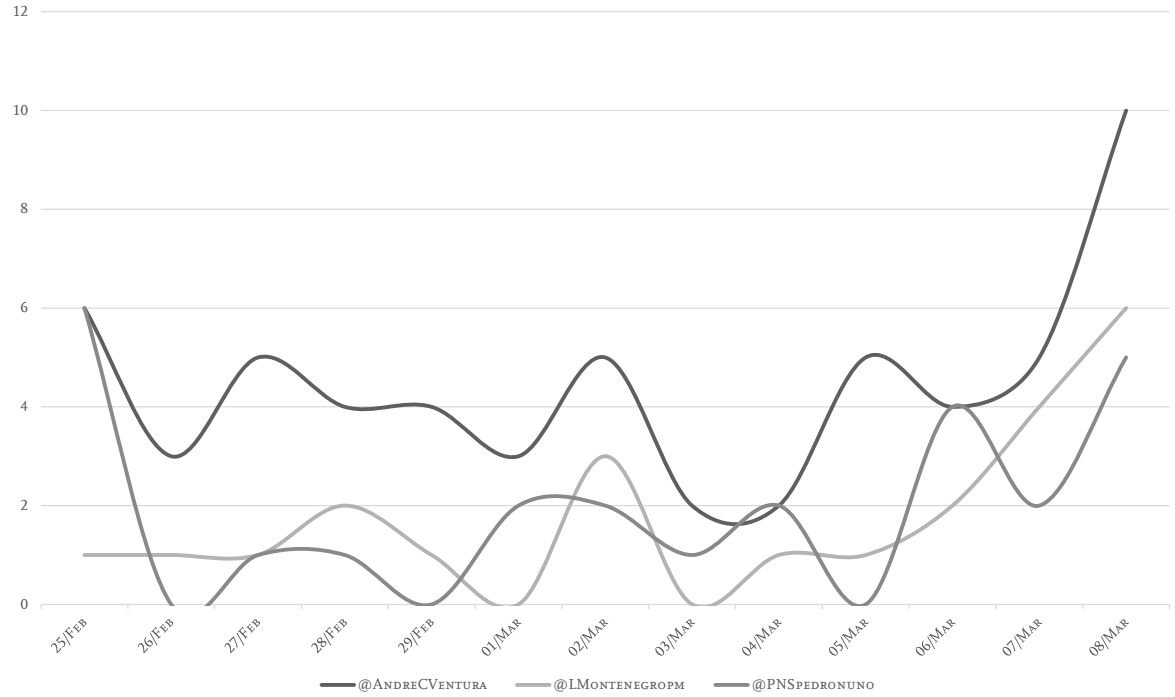


Figure 2. *Number of messages on X by leading political figures during the 2024 Portuguese election campaign*

Engagement levels in the Portuguese campaign (see Figure 3) are comparatively contained and show limited dispersion across actors, both in maximum values and overall distributions. The interaction peaks correspond to @AndreCVentura, with 8,995 likes, 489 comments, 2,169 retweets, and 442 quotes. This is the only item surpassed by another actor, as @LMontenegropm reaches the maximum peak of quotes (773). In addition, he achieved 3,961 likes, 331 comments and 381 retweets; for its part, @PartidoCHEGA achieved 2,119 likes, 413 comments, 1,450 retweets and 71 quotes; @PNSpedronuno obtained 1,546 likes, 445 comments, 184 retweets and 48 quotes; @psocialista, meanwhile, achieved 1,259 likes, 448 comments, 130 retweets and 211 mentions; finally, @ALIANCAD2024 merely achieved 452 likes, 83 comments, 54 retweets and 15 mentions.

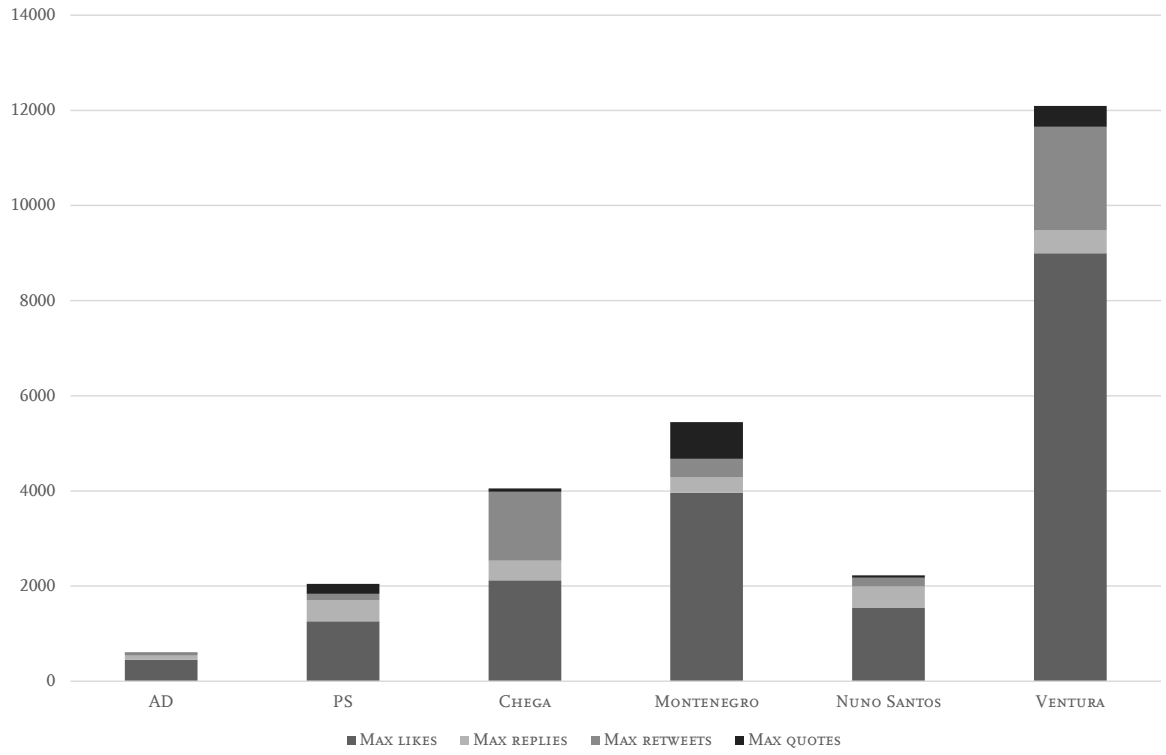


Figure 3. *Distribution of interaction peaks in Portuguese accounts during the 2024 campaign*

When average engagement levels are considered, personal accounts clearly outperform institutional party accounts. The profiles of @AndreCVentura, @LMontenegropm and @PNSpedronuno show the highest mean interaction values across all indicators. In particular, @AndreCVentura averages 754.8 likes, 57.3 replies, 115.4 retweets and 7.8 quotes per post, while @LMontenegropm records averages of 857.3 likes, 106.4 replies, 68.6 retweets and 50.8 quotes. @PNSpedronuno also exhibits comparatively high engagement, with averages of 497.5 likes, 115.6 replies, 44.6 retweets and 7.7 quotes per publication.

By contrast, institutional accounts show lower, more regular engagement patterns: @ALIANCAD2024 averages 121.9 likes, 16.4 replies, 12.5 retweets and 1.7 quotes, while @psocialista records 118.2 likes, 29.7 replies, 15.6 retweets and 4.5 quotes per post; and @PartidoCHEGA occupies an intermediate position, with higher engagement than the remaining party accounts but still below leader averages.

Overall, these results indicate a clear concentration of engagement around individual leaders, particularly André Ventura, whereas institutional party accounts maintain more stable and less emotionally intense interaction levels. This pattern reinforces the role of personalisation in Portuguese digital campaign communication, while also pointing to a comparatively moderate and homogeneous engagement environment, rather than one characterised by extreme polarisation or volatility.

4.2. Thematic Orientation and Narrative Strategies: A Balanced and Diversified Communicative Landscape in the Portuguese Campaign

The analysis of political communication on X during the 2024 Portuguese legislative election campaign reveals a communicative environment characterised by moderation, thematic plurality and differentiated narrative strategies across actors. Although campaign-related content forms the central axis of communication, this category largely consists of low-density, logistical information — such as references to campaign events, schedules, rallies, media appearances, or interview times — rather than substantive political debate. This content does not monopolise the discourse and coexists with a substantial presence of political and programmatic communication.

At the aggregate level, campaign-related messages represent 61.3% of the *corpus*, confirming that electoral logic structures communication in the Portuguese context. However, general political issues account for 27.1%, indicating frequent references to ideological positioning, institutional context and broader political diagnoses beyond the immediate dynamics of the campaign. Policy-related issues reach 10.9%, while personal content is virtually absent (0.7%), pointing to limited thematic personalisation.

Narrative strategies display a similarly balanced distribution. Strategic narratives are the most frequent (32.7%), reflecting the importance of electoral positioning and campaign management, but they are far from hegemonic. Confrontational narratives account for 23.2%, confirming the presence of conflict without it becoming the dominant organising principle. At the same time, identitarian (20.1%) and programmatic narratives (19.6%) carry comparable weight, indicating a communicative ecosystem in which identity construction and policy-oriented framing coexist with strategic and conflictual messaging. Personalist narratives remain marginal (4.4%).

4.2.1. Party-Level Patterns: Differentiated Campaign Strategies

AD's communication strategy is clearly campaign-oriented but not exclusively so. Of its 132 messages, 70% focus on campaign-related content, while policy issues account for 17.7% and general political issues for 12.3%. No personal content is observed. Narratively, AD prioritises strategic framing (36.9%), followed by confrontational narratives (23.8%), and maintains a relatively balanced presence of identitarian (17.7%) and programmatic narratives (16.2%). Personalist narratives are residual (5.4%). This configuration reflects a communicative style centred on electoral competition and mobilisation, without relying predominantly on confrontation or leader-centred appeals.

PS exhibits a much stronger concentration on campaign communication. Among the 156 valid messages analysed, 88.5% are campaign-related, while policy issues represent 9%, and general political and personal content only 1.3% each. Narratively, the PS combines a strong strategic orientation (51.9%) with a substantial identitarian component (26.9%), reinforcing party cohesion and collective affiliation. Confrontational

narratives remain limited (12.2%), and programmatic (7.7%) and personalist narratives (1.3%) play a marginal role. Overall, the PS deploys a disciplined, mobilising and identity-focused discourse, with limited emphasis on direct antagonism.

Chega presents the most distinctive party-level profile. Of its 85 messages, campaign-related content accounts for 49.4%, closely followed by general political issues (35.3%), while policy issues represent 15.3%. This distribution indicates a discourse that combines electoral mobilisation with broader ideological and systemic critique. Narratively, Chega adopts a strongly confrontational style that dominates its communication, complemented by strategic framing. Identitarian and programmatic narratives play a secondary role, reinforcing the party's positioning as an antagonistic and system-challenging actor. No personal content is observed, underscoring a party-centred rather than biographical communication strategy.

4.2.2. Leader-Level Patterns: Personalisation Without Thematic Dominance

Leader communication introduces additional differentiation, particularly in narrative orientation, while remaining largely aligned with party strategies.

Luís Montenegro's communication combines campaign-related content (52.2%) with a notable presence of general political issues (30.4%) and policy-related messages (17.4%). Narratively, his profile is clearly identitarian (56.5%), supplemented by strategic framing (17.4%) and limited confrontation (13%). Programmatic (8.7%) and personalist narratives (4.3%) are marginal. This pattern reflects a leadership style oriented towards collective identity, institutional credibility and low conflict.

Pedro Nuno Santos displays a highly concentrated campaign-oriented strategy. Campaign-related content accounts for 88.5% of his messages, with minimal general political, policy-related and personal content (each 3.8%). Narratively, his discourse is dominated by identitarian narratives (38.5%), followed by strategic framing (26.9%) and a moderate presence of programmatic narratives (19.2%). Confrontation (7.7%) and personalist narratives (7.7%) remain limited. His communication is therefore strongly mobilising and cohesion-oriented, with low levels of antagonism.

By contrast, André Ventura stands out as the central vector of discursive polarisation. His messages are evenly divided between campaign-related content (45.8%) and general political issues (45.8%), with policy-related content remaining marginal (6.8%) and personal content virtually absent (1.7%). Narratively, confrontational framing dominates overwhelmingly (55.9%), followed by strategic narratives (28.8%), while identitarian (8.5%) and programmatic narratives (6.8%) play a minor role. This configuration confirms a communication strategy centred on antagonism, moralisation and mobilisation through conflict.

Overall, the Portuguese digital campaign is characterised by thematic plurality and narrative balance, with clear differentiation between actors. While Chega and André

Ventura concentrate the most confrontational and polarising discourse, PS, AD, Luís Montenegro and Pedro Nuno Santos display more moderated communicative profiles, structured around strategic coordination, identity reinforcement and, to a lesser extent, programmatic framing. These findings support the interpretation of Portugal as a case of moderate, actor-specific discursive polarisation, rather than a campaign environment dominated by systemic conflict.

4.3. Sentiment and Affective Tone: Predominance of Positive Tone and Moderated Negative Affect in the Portuguese Campaign

The analysis of affective polarity in Portuguese campaign communication reveals a predominant use of positive tone, alongside a moderate and uneven presence of negative messages across actors. At the aggregate level, positive messages account for 68.1% of the *corpus*, indicating that campaign communication on X is largely oriented towards affirmation, mobilisation and the projection of favourable images. Negative messages represent 27.1%, while neutral content is marginal (4.8%), suggesting that most messages are emotionally charged, even when expressed in restrained or institutional registers.

This overall distribution points to a communicative environment in which emotional appeals are common but systematic affective confrontation is limited. Positivity is used primarily to reinforce identity, confidence and mobilisation, whereas negativity is selectively deployed and concentrated amongst specific actors.

Clear differences emerge at the party level. AD exhibits a predominantly positive affective profile, with 71.5% of its messages coded as positive. Negative messages account for 23.8%, and neutral content remains residual (4.6%). This distribution reflects a campaign strategy centred on constructive framing and affirmative messaging, while still incorporating criticism or negative references when strategically necessary.

An even stronger positive orientation is observed in PS. Amongst its messages, 76.8% display positive polarity, compared to 12.9% negative and 10.3% neutral. This pattern indicates a communicative strategy focused on highlighting achievements, reinforcing credibility and projecting confidence, with limited reliance on negative or confrontational appeals. Neutral messages are mainly associated with informational or institutional content.

Chega presents a markedly different affective configuration. While positive messages still represent a slight majority (53.6%), negative content reaches a very high level (46.4%), and neutral messages are entirely absent. This combination of elevated positivity and negativity reflects an emotionally intensified style characteristic of populist communication: positive affect is used to exalt the in-group and mobilise supporters, while negative affect denounces political adversaries, institutions and perceived systemic failures. The absence of neutral tone underscores a deliberate avoidance of emotionally detached or descriptive communication.

Leader-level analysis reinforces these contrasts. Luís Montenegro adopts a clearly positive affective strategy, with 82.6% of his messages coded as positive and 17.4% as negative. No neutral messages are observed. This profile aligns with an attempt to project moderation, credibility and optimism, consistent with his positioning as a viable governing alternative.

A similar but even more pronounced pattern characterises Pedro Nuno Santos, whose communication displays an exceptionally high level of positive polarity (88.5%). Negative messages account for only 7.7%, while neutral content represents 3.8%. This distribution confirms a strategy oriented towards cohesion, confidence and mobilisation through affirmative emotional appeals, with minimal engagement in confrontational discourse.

By contrast, André Ventura exhibits the most polarised affective profile of all actors. Negative messages dominate his communication (55.9%), surpassing positive ones (44.1%), and no neutral messages are recorded. This configuration consolidates a discourse centred on denunciation, alarm and moral confrontation, in which emotional intensity is deliberately maximised and informational neutrality is absent.

Overall, these results show that affective polarisation in the Portuguese campaign is highly actor-specific. While Chega and André Ventura concentrate the highest levels of negative emotionality, mainstream parties and leaders rely predominantly on positive affect and avoid sustained negativity. The Portuguese digital campaign thus combines widespread emotionalisation with moderated affective confrontation, supporting the interpretation of a communicative environment that is emotionally active but not systemically polarised.

4.4. Interaction Networks and Campaign Communication Strategies

The analysis of mentions on X during the Portuguese campaign (see Figure 4) reveals a very low-density interaction network, characterised by a residual use of explicit mentions (@) and a scarcity of direct relational ties between political actors. Overall, the sociogram shows a highly fragmented structure, with few links and many isolated nodes, indicating that explicit interaction is not a central communicative resource in the Portuguese digital campaign. Rather than functioning as a relational arena, X is primarily used for message dissemination and discursive positioning.

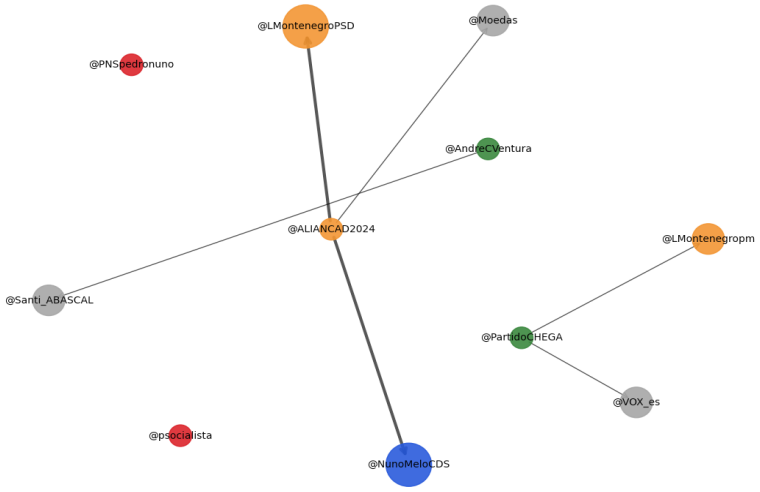


Figure 4. *Sociogram of networks and communication strategies*

Within this limited interactive environment, @ALIANCAD2024 is the institutional account that registers the highest number of explicit mentions, although the absolute figures remain very low. Its mentions are directed almost exclusively towards allied or ideologically proximate figures: @LMontenegroPSD (three mentions) and @NunoMeloCDS (three mentions), as well as a single reference to @Moedas. These mentions do not generate reciprocal interaction or sustained conversational threads; instead, they function as isolated internal references within the centre-right political space. Other major institutional accounts — namely @psocialista, @LMontenegropm and @PNSpedronuno — do not employ explicit @mentions at all, reinforcing the pattern of a non-interactive campaign strategy.

Chega and its leader use explicit mentions similarly sparingly, but in a strategically distinctive way. @AndreCVentura makes a single explicit mention, directed to @Santi_ABASCAL, while @PartidoCHEGA registers two mentions: one to @vox_es and one to @LMontenegropm. Although quantitatively negligible, these references introduce transnational and adversarial elements absent from other actors' interaction patterns. However, they remain isolated gestures and do not generate sustained relational dynamics.

In contrast to the limited use of explicit mentions, all actors make extensive use of nominal references to political parties, leaders, media outlets and public figures, without activating interactive affordances. @ALIANCAD2024 repeatedly refers to AD (130 mentions), as well as to PS (16), Luís Montenegro (14), Pedro Nuno Santos (six) and Partido Social Democrata (Social Democratic Party; PSD; three). It also includes recurring references to journalistic media such as Antena 1, TSF, Renascença and Rádio Observador (five mentions each), suggesting an effort to situate campaign messages within a broader political-media ecosystem without direct engagement.

A similar pattern is observed in Chega's communication. @AndreCVentura mentions Chega nominally on 19 occasions, while @PartidoCHEGA intensifies this strategy

with 28 references to the party name. These are complemented by references to André Ventura (six), PS (five), PSD (five) and public figures such as Quim Barreiros (three). This pattern points to a discourse centred on self-affirmation, identity reinforcement and symbolic opposition, rather than relational exchange.

The account @LMontenegropm does not use explicit mentions but includes eight nominal references to AD, reinforcing party identification while avoiding direct engagement. Similarly, @PNSpedronuno mentions the PS nominally 14 times, without addressing other actors via @mentions, maintaining a unidirectional communication strategy.

The @psocialista account displays the highest volume of nominal references overall, particularly to PS (70) and Pedro Nuno Santos (20). It also includes scattered references to figures from across the political and cultural spectrum, such as António Costa (three), Pedro Passos Coelho (three) and several public intellectuals and party members. Notably, Luís Montenegro is referenced nine times, indicating discursive acknowledgement of political competitors without translating this recognition into interactive exchange.

Taken together, these findings show that political communication on X in Portugal is characterised by low interactivity, weak relational density and the absence of conversational dynamics between actors. While leaders — particularly André Ventura — occupy a prominent symbolic position within the discourse, this visibility does not translate into network centrality in interactional terms. Instead, the platform is used primarily as a broadcast medium, where political actors construct narratives, reaffirm identities and position themselves symbolically within the political field, rather than engaging in direct dialogue or confrontation through platform affordances.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article analysed political communication on X during the 2024 Portuguese legislative election campaign to examine how activity patterns, content, affective tone and interaction dynamics contribute to the articulation of conflict and discursive polarisation in the digital public sphere. Using a mixed-methods design, the analysis addressed a set of ROs and hypotheses drawn from contemporary debates on political communication, digital polarisation and populist styles. The findings allow for a nuanced assessment of the Portuguese case, highlighting a pattern of moderate, actor-specific polarisation rather than systemic communicative conflict.

The findings on patterns of communicative activity and user engagement in the Portuguese election campaign suggest that the major parties —particularly the PS and AD — dominate in publication volume, while emerging actors show lower but more selective activity levels. This finding partially confirms Hypothesis 1 and aligns with the normalisation thesis, which holds that resource-rich actors maintain greater visibility through sustained output. However, engagement patterns offer a more differentiated picture (Hypothesis 2). Despite lower publication volumes, individual leaders — especially

André Ventura — generate disproportionately high levels of interaction, confirming that personalisation and emotionally charged communication are key drivers of visibility on X. The Portuguese case thus illustrates a clear distinction between activity and impact: institutional actors ensure continuity and presence, while leaders, particularly those adopting confrontational or populist styles, concentrate attention and engagement. This result reinforces the argument that digital platforms do not simply reward volume, but rather selective, emotionally resonant intervention, contributing to differentiated forms of visibility without necessarily producing generalised escalation.

Regarding differences in communicative style between parties and leaders, the results indicate that leaders consistently use more personalistic language and narrative framing than party accounts, even when thematic personalisation remains limited, clearly supporting Hypothesis 3. This confirms that personalisation in Portuguese digital campaigns operates primarily at the discursive and affective level, rather than through biographical or private content. Furthermore, while emerging actors — particularly Chega and André Ventura — display a more confrontational and negative tone, this pattern does not extend uniformly to all non-governing actors, only partially supporting Hypothesis 4. Mainstream leaders such as Luís Montenegro and Pedro Nuno Santos adopt markedly positive and low-conflict styles, indicating that emergence alone does not predict negativity. Instead, negativity appears linked to specific populist communication strategies, rather than to structural position alone. This finding refines existing assumptions about negativity and polarisation in digital campaigns, suggesting that stylistic choices matter more than institutional status.

Thematic priorities in campaign communication broadly confirm expectations (Hypothesis 5), but also reveal important nuances between political actors. Major parties prioritise campaign-related content and policy-oriented issues, particularly those linked to governance and institutional responsibility. By contrast, Chega devotes a substantially larger share of its communication to general political issues, using them to articulate systemic critique and ideological positioning. Crucially, however, the Portuguese campaign is not dominated by identity or cultural conflict. Policy-related content remains non-negligible across actors, and personal issues are virtually absent. This supports the interpretation of Portugal as a case where issue-based communication and campaign logic coexist, without being fully displaced by polarising identity frames.

The results on narrative patterns in the campaign announcement reveal that policy-related issues are predominantly framed through programmatic narratives, while political and identity-related issues are associated with identitarian and confrontational narratives, strongly supporting Hypothesis 6. However, narrative types are relatively balanced at the aggregate level. Discursive polarisation emerges as actor-specific rather than systemic. Chega and André Ventura focus on confrontational narratives, whereas PS, AD and their leaders rely more heavily on strategic, identitarian, and programmatic frames.

This confirms that polarisation in the Portuguese campaign is selectively articulated, rather than structurally embedded across the communication ecosystem.

Regarding affective polarity, while positive tone predominates across the campaign, negative affect is heavily concentrated among ideologically extreme actors, particularly André Ventura. Mainstream parties and leaders overwhelmingly rely on positive emotional framing, using affirmation, confidence and mobilisation rather than denunciation, clearly supporting Hypothesis 7. Importantly, the Portuguese case demonstrates that emotionalisation does not necessarily equate to polarisation. Although most messages are emotionally charged, affective confrontation remains limited to specific actors. This distinction contributes to the broader debate on digital polarisation by showing that emotional intensity and polarisation can be disentangled analytically and empirically.

The interaction dynamics show that campaign communication on X in Portugal displays very low levels of explicit interaction, with minimal use of @mentions and a highly fragmented sociogram, supporting Hypothesis 8 and Hypothesis 9, but with important qualifications. Political actors largely avoid direct engagement with competitors, allies or media through platform affordances. At the same time, leaders —especially André Ventura — occupy a central symbolic position through nominal references, even if this does not translate into relational centrality. This confirms that personalisation in the Portuguese campaign is discursive rather than relational: leaders dominate attention without engaging in dialogic or confrontational exchange. These findings challenge assumptions that polarisation on social media necessarily manifests through dense interaction networks or echo chambers structured by explicit ties. In Portugal, polarisation operates primarily through framing, tone and narrative positioning, not through networked confrontation.

Overall, the results portray the Portuguese digital campaign as a moderately polarised communicative environment, shaped by selective personalisation, controlled confrontation and a persistent institutional presence. Polarisation manifests primarily through discursive styles and engagement patterns, rather than through sustained ideological antagonism or emotional escalation. These findings align with the characterisation of Portugal as a context where digital political communication introduces new dynamics of visibility and personalisation without fully displacing established norms of moderation.

Taken together, the findings support a coherent interpretation of the Portuguese digital campaign as a case of moderate, actor-specific discursive polarisation. Conflict and negativity are clearly present, but they are unevenly distributed, concentrated in the communication strategies of specific actors rather than embedded across the system as a whole.

Mainstream parties and leaders rely predominantly on positive affect, strategic framing and identity-based mobilisation, maintaining a controlled, institutionally oriented communication style. By contrast, Chega and André Ventura function as the principal vectors

of polarisation, articulating antagonistic narratives, negative emotionality and populist framing without generating corresponding levels of interaction or dialogic exchange.

Although this study provides valuable data on political communication in Portugal, several limitations must be borne in mind when interpreting its results. The two main limitations are the exclusive focus on a single social media platform and the selection of the actors involved, which could restrict the possibility of generalising the findings to a wider population. Future research could broaden the selection of social media platforms and/or include the communications of all political parties.

Despite these limitations, these results, from a theoretical perspective, contribute to debates on digital political communication by showing that hybrid media systems can accommodate emotionalisation and personalisation without producing systemic polarisation. The Portuguese case illustrates how platform affordances interact with national political cultures, party systems and strategic choices, generating distinctive patterns of digital campaigning. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of combining content, narrative, sentiment and network analysis to capture the multi-dimensional nature of polarisation, moving beyond simplistic measures of negativity or engagement. Substantively, it highlights the importance of analysing who polarises, how, and through which communicative resources, rather than assuming polarisation as a uniform outcome of digital media use.

In conclusion, political communication on X in Portugal during the 2024 legislative elections reflects a plural, emotionally active but institutionally bounded communicative environment, where polarisation is present but not dominant, and where discursive strategies, rather than platform dynamics alone, shape the contours of political conflict.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the preparation of this work, the authors used DeepL for the Portuguese translation of the title, abstract, and keywords; ChatGPT for formatting (Figure 4), based on precise instructions; and ChatGPT to edit selected sections derived from the original text of the first author's doctoral thesis. The authors reviewed and edited all content and assumes full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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