

Left Populism in Spain? The Rise of Podemos.

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Introduction

David Axelrod, President Obama's advisor, became famous after coining the slogan campaign 'Yes We Can' for the 2002 presidential campaign. Few would have imagined then that more than a decade later, in a completely different political context, a new Spanish political party would adopt this motto as its name and main slogan. *Podemos* (We Can) emerged in 2014 from the turbulent waters of the Spanish economic and political crisis of the previous years with a political message of rupture and change directed against the political establishment—the political caste in the language of the party. The party was officially registered in March and the following May it had achieved a major electoral breakthrough, obtained 5 MEPs to the European parliament, and become the fourth most-voted party in Spain. After the 2014 European elections, several surveys indicated that Podemos was the party with the highest vote intention in the incoming general elections.

The social and political conditions that Spain experienced from 2009 onwards created very favorable conditions for the emergence of new political parties and for populist discourses.

In other European countries, populist appeals had been channeled by radical right parties, and had thus taken an ethnocentric and exclusionary form (Taguieff 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). In Spain, however, all efforts to create a party of these characteristics had miserably failed. By contrast, in 2014, a radical left populist platform attained excellent electoral results. In our paper we try to trace the main social and political processes that led to the birth and success of a party of these characteristics. We also examine the main characteristics of its programmatic and discursive appeals, and explore the organizational dilemmas that this new organization had to confront in its foundation process.

The rise of other populist political parties in Southern Europe, such as the Greek Syriza and the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle, poses interesting questions regarding the causes, similarities and differences among these political actors. Also, the changing successes of radical-left groups in Southern Europe (including here Syriza, but also the French Front de Gauche and Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste) underscore the interest of analyzing the differences and similarities among these groups in their programs, discourses, and electoral bases. In this paper, however, we restrict ourselves to a case study (George and Benet 2005) in which we trace the processes that led to the emergence of Podemos and that shaped its main characteristics (organizational, ideological, and discursive). In our paper we analyze how a contingent combination of political-economic developments, party system characteristics, and new initiatives of political entrepreneurs led to this unexpected political outcome.



The first section of this paper describes the political and economic context in which Podemos emerged. The second section presents the foundation of Podemos and the convergence of the main actors that played a role in launching this project. A minor radical left party of Trotskyite origins, Izquierda Anticapitalista, and a group of social and political science scholars from the Universidad Complutense with strong connections with Venezuelan Chavismo converged in a new political organization that heavily relied on the media impact of their future leader, Pablo Iglesias. The third section addresses the programmatic and discursive choices adopted by Podemos, and reveals both the classical left-libertarian orientation of its program and the populist components of Iglesias's political discourse. The fourth section examines the characteristics of Podemos voters, and shows that the latter have predominantly leftist origins and orientations. This analysis shows also the connection between voting for Podemos and previous experiences of informal political mobilization. Finally, the fifth section examines the organizational model adopted by the party, and the tension between the bottom-up dynamics that facilitated its birth and success and the attempt, so far successful, at least in the election of its national directing bodies, to establish a cohesive and autonomous leadership around the leadership of Pablo Iglesias and his allies.

1. The window of opportunities. Economic crisis, Socialist policy shift, and social mobilization.

In May the 12th, 2010, the Socialist Spanish government presided over by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced in parliament a severe austerity package that reduced public expenditures by 1.5% of the GDP. This package followed the escalation of the debt crisis and the financial rescue of the Greek economy in April-May 2010. It also responded to the rapidly growing pressures exercised by European governments on the Spanish government to adopt severe fiscal consolidation measures, most notoriously, in the 9 May ECOFIN meeting. In that meeting, the Spanish Economic Affairs Minister, Elena Salgado, agreed to adopt a deficit reduction plan that would be presented to the ECOFIN in its May 18th meeting.¹ In 2009 the Spanish economy had experienced a very severe downturn. Its GDP had fallen by 3.9% and its unemployment level had reached almost 19%. But the economic freefall had been reduced to -0.15% in the last trimester of 2009, and it had turned into positive figures (0.3%) in the first trimester of 2010. In 2009 the public deficit equaled 11.9%, a result of the anti-cyclical and expansive economic policies followed during that year, and public debt amounted to 55.2% of the GDP. Following the 9 May ECOFIN meeting, the Spanish government would switch its economic policies from expansion to austerity.

¹ See http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ecofin/114324.pdf.

The package announced by President Rodríguez Zapatero included a wage reduction in 2010 (5% on average) and a salary freeze for public employees for the year 2011. The government froze public pensions in the year 2011 (with the exception of minimal and non-contributive pensions), and eliminated the financial aid of 2500 Euros to parents of newborn babies. Economic reforms aiming at fiscal consolidation would continue under the Rodríguez Zapatero government. In 2010, the Spanish parliament approved a reform of labor regulations that increased flexibility and decentralization in labor markets. Among other things, this reform decreased the costs of dismissing employees and allowed firms to opt out of agreements signed between business representatives and labor unions at the branch level. Economic and institutional reforms continued during the year 2011. Crucial reforms affected the public pension scheme. Retirement age moved from 65 to 67 years (although this change would take place incrementally over a long period of time), and the period of time used to calculate pensions jumped from 15 to 25 years. Finally, in the summer of 2011, in the face of an escalating debt crisis, the Socialist and Popular parties agreed to conduct an urgent constitutional reform that imposed balanced budgets. These ambitious reforms did not bring economic recovery. The Spanish economy grew by 0.2% in 2010 and -0.6% in 2011, and the unemployment rate rose to 20.1% in 2010 and 22.6% in 2011. Among people younger than 25 years old, the unemployment rate in 2010 was higher than 40%²

Overall, as President Rodríguez Zapatero himself later acknowledged (Rodríguez Zapatero 2014), these reforms implied a strong departure from the policies advocated by Socialist governments from the 1980's onwards. **They led to a strong sense of alienation on the part of important segments of the Socialist electorate.** From 2008 to 2011 the percentage of voters for the Socialist party in the general elections dropped from 43.9 to 28.7% percent, and the absolute number of socialist voters fell by more than 4 millions.

Almost in parallel way, the perception of political corruption increased drastically from 2008 onwards (Villoria and Jiménez 2012). This perception was fuelled by scandals and judicial processes implicating politicians and political parties, initially at the local and regional levels and quite often in connection with the housing bubble and the funding of political parties, from which some entrepreneurs and politicians also extracted generous kickbacks. In some cases, corruption scandals linked political parties, regional governments and mismanaged financial institutions (such as Bankia) that were eventually rescued at a high economic price with public funding. Interestingly, this perception was mostly focused on politicians and authorities, and did not relate to the everyday experiences citizens had in their dealings with the public administration (Villoria and Jiménez 2012: 119-120).

² See https://www.bbvaresearch.com/KETD/fbin/mult/WP_1130_tcm346-270043.pdf?ts=2152012.

In this social and economic context, a bottom-up wave of social mobilizations erupted in the year 2011 (Minguijón Pablo y Pac Salas 2013). In May 15th, one week before the date of regional and local elections in which the Popular Party would attain a landslide victory, *Democracia Real Ya*, a grassroots social organization integrating a diverse array of social movements and networks, called for a popular demonstration in protest of unemployment, cuts in social expenditures, and privileges of the political class, and also in demand of new democratic channels for civic participation. Protests crystallized in permanent camp-outs all over the Spanish geography that would last in some cases until August 2011. Although protesters camping out had a distinctive social and ideological profile (young people with a high overrepresentation of college graduates and leftist oriented participants) (Calvo, Gómez-Pastrana, and Mena 2011; Minguijón Pablo y Pac Salas 2013), this wave of social mobilizations had transversal characteristics and appealed to people with quite diverse previous political sympathies. Protests against political corruption and the oligopolistic character of Spanish parties, and demands in defense of social services and the welfare state had a wide appeal among Spanish citizens. According to different surveys (Calvo, Gómez-Pastrana and Mena 2011: 5), in 2011 more than 70% percent of Spaniards felt sympathy for the 15-M movement and its demands.

In the November 2011 general elections, the Popular Party attained an absolute majority of seats in parliament. Rajoy's conservative government continued the austerity policies initiated under Rodríguez Zapatero. It maintained the freeze on public sector wages, contracted public employment, and increased direct and indirect taxes. It also approved a labor law reform that drastically reduced compensations for dismissals and increased flexibility and decentralization in wage negotiations and labor conditions³. Economic reforms did not manage to reduce Spanish unemployment rates, which escalated above 25% by the end of 2012 and remained above that threshold level until mid-2014. Public trust on President Rajoy suffered also from poor economic performance. By early 2013, surveys conducted by Metroscopia indicated that more than 80% of citizens did not trust President Rajoy⁴. By mid-2013, according to the same polling agency, 60% of PP voters did not trust President Rajoy⁵.

By the end of 2013, the combination of unpopular economic measures and deep economic crisis had triggered a strong sense of discontent and political alienation among many Spanish citizens. That feeling was especially acute among former socialist voters, who had witnessed the sharp policy switch made by the Rodríguez Zapatero government, a switch whose economic benefits were very hard to grasp for most Spanish citizens. Overall economic and political conditions were therefore favorable for the emergence of new political actors, even if

³ See <http://www.oecd.org/els/emp/SpainLabourMarketReform-Report.pdf>

⁴ See http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/01/12/actualidad/1358017058_376467.html

⁵ http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/09/14/actualidad/1379177988_228092.html

the strong disproportional bias of the Spanish electoral system put strong constraints on the possibilities of electoral breakthroughs by newcomers.

Now, which were main programmatic and discursive alternatives that were available to new contenders in party competition, and which were the chances of electoral success? In order to address the main ideological and programmatic alternatives opened to political actors we can use Kriesi et al's analysis (2008) on effects of globalization on the transformation of party competition in Western Europe. We assume that despite the presence of important conjunctural and national particularities, Kriesi et al's map captures crucial dimensions of the spaces of public opinion and party positions in Spain. If anything, the intensity of the economic crisis, and the depth of its social and political-economic effects should have increased the perceived importance of globalization among Spanish citizens. In addition to the two dimensions identified by Kriesi et al, the analysis of Spanish politics will have to take into consideration the role played "center-periphery" conflicts, which have evolved around the autonomy and symbolic recognition of peripheral nationalities.

Kriesi et al's analyses show that in the last decades West European party systems have become organized around two main axis of party competition, one economic and one cultural. In both of them, the prevailing tension pits advocates and opponents of globalization. In some national cases, this transformation has gone hand in hand with a tripolarization of the political space in which the three poles are occupied by a libertarian left (pro-integration in the cultural dimension and pro-demarcation in the economic dimension), a liberal right (pro-integration in both dimensions) and a populist right (pro-demarcation in the cultural dimension) (Lachat and Kriesi 2008: 277-278).

In the context of a deep and unsettling economic crisis, many citizens embraced the defense of the welfare state against austerity policies and of Spanish sovereignty and national solidarity against supranational or foreign impositions. Populist radical right groups adopting a pro-welfare state strategy could have been particularly well placed to channel these types of positions. However, the Spanish popular right has never abandoned a situation of political and electoral marginality (Llamazares and Ramiro 2006; Llamazares 2012), a fact that can hardly be explained by the absence of anti-globalization attitudes (in particular regarding immigration and multiculturalism) among Spanish citizens. Much more important to explain the failure of the Spanish populist right have been other characteristics of both the demand- and supply-sides of Spanish politics. The overwhelming gravitational pull of conflicts regarding the autonomy and status of Catalonia and the Basque country has made it more difficult for new groups to center their political platforms around the issues of immigration and/ European integration. Furthermore, the anti-accommodation position adopted by the PP in center-periphery conflicts has given this party a strong competitive advantage vis-à-vis other potential groups advocating Spanish nationalism (Llamazares and Ramiro 2006; Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014). At

the supply-side level, Spanish extreme right groups have failed to get rid of their Francoist and/or neofascist symbols and identities. They have not managed to articulate radically new nationalist positions, and have therefore failed to appeal to working-class voters, which have remained hostile or reluctant at the best to the ideological inheritors of the Francoist regime (Llamazares 2012). As for the PP, it has embraced conservative positions regarding cultural and moral issues such as abortion and gay marriage, and it has flirted with anti-immigration positions, but it has never adopted Euroskeptic positions, and had not campaigned on anti-immigration or anti-multicultural platforms.

The political conditions in the potential space of the libertarian left have been quite different. The main national competitor at this side of the political space has been the Socialist Party which, despite its quite moderate economic policies, had played a decisive role in the development of the Spanish welfare state. Now, the policy switch adopted by Rodríguez Zapatero's government drastically reduced the credibility of the Socialist Party as a left-oriented party. Furthermore, the perceived effects of both the debt crisis and the austerity policies induced by the EU this situation transformed the interpretation of economic conflicts and dilemmas along the lines identified by Kriesi et al, that is, as a conflict between economic globalization and the defense of national welfare states. As for radical left organizations, they have been present at the electoral and institutional arena at both the Spanish (IU-United Left-) and regional levels (particularly in the Basque country, in Galicia, in Catalonia, and Valencia). These organizations have tended to adopt a left libertarian profile, emphasizing in different degrees their redistributionist, libertarian or, in the case of peripheral nationalist groups, independentist positions. In many cases, they have benefited electorally from the collapse of the Socialist Party. In fact, during the years 2012 and 2013 conditions seemed very favorable to IU, and surveys predicted a huge increase in the electoral results of this group.

However, some factors constrained the political chances of the radical left in general and of IU in particular. In the first place, their long political and institutional experiences (in some cases as members of regional or local coalition governments) was not very helpful at the nadir of popular trust in political parties and professional politicians. In the second place, the economic crisis had made less important and/or disorganized preexisting patterns of ideological opposition. Left (PSOE) and right (PP) had conducted similar austerity economic policies, and these policies had hit all kinds of social groups, in particular those sheltered by the welfare state, irrespective of their previous ideological orientations and political allegiances. The transversal and bottom-up character of the 15M mobilizations revealed both the limits of the traditional left-right frame that had structured Spanish politics and the weak legitimacy of all institutionalized political actors. In the third place, as Hawkins's analyses have shown (Hawkins 2010), high levels of political corruption created a fertile soil for populist political alternatives. In the words of a leader of *Podemos*, traditional left-right conflicts had been

overcome by a new tension between those who are up, the elites, and those who are down, the people, irrespective of their old ideological orientations.

This context was propitious for alternatives that arose outside the realm of official politics, and that advocated the defense of the welfare state and the rejection of supranational impositions on national policies. These alternatives could appeal to those wide sectors of society that had been severely hit by the crisis. And they could frame the demands of these sectors in a new vocabulary, one that pitted social and political elites to common citizens. This alternative could therefore be based in a new combination of economic demands (pro-welfare state and pro-redistribution, connected to classical leftist platforms, but framed now in a different vocabulary) and populist appeals directed against the political elites. In the following section we turn to the process by virtue of which this new political alternative took shape.

1. The foundation of Podemos

The movement '*Podemos*' was officially launched in a press conference in the Teatro del Barrio in the neighborhood of Lavapiés in Madrid in January 17h, 2014. The occasion was the presentation of the political manifest '*Mover Ficha*' (Make a Move, January 14th). The first steps to launch the party were outlined by Miguel Urbán, now MEP and the candidate of *Podemos* to preside the Autonomous Community of Madrid in the next elections in May 25th, 2015. They would collect 50.000 signatures through the web to endorse Pablo Iglesias, the future leader of the organization, in the next European elections. Second, they would upload documents and material on a webpage for debate among followers. Then, they would create assemblies and support groups in neighborhoods and towns across the entire geography. As for their financial resources, Urbán claimed that 'their candidature was born with 0 euros'.⁶ Several procedures would be open for supporters to collaborate with economic resources to help the electoral campaign.⁷

The political manifest '*Mover Ficha*' was originally an internal document from *Izquierda Anticapitalista*, Anticapitalist Left, a radical left political party of Trotskyite origins born in 2008. *Izquierda Anticapitalista* defined itself as 'revolutionary, anticapitalist, internationalist, feminist and socialist organization'.⁸ It had competed in the 2009 European elections obtaining no representation (19.880 votes, 0.13%). An article published on 21 January

⁶ "Nace con cero euros: cero euros de la banca que queremos expropiar y cero euros de los políticos que queremos echar".

⁷ "Igual que a la derecha la financian constructores y banqueros, y con ellos tienen sus lealtades, nosotros nos vamos a financiar a través de los ciudadanos y con ellos está nuestra lealtad".

⁸ Its origins go back to the organization of Alternative Space in 1995, and it was created by former members of the Trotskyite Liga Comunista Revolucionaria. It was articulated as an internal current within Izquierda Unida until it left the latter in 2007.

2014 on a national newspaper revealed that the Mover Ficha Manifest was in fact largely based on a previous internal document of the party (bulletin n.82).⁹ Both texts have striking similarities and the bulletin of *Izquierda Anticapitalista* also ends with the same statement that later made the name of *Podemos* well-known:

The signatories of this Manifest are convinced that this is the moment to make a step forward. Indignation and new forms of participation must also reach out to politics. In the streets it is repeated ‘Yes it can be. We say: We can’. (*Sí se puede. Nosotros decimos: Podemos*).

The list of signatories of the Manifest gathered members of Anticapitalist Left (Jaime Pastor, Teresa Rodríguez, later elected as MEP, and now a member of the Andalusian regional parliament), activists from social movements (*Marea blanca*—health--, *Marea verde*—education--, several leftist intellectuals (Jorge Riechmann), and trade unionists.

Beyond the direct link between *Izquierda Anticapitalista*, there were other factors conducive to the launching of the party. Unquestionably 15M was the fulcrum for political change. Podemos and the 15M movement were two separate political processes, a social movement gathering very different groups in the first case, and a new political party the latter in the second. They appeared in sequence but their connection, although loosely, exists. Many activists in Podemos had previously participated in the activities of the 15M. Some claim (for example, Iñigo Errejón) that 15M was a learning experience, a window of opportunity that made possible redefining politics, but they do not consider themselves as their direct heirs. **But the 15M definitely inspired many of the activists to become involved in politics and make a step forward.**

In the context of widespread social mobilization against the public policies implemented by the government and increasing political disaffection and widespread social mobilization, the confluence between a radical left party and a group of researchers from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid who had collaborated with the Foundation CEPS (Centro de Estudios Políticos y Sociales) took place. CEPS is a foundation linked to the Universidad Complutense de Madrid that defines itself as ‘a political organization (not a party) dedicated to the production of critical thinking and cultural and intellectual work to build consensus among the left.’ CEPS has been involved in different types of research but in its 15 years of existence, the foundation has also developed different projects in Latin America, including Venezuela. Future leaders of Podemos, in particular Juan Carlos Monedero, but also Pablo Iglesias, Carolina Bescansa, Iñigo

⁹ A. Gil, El Diario.

Errejón and Luis Aguilar, participated as advisers and strategic analysts in different projects with the populist Chaves' government.¹⁰

Izquierda Anticapitalista purposefully supported the political project under the banner of *Podemos* while recognizing the nature of the political confluence among these two separate souls (Bulletin 84, March 5th, 2014). Two months before the European elections, an internal document of *Izquierda Anticapitalista* stated:

We are aware that we are launching an initiative with a populist political culture, but they have a significant convening power, influence and popularity.

The confluence between the radical left *Izquierda Anticapilista* and the populist advisors, beyond personal and academic connections, crystallized through the media. *La Tuerka* (the Nut), a TV program created in 2010, broadcasted through first local TVs and then internet, served as a political talk show for some of the members of the Complutense team in order to advance their political proposals and denounce the political class and the incumbent government. Pablo Iglesias, an adjunct professor at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, was the anchor and director of a program of political debate that gathered some of the later key figures of *Podemos*. Beyond *La Tuerka*, Iglesias' was able to access the mass media in several widely followed TV private channels. The first time was a short participation on the program *La Noria* (Cuatro) in 2011. The very conservative channel *Intereconomía* invited him to participate in its talk shows in 2013. His first appearance took place on April 25th 2013. Allegedly *Intereconomía* was looking for someone with a leftist profile, but not a professional politician or journalist (he was introduced as someone close to the 15M movement). Until the fall of that year, Iglesias was invited several times to participate in their talk shows. Later he was invited to participate in the talk shows of *Cuatro* and *la Sexta* as a main protagonist in political debates. From then, Pablo Iglesias was born as a *tertuliano*, a talk show guest representing an alternative political discourse. With his characteristic ponytail, soft manners, and eloquent style, Iglesias soon became a well-known and increasingly public figure.

In March 11th 2014 *Podemos* was officially registered as a political party. The party campaigned in European elections mainly based on social networks. The first electoral list to the European elections was made using the tools later developed by the organization: the web and the circles. In principle the election was defined as citizens' primaries (a total of 33.165 people participated). Since the Project was launched in January of that year it was backed up by 100.000 people and around 200 *Círculos* (circles, the name of the party branches) were

¹⁰ The connection with Chaves has been one of the Achilles' heel of the movement since the press and the rest of political parties have denounced their democratic credentials on these grounds. The foundation CEPS has refused the allegations of payments to Juan Carlos Monedero for the amount of 1m€. Estimates of the amount of money received from the foundation from Venezuela since 2002 are 3.7m€.

constituted. They decided to launch a participatory process both to open up the selection of candidates and elaborate an electoral program for the European elections. Pablo Iglesias was elected as number 1 on the list and a quota system granted that both male and women candidates would alternate in the full list of candidates. A small coordinating team organized by Iñigo Errejón, a young researcher who had written his Ph.D. dissertation on the discourse of the Bolivian MAS, was in charge of the electoral campaign.

2. Programmatic and discursive choices.

2.1. The 2014 European elections program.

The electoral program that Podemos presented in the 2014 European elections revealed the main ideological and strategic choices made by the new party¹¹. In this section we reflect the positions adopted by Podemos regarding key political-economic and political-cultural issues, and address also the role of **anti-elitist proposals** in that electoral platform.

In the field of economic and social policies, the program had a strong redistributive content, and advocated a drastic increase in the economic role of the state. It proposed a universal basic income for every Spanish citizen equal to the poverty threshold (point 1.12). This income would be financed through a progressive reform of direct taxes. It also proposed a substantial increase in the minimum wage and in public pensions, and it even advanced the proposal of setting limits to maximum wages (point 1.1). The program proposed the derogation of all recent labor and pension reforms. It also proposed establishing a 35 hours labor week and moving the retirement age to 60. Finally, the program advocated increasing public control and intervention in strategic economic and social sectors (including health, education, transportation, and communications) (points 1.6, 3.4 and 3.5), and established the requirement of referenda for the privatization of publicly-owned firms (point 1.6). Overall, consequently, the program adopted a clearly leftist redistributive economic program that resembled the platforms of other leftist groups in Europe. For instance, some of the measures presented above (like increasing the minimum wage, setting a maximum for incomes, reducing working hours and retirement age) were also present in the electoral platform of the French *Front de Gauche* in the 2012 presidential elections¹².

In the domain of cultural and moral policies, the 2014 electoral platform advocated gay rights, abortion rights, gender equality and civic liberties (points 2.8, 2.11, and 3.3), and had therefore a clearly libertarian profile. Furthermore, the electoral program adopted by Podemos

¹¹ The program was based on a first draft and on the amendments made to that draft by individuals and circles, which had to be approved later in an online referendum. See <http://podemos.info/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Programa-Podemos.pdf>.

¹² https://www.lepartidegauche.fr/system/documents/docs-pg-humain_dabord.pdf

favored an open and inclusive immigration policy. In its point 4.3, the electoral program proposed eliminating special border control programs (like FRONTEX) and direct repatriation measures, defended temporary residency permits for all immigrants lacking legal documents, proposed freedom of movement in Europe for all immigrants, and, finally, advocated voting rights for all immigrants in Europe. Consequently, the combination of socio-economic and cultural policies advocated by Podemos had the classical features of a radical left-libertarian program. Furthermore, the electoral program did not oppose European integration either. Although its section 5 was titled “Recovering sovereignty,” its contents were directed against privatization and competition policies, aimed at reinforcing democratic controls (through national referenda) (5.4 and 5.5), and even demanded a new founding of Europe through a constitutional assembly (point 5.1). The program referred in critical terms to the European Central Bank, but instead of questioning its existence, it demanded its subordination to democratic controls. It also proposed assigning the ECB an increasing role to foster growth, and the inclusion in its statutes of the fight against unemployment as one of its goals (point 1.3). Ultimately in terms of the two dimensions identified by Kriesi et al.’s work (2008), the electoral program of Podemos was radically pro-demarcation in the economic, welfare state dimension, and also pro-integration in the political-cultural dimension, even if in this case there was a marked difference between the radically liberal immigration and multicultural policies it proposed and the more mixed attitudes towards European integration.¹³

But the new party put also emphasis on issues not directly connected the main dimensions of spatial competition in European politics, and which tended to be less important in the programs of radical left parties. In particular, the program assigned a critical role to a battery of measures that were directed against party political elites. These measures aimed at fighting corruption and at reducing the economic and legal privileges and autonomy of political elites. For elected authorities, the electoral program proposed a maximum salary equal to the mean national income, a limit of two terms, permanent revocability, the prohibition of accumulation of public offices, the abolition of judicial privileges, and new rules to make public the wealth and income of politicians.¹⁴ Overall, this electoral platform channeled anti-political elites

¹³ The 2014 electoral platform avoided to address the crucial issue of multinationalism and self-determination in Spain. It referred explicitly in section 5.7 to the right to decide (*derecho a decidir*) of the peoples of Europe (a central reclamation in the Catalan mobilizations for self-determination) in section 5.7. But the phrasing was not particularly clear (recognition of the right of European peoples to constitute themselves as such and to democratically decide their future) and did not mention instances or examples. Section 4.4, which was devoted to cooperation and integration mechanisms among Southern European countries, referred also succinctly to the right to decide and to the cultural identities of stateless nations. No single mention was made in the text to the political situation and alternatives in Catalonia or the Basque country.

¹⁴ Some of these measures (for instance the revocability of all elected authorities) maintained similarities with proposals made by the NPA in the 2012 French presidential elections (section 4). However, the NPA demands were framed in a classical revolutionary and Marxist interpretation. Political reforms were interpreted as elements of an anticapitalist program, and no such a strong emphasis was put on the

claims, and put emphasis on political-institutional issues. But it did not advocate a radical break with existing institutions, with the exception of the derogation of the Lisbon Treaty and of the call of a constitutional assembly for the European Union.

2.2. Populist discourse.

The discourses made by the current secretary general Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, had a much more definite populist profile. They portrayed in a Manichean frame the divisions between the elites and the people, they ascribed to these divisions strong moralistic connotations, and they emphasized the systemic and liberating character of the changes Podemos was advocating. The analysis of two key speeches made by Iglesias using Hawkins (2010) holistic grading technique identified them as extremely populist and close to the ideal type of populist discourse (a grade of 2 in Hawkins populism score)¹⁵.

Iglesias's discourse portrayed a Manichean vision of society by constantly referring to the difference between the people and "the caste" (*la casta*)¹⁶, the political and economic elites that occupy a privileged social position, lead the government and the economy and, paradoxically, claim to represent that same people through the institutional mechanisms created by the 1978 Constitution. In Laclau's terms, the caste works here as the excluded other that, through its "demonization," allows the constitution of the people (Laclau 2007: 70 and 80-83)¹⁷.

Professional politicians pretend to be divided along ideological lines, but in reality they are more interested in maintaining their privileges than in serving the interests of the people¹⁸. For these reasons, left and right divisions have become irrelevant, and are used as manipulating devices by political elites. They must be overcome by a new opposition pitting the caste and the

autonomy of political elites. Interestingly, the NPA expressed also mistrust of referenda, which were interpreted as manipulative devices in the hands of Presidents, without doubt a result of the conservative and populist uses of this political tool in French history. See <http://npa2009.org/sites/default/files/Programme%20POUTOU%202012.pdf>

¹⁵ These analyses have been conducted by Hugo Marcos and Carolina Plaza.

¹⁶ The expression "the caste" was popularized in Italy by two journalists, Rizzo and Stella (2007), to refer to the privileged status of professional politicians. "A caste of insatiable Brahmins" is the title of the first chapter of their book. Iglesias wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on social movements in Italy and Spain, and must have been very familiar with this term and its political uses.

¹⁷ In one of his discourses Iglesias refers to elites as "cats," and to the people as "mice."

¹⁸ Pablo Iglesias's closing speech in the 2014 European elections campaign is particularly clear in this regard: "A mi no me toman más el pelo. El problema de este país no es ni el centro-izquierda ni el centro derecha, es la casta, es la corrupción institucionalizada, son las empresas del IBEX 35 que al tiempo que aumentan sus beneficios en un 67% están en paraísos fiscales, al tiempo que 1 de cada 4 ciudadanos de nuestro país es pobre, al tiempo que somos la medalla de plata europea en malnutrición infantil, al tiempo que el salario de los trabajadores se ha reducido un 10%, al tiempo que tenemos 6 millones de parados, al tiempo que 800 mil familias no reciben ninguna prestación, al tiempo que los eurodiputados van en business y cobran 8000 euros. Ese es el problema de este país, que no me cuenten rollos de centro-izquierda y de centro-derecha."

people.¹⁹ In Laclau's terms, this new framing can be interpreted as an "hegemonic operation." It involves the redefinition of "equivalential chains" among popular demands and the creation of new "dichotomic frontiers" (Laclau 2007: 130-33). And it follows thus logic of floating signifiers (Laclau 2007: 133). Naturally, this division between the caste and the people has strong moral overtones. The caste is corrupt and narrowly self-interested, while the people represents hard-work, dignity, solidarity, and true patriotism.

The innovative uses of patriotism in Iglesias's discourses are very revealing in this respect. In Spanish history, patriotism has been mostly emphasized by the political right, which has also attempted to link Spanish pride and nationalism to traditional institutions (the Army, the Crown, the Church), traditional values (Catholicism), and the rejection of foreign-based ideologies, such as liberalism or socialism. The labels that contenders in the civil war gave themselves are very telling respect: nationals (*nacionales*) in the case of Francoists and republicans (*republicanos*) for the supporters of the republican regime, which had a mostly left and left-of the center political base). The association of Spanish nationalism with the centralist and anti-peripheral policies conducted by the Francoist regime increased the unease of the Spanish left with patriotic and nationalist rhetoric. Iglesias's discourse attempted to overcome this division in an innovative way. A renewed patriotism could help to establish an encompassing division between all the people and the elites, and to overcome the traditional distinctions between the left and right.²⁰ Patriotic pride and dignity were not linked now to language or ethnic particularism, but to solidarity, hard work, and care for the common good. Patriotism stood now in sharp contrast to the values of those who, notwithstanding the intensity of their Spanish (or peripheral) nationalist appeals, evade taxes, place their money in tax havens, and just care about their banking accounts.²¹

Finally, the acute political divisions presented in Iglesias discourses must be overcome by a systemic political change that will allow the people to take back the control of politics.

¹⁹ In Iglesias's words, "*que miopes, que miopes, que miopes son los que piensan que el poder teme a la izquierda, que poco han entendido la historia del s. XX. El poder teme al pueblo.*" (Closing speech in the 2014 European elections).

²⁰ Also revealing of the redefinition of political frontiers attempted by Podemos is the fact that Iglesias, in sharp contrast with the tradition of the Spanish radical left, has consistently appealed to members of the Army and the police (for instance in his speech in Malaga in April 14th 2015, in the Andalusian elections campaign).

²¹ The following extracts reveal quite clearly this new use of patriotism: "*Y dijimos patria, y nos criticaron. Y dijimos que los que rompen España son los que tienen cuentas en Suiza o en Andorra y sean de CIU, del PP o del PSOE no tienen más patria que sus cuentas bancarias... Hablar de patria es otra cosa, es hablar de la dignidad de un pueblo, independientemente de la lengua que se hable, es hablar de que tiene que haber escuelas para que la gente pueda llevar a los niños, es hablar de que tiene que haber hospitales, es hablar de que tiene que haber los mejores profesionales sanitarios para no hacer el ridículo. Eso es sentirte orgulloso de tu país, sentirte orgulloso de tener las mejores escuelas públicas, sentirte orgulloso de tener los mejores hospitales.... No es la casta política la que hace que los trenes lleguen a su hora, la que hace que funcionen los hospitales, la que hace que funcionen las escuelas, es la gente, esa es nuestra patria: la gente*" (Opening speech in the 2014 Asamblea Ciudadana).

This change cannot be based on consensus or negotiations, but on the formation of solid popular majorities. In Iglesias's words, paraphrasing the Marx's famous revolutionary expression, "heavens are not taken by consensus, they are taken by assault"²². However, this portrayal of radical change remains always within the limits of legal and constitutional procedures.

3. The 2014 elections and the characteristics of Podemos voters.

In the 2014 European elections Podemos became a political surprise obtaining 7.96% (1,200,000 votes) of the vote and 5 MEPs. It became thus the third most voted-for party in Spain, after the PP (26%), the PSOE (23%) and IU (10%). Moreover, from that moment on, vote intention for Podemos grew quite fast. By early 2015, several surveys indicated that the vote intention for Podemos was the highest among Spanish voters.²³

The 2014 European Elections Study provides us with insightful observation regarding the characteristics of Podemos voters. A good portion of Podemos voters had voted for the Socialist Party and the IU in previous elections. Among the respondents who intended to vote Podemos in the next general elections (159 voters out of 1106 people interviewed), 35% had voted for the PSOE in the previous general elections, 20% did not vote, 16% voted for IU (or ICV), and only 4% had previously voted for the PP. Podemos was thus receiving about one half of its votes from left-oriented parties, and about one fifth of them from people who had abstained in the last general elections.

In the left-right dimension Podemos voters were not very different from those of the PSOE and IU. People who intended to vote for Podemos in the next general elections had a 3.4 average position for 3.1 of IU voters and 3.2 for PSOE voters. They were, however, slightly more extreme in their pro-redistribution orientations (question qpp17_2). In a scale in which 0 indicates total support for redistribution and 10 total opposition to redistribution, the average position for Podemos voters was 2.3, for 2.8 in the case of PSOE and IU voters. Podemos voters were also very similar to other left-oriented voters in their positions towards gay rights. Interestingly, despite the clear pro-multicultural positions adopted in the European elections program, Podemos voters took very central positions regarding immigration controls (question qpp17_6, with 0 indicating full support for immigration controls and 10 indicating full

²² "*El cielo no se toma por consenso, el cielo se toma por asalto.*" (Opening speech in the 2014 Asamblea Ciudadana).

²³ For instance, according to a Metroscopia survey conducted in February 2015, the vote intention for Podemos was 27.7%, for 20.9% for the PP, and 18.3% for the PSOE.
http://elpais.com/elpais/2015/02/06/media/1423258205_790592.html

opposition to immigration controls). Their average position was 5.3, compared to the 5.3 for PSOE voters and the 7 of IU voters.

More important were other social and political differences between Podemos voters and the voters of other parties. Podemos voters were certainly more likely to have participated in demonstrations over the last 12 years than the rest of voters. The percentage of Podemos voters who had participated in several demonstrations over the last 12 months equaled 30% of the respondents who intended to vote for Podemos in the next general elections and 40% of the respondents who had voted for Podemos in the last European elections (compared to a national average of 11%). Multivariate logistic regressions conducted with different ideological and programmatic variables and socio-demographic indicators that the strongest predictors for Podemos vote intention in the general elections were political activism, interest in politics, and pro-redistributionist orientations.

Overall, and despite its attempts to overcome and reframe preexisting ideological tensions, Podemos has made its best inroads among the voters of other left-oriented parties. It has thus benefited from the crisis of the Socialist Party and the persistent weakness of IU. However, it is also clear that Podemos has managed to reach people who had not voted previously, and that it has established strong links with the people who engaged in social protests in the last period. This reveals the success of Podemos, but also the limitations it must face in the near future, if it fails to reach beyond the limits of the Spanish left, particularly if the Socialist Party (and also IU), do not vanish from the Spanish party system.

4. Organization: a political party under construction

As noted above, in its first months of existence the party relied on a webpage and a handful of circles in some cities. Both tools would become the main tools in the participatory mechanisms implemented by the party. Registration in the webpage is free, equates party membership and gives rights of voting in the assemblies. Membership in the organization has exponentially grown since it was opened on June 28th, 2014. According to the figures listed in the party webpage, party membership is currently 368.773 (as of April 17th). The webpage includes Plaza Podemos, a tool for participation in debates.

Participation takes place through internet (social networks, facebook, twitter and the party web page) and the Círculos (local branches, the basic organizational units that operate as assemblies and commissions). The organization of Podemos seeks the 'compatibility' of both mechanisms of participation. According to the party webpage section on participation:

The (second) challenge ahead of us is to be capable of making face-to-face and virtual participation both compatible and retroactive. We believe new technologies open an

enormous horizon of possibilities of democratization, organization and communication, but we know not all people have the same opportunities to access them, nor the same habit to use them. Moreover, we consider that telematics cannot substitute face-to-face meetings, the creation of participative spaces is something positive.

Electronic voting

The webpage of Podemos contains Plaza Podemos, a tool that also supports the workings of the Círculos. Technology allows for participation and debating online but the webpage has also become a key instrument for participatory democracy. The candidates to the different elections (European, regional, and local), the organizational structure of the party, internal organs and the general secretary, have been elected through the use of the platform. The system has been criticized on two accounts. First, there have been cases in which the system of registration has been denounced because it does not efficiently prevent its abuse, and individual registration can be violated if there are different registration mechanisms available (cases have been reported in the Balearic and Canary Islands). Second, there are different voting systems at work—individual and blocked and associated lists) that have been put in place by the organization and that may have biased results in favor of some party elites.

Círculos: The local and thematic branches of the party

Previously to the 2014 European elections, a handful of circles existed (around 200). They were essential for the presentation of the candidates to the European elections, the first step in the formation of the lists to the European elections. In the words of Pablo Iglesias:

A Círculo Podemos is a point in a network for unity, change and democratic rupture. It is a group that agrees that the dramatic situation in which we live can only be solved among all and with popular and citizen leadership.

The circles are defined as the basic units that articulate the organization of *Podemos*. They have a horizontal structure that aims to provide the space of confluence for ordinary people that sympathize with the organization. They have to be approved by the Commission of Guarantees. The units open to citizens' participation (in principle all), and they are sovereign to make decisions at the territorial and sectional level. They help in the process of electronic voting and work in assemblies. Finally, the circles are not only a with party leadership, but also a space of dialogue, confluence of ideas and discussion—less than as party branches in the

traditional sense. They are supposed to have flexibility, autonomy and independent resources through donations from citizens. At present, the webpage of *Podemos* still claims that the circles are going through a process of ‘validation’ and there are not official figures available.

There are two types of circles. Sectional branches gather individuals with a similar profession or interest. Territorial branches gather people from the same city, neighborhood or district. Main cities may have central circles—Valencia—but that is not the case in Madrid (where a Coordinating organ was formed, and where according to the press, at least 90 circles exist). At present according to informal sources *Podemos* has around 900 circles across all of Spain and also abroad.

The model of the party organization at stake: Organizational battles

Izquierda Anticapitalista provided the initial structure for *Podemos*, but its role within it has declined after many disagreements and ongoing disputes about the organizational design. Over the first months of its existence, *Izquierda Anticapitalista* attempted to exert its ‘guardianship’ over the new organization. The bulletin n.84 of the party explains how they sought to take advantage of the initial popularity of Pablo Iglesias to gain access to decision-making power within the new organization, given the fact that:

The influence of our members is undeniable in many territories and that can give us a determinant weight in this battle.

Defined as a ‘struggle for hegemony’ in this bulletin, *Izquierda Anticapitalista* considers that it has possibilities to win this battle: ‘as long as we involve ourselves, work with cohesion and trust among us, and develop an offensive and bold tactic’. The document concludes:

Then the operation with Pablo (Iglesias) would have allowed us to make leap forward in several aspects: organized people, political discussion, and partial change in the correlation of forces with respect to the reformist left.

However, *Izquierda Anticapitalista* was soon questioned as the main promoter of *Podemos* and it was increasingly marginalized from the core group established around Pablo Iglesias and linked to the University. Thus, IA was minimally present in the group of 25 people in charge of organizing the Constituent Assembly of *Podemos*.

The Constituent Assembly also displayed some of the underlying internal disagreements and the perception of proposals alternative to the one advanced by Iglesias and his team. Juan

Carlos Monedero, another senior lecturer in the Universidad Complutense, explained his views on the other alternatives in the following terms:

The most organized proposal around Pablo Echenique—Iglesias' contender—is Izquierda Anticapitalista, which only obtained 23.000 votes in the last elections in which it competed (2009). One could think that if the people from Izquierda Anticapitalista control the Project, it is most likely they would conduct it to that result and not the one we have achieved. That is why we are vehemently defending our document. Personally I am convinced that if the document of Pablo Echenique and Izquierda Anticapitalista wins, Podemos would look very much alike to the political force that won 23.000 votes in the last elections. Thus, all our efforts and the illusions we have awoken in Spain would become nothing. (La Marea Oct. 17th 2014).

Despite this statement, the only rival to Iglesias' model for the party organization, Pablo Echenique, has never been part of Izquierda Anticapitalista. As for the members of *Izquierda Anticapitalista* in *Podemos*, such as Teresa Rodríguez or Miguel Urbán, they were prevented from having access to institutional representative organs thanks to a rule which was included in the ethical code of *Podemos*. That rule forbids access to elected positions of authority within *Podemos* to all people who were affiliated to other parties (which could however be candidates in electoral contests). As a result of this rule, in January 2015 *Izquierda Anticapitalista* decided to become an association instead of a political party, so that its members could hold positions of responsibility within the organizational structure of *Podemos*.

The celebration of the Constituent Assembly, (*Asamblea Ciudadana*, 'Si se puede') took place from September 15th through November 15th 2014. The preparation of the assembly was initiated in June 2014 with two opposing models. There was a proposal of a Constituent Assembly, consisting of a list of 25 members chosen by Pablo Iglesias, and another one which was more open and democratic and was based on *Círculos*. The first proposal was finally adopted. The team that organized the Constituent Assembly was also voted through the webpage (48.000 people registered for electronic voting).

The Constituent Assembly of *Podemos* defined the organizational model of the party. 24 different organizational models were proposed but only two (*Claro que Podemos*, proposed by Pablo Iglesias and *Sumando Podemos*, advocated by MEP Pablo Echenique) caught public attention. Echenique defended the political and financial independence of the territorial and thematic units, the circles, and their right to decide whether they would present their candidates to elections or establish alliances with other formations. Instead Iglesias' technical team, proposed that the *Consejo Ciudadano*, the highest organ between assemblies (that should last 3 years for Iglesias and 2 for Echenique) would establish the process for the formation of electoral

lists and for pre- and post-electoral alliances and pacts. There were also differences about the number of spokespersons both at the national and the branch level. Echenique proposed seven spokespersons at the national level while Iglesias claimed that this system would not work. At the end the question was whether to elect a general secretary of the party (granting efficacy and strategic coherence in Iglesias' view) or alternatively, a model with three spokespersons (more plural from Echenique's perspective). At stake was not only the organizational format but also the type of leadership of *Podemos*. Pablo Iglesias was clearly the winner of the contest and his leadership of the organization was reinforced, at the expense of criticisms about the evolution of the party.

A total of 251.998 persons were registered in the census to vote in the *Asamblea Ciudadana*. Only 107.488 voted, and 9101 voted blank for the general secretary (8.47%). Pablo Iglesias was elected as secretary general of the party with the 88.6% of the votes (95.311). *Izquierda Anticapitalista* did not propose any candidate to that position. There were other candidates but the one who came closest obtained only 995 votes. In addition to becoming secretary general of *Podemos*, Pablo Iglesias obtained a large majority in the direction organs of the party, such as the *Asamblea Ciudadana* and the *Comisión de Garantías Democráticas*. The Constituent Assembly elected 62 members to the *Consejo Ciudadano*, and they all were candidates in Iglesias's list (this *Consejo* includes also 17 general secretaries representing regional organizations). Contrary to the proposals of rival groups, the election procedure allowed members to vote with one computer click for full lists of candidates (62 members) to the *Consejo Ciudadano*. This procedure facilitated the election of the whole list proposed by Iglesias, and the formation of *Consejo Ciudadano* aligned with the leader and in which alternative groups would not be present (except as representatives of regional branches)

In March 1st 2015 *Podemos* started the procedure to elect candidates for the forthcoming regional elections using party primaries and electronic voting. The process showed the tensions between the attempts of controlling all the candidate lists by Pablo Iglesias (who wished to promote his own choices) and the autonomy of the territorial branches. Despite these attempts, Iglesias's strategy failed in several regions (like Madrid, Andalusia, Aragón, Cantabria or Navarre), and the organization remained more plural than Iglesias's group had originally intended.

Concluding remarks

In its short lifespan, *Podemos* has experienced the delights of a fulgurant trajectory that has led from birth to electoral success. However, more recently it has also had the experience of failing to fulfill its ambitious objectives. In the regional Andalusian elections of 2015, *Podemos* became the third most voted- for party, a result that falls far from its explicit goal of winning the

next general elections. The new party has also experienced important political dilemmas and tensions regarding its programmatic objectives, discourse, and organization.

Podemos adopted a clear leftist program in for the 2014 European Parliament elections. This resulted both from its initially strong bottom-up characteristics and from the key role played by Izquierda Anticapitalista, which provided the party with both activists and a leftist programmatic core. At the same time, as also shown in the preceding pages, Pablo Iglesias adopted a clearly populist discourse. This discourse aimed at transcending previous political divisions and at reaching sectors of the electorate that lie outside the limits of the left, not to talk of the radical left. This choice was parallel to the transformation of Podemos into a more top-down and leader-centered organization, one in which national directing bodies were highly homogeneous and in which Pablo Iglesias and its closest collaborators attempted to build strong political autonomy.

But as we showed before, despite its attempts to overcome preexisting ideological tensions, so far Podemos has made its best inroads among the former voters of other left parties. In fact, ideologically Podemos voters are not very different from those of the Socialist Party and IU. In its electoral growth, Podemos has benefited from the crisis of the Socialist Party and the weakness of IU. But this fact reveals also the limitations that Podemos must face in the near future. If Podemos fails to reach beyond the limits of the Spanish left, and if the Socialist Party and to a lesser degree IU maintain the allegiance of significant sectors of the electorate, the electoral chances of Podemos will be less brilliant than initially suspected. The fact that a new party (Ciudadanos) has rapidly grown at the center of the Spanish political space, poses further limitations to the strategy of building a populist and ideologically transversal electoral coalition.

This case study can also pave the way for comparative approaches to new populist and/or radical-left parties in Southern Europe. Podemos shares with the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle some discursive (populist) and organizational features (electronic voting procedures, emphasis on local branches), but it departs from Grillo's party in its programmatic orientations (leftist), discursive aggressiveness (much lower) and degree of personalism (much lower as well). Podemos presents more programmatic and substantive similarities with the Greek Syriza and with the French Front de Gauche and Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste. Podemos has endorsed the candidacy of Tsipras to the Presidency of the European Commission, and shares with Tsipras's party membership in the same political group in the European Parliament. Comparisons between the political discourses of Tsipras and Iglesias might provide us with useful insights on the characteristics and determinants of populism among new left parties. Podemos shares also some programmatic features with the French Front de Gauche and Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, but in contrast to these groups the new Spanish party has aimed at transcending left-right divisions and embraced a populist discourse. Overall, comparing national contexts, organizational features, and ideological legacies and influences can help us

understand better the main factors affecting the emergence of leftist populist discourses in Southern Europe.

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