

Podemos: The Spanish New Left?

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Introduction

The unexpected appearance of Podemos in the Spanish political scene after the European Parliament elections in May 2014 was perceived as a clear signal about the consequences of the political management of the financial crisis. It has also been presented as a new chance for renewing the left-wing proposals after the collapse experienced by the social-democrats of PSOE after 2011 elections. Last but not least, this sudden irruption intensified the public debate about the continuities and disruptions with a somehow static political landscape between 1986 and 2012. The ideological connections of Podemos with grassroots movements as the ones fuelled during the 15 May social protests are evident; even they are still requiring a deeper analysis in order to find not only the connexions but also the discrepancies between processes that are not always following the same logics and principles: Podemos is not the 15 May, even they are trying to crystalize the social collective action into a classical political alternative available to the citizenship (Lobera, 2015).

Consequently, this brief article aims to shed some light under a political party that can be seen, to some extent, as an innovative experiment in a rather institutionalised field of play. In order to do so, we will present evidences coming from the electoral behaviour of the Spanish citizenship in the very last years, discussing them with certain key points of the strategy displayed by Podemos in order to achieve their ambitious goals. To conclude, the imminent context of the 2015 general elections forces us to provide some reflections that can be useful to critically observe the campaign, the results and the upcoming political cycle in Spain.

A recent background

The Spanish democracy established in 1978 after the Constitution approval was traditionally built upon two strong political parties (Partido Popular, PP, as a conservative option, and Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE, as a social-democratic alternative). Both of them were well-grounded at the whole territory, covered both sides of the ideological centre and occasionally found support coming from nationalist parties based at Catalonia and the Basque Country in order to keep their solid position.

The general elections held in November 2011 confirmed this trend. Although the alarms of the crisis were already felt by the population by then and after an unprecedented wave of social mobilizations, the conservatives earned a record absolute majority for the right-wing in Spain. There was a clear redistribution of the votes between PSOE and PP, but adding up both majoritarian parties, almost four out of five casted ballots were granted to these options. The clear triumph of Mariano Rajoy's party led to four years where its comfortable position in the Parliament was used to put forward a strict plan of economic and social reforms without reaching almost any agreement with the remaining political parties. In this period, the absence of a solid counterpart, as PSOE used to be, made it even more visible the system's polarization and diminished the citizens' trust in representative systems of democracy.

2011 SPANISH PARLIAMENT GENERAL ELECTIONS (TURNOUT: 71,69%)

Political party	General Elections 2011		
	Votes	%	Seats
PP	10.830.693	44,62	186
PSOE	6.973.880	28,73	110
Convergència i Unió	1.014.263	4,17	16
Izquierda Unida	1.680.810	6,92	11
Amaiur	333.628	1,37	7
UPyD	1.140.242	4,69	5
EAJ-PNV	323.517	1,33	5
ESQUERRA	256.393	1,05	3
BNG	183.279	0,75	2
CC-NC-PNC	143.550	0,59	2
Compromís	125.150	0,51	1
FAC	99.173	0,4	1
Geroa Bai	42.411	0,17	1
TOTAL	24.590.557		350

Source: Ministry of Interior - Spanish Government

http://elecciones.mir.es/resultadosgenerales2011/99CG/DCG99999TO_L1.htm

This outcome of this general election seemed to provisionally freeze the social action fostered after May 2011. The democratic uprisings performed during the previous spring were transversal to different traditional cleavages (Sampedro and Lobera, 2014), but the final results returned the most solid majority for the conservative party ever. However, the crystallization process of these social mobilizations was not completed, not even started yet, as one should not forget that 15 May and the Indignados (Outraged) movement set the whole political and economic system as their critical target. The people camping at the Spanish squares were aiming for a new system and for a new kind of political relation between institutions and individuals, not for any specific political party. A bottom-up process, based on assemblies and direct participation in the collective decision-making process, does not easily lead to a political alternative within a representative democracy model, as the one built and constantly reinforced in Spain since the transition from dictatorship.

It was not until May 2014, three years after the social protests, when a salient change in the voting behaviour was perceived. Most of the public opinion polls were not able to capture the rapid consolidation of Podemos, an unexpected runner-up to the European Parliament elections that was established only some months before. Neither political parties nor media professionals were able to foresee the impact of this new formation, collecting up to the 8% of the valid ballots.

2014 EU PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS (TURNOUT: 45,84%)

Political party	EU Parliament Elections 2014		
	Votes	%	Seats
PP	4.074.363	26,06	16
PSOE	3.596.324	23,01	14
Izquierda Plural	1.562.567	10,03	6
Podemos	1.245.948	7,98	5
UPyD	1.015.994	6,51	4
CEU	850.690	5,42	3

EPDD	629.071	4,01	2
Ciudadanos	495.114	3,16	2
LPD	324.534	2,08	1
Primavera Europea	299.884	1,92	1
VOX	244.929	1,57	0
Otros		8,22	0
TOTAL	15.920.815	100	54

Source: Ministry of Interior - Spanish Government

<http://elecciones.mir.es/resultados2014/99PE/DPE99999TO.htm>

Podemos is usually presented as a party-movement (Kitschelt, 2006; Subirats, 2015), but their appearance during and after the European Parliament elections also followed some of the classical strategies of conventional parties. A clear and strongly mediatized leadership in hands of Pablo Iglesias, a predefined ambiguity regarding their position in some key issues in the Spanish discussion and a sometimes inconsistent discourse about their own proposals and initiatives seems to have contributed to slow down the solid expectations raised after their astonishing success in 2014. These contradictions are recurrent arguments in hands of critics with the purple party, as they are scrutinised with the same lenses as the other parties, if not with a more severe ones due to their clear appeals to democratic regeneration and the need for a more equal and fairer distribution of resources among individuals.

Actually, one of the main features of the current political system points to its instability, to the rapid change in the climate of public opinion, with significant ups and downs for both traditional parties and the 'new kids on the block'. At least three political parties with national presence (Unión Progreso y Democracia, UPyD; Podemos and Ciudadanos) have experienced drastic explosions and implosions of popular support in the last four years of Rajoy's mandate.

The need to establish a common direction in order to run for local, regional and national elections forced Podemos to adapt an open strategy in which punctual agreements were reached with different left-wing options around Spain. Once again, a horizontal coordination, refusing integration at larger levels, was decided. Their results at the elections held up to three times in 2015 were contradictory, as different brands in the orbit of Podemos reached a lot of executive and legislative positions (being Barcelona and Madrid municipalities the most visible ones), but at the same time the divergences inside the party started to arise, as a normal consequence of setting any political organization up and running. Additionally, the results of these elections brought a new strong competitor to the light, as Ciudadanos achieved a solid position at the Catalan autonomic Parliament, challenging the comfortable position of the PP among the liberal and conservative voters but also claiming the label of new political party in direct confrontation with Podemos.

Right and Left, New and Old... What will 2016 bring?

Political identification has traditionally been constructed upon ideological roots, ranging from left to right. Podemos accessed the Spanish public arena openly refusing to take a clear position in this axis. Even this decision was criticised by their opponents, both at the political and media instances, it clearly brought fresh air and new voices to a population experiencing an unstoppable political disaffection (Bouza, 2011). Their main priority was to be seen as a true alternative to the two dominant parties, blaming them about not only the critical social situation of the citizenship but also about the corruption installed in almost every single spot of the political system. Hence, they claimed to be a new political option, away from the all the

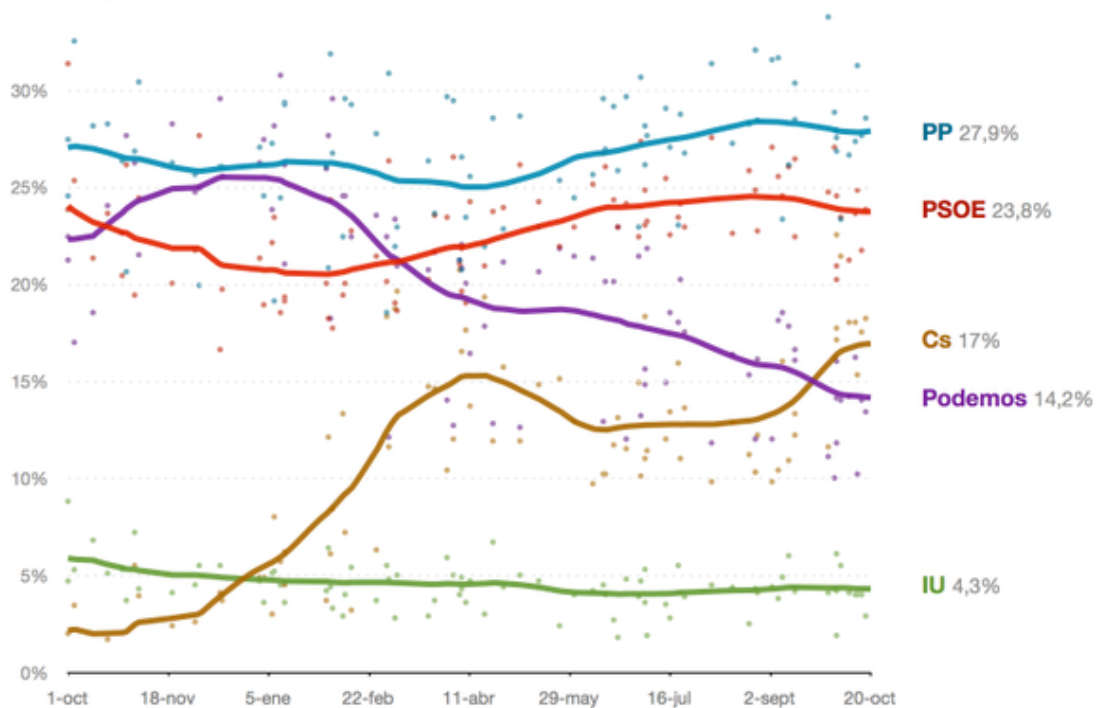
vices acquired by the authorities since the transition to democracy and presenting the virtues of an initiative supported by an intellectual background and away from the current system.

The axis linking new and old political alternatives is constantly present in the public and academic fields of debate (Ignazi, 1996). Intensive personalization, strong leadership, media visibility and a small decision-making group are some of the trends that might be easily identified in both sides of this line, whereas the establishment of new internal systems of deliberation within the parties, the openness to those outside from the party to have a say in the evolution of the party, the use of new communication technologies can be presented as symptoms of new approaches to politics. But no party can stay away for these evolutions too long, so most of them are trying to adapt their discourses and their practices in order to be perceived as renewed alternatives.

AVERAGE OF POLLS (2014-2015)

Elecciones generales: promedio de sondeos

Porcentaje de voto según las encuestas. Las líneas representan un promedio ponderado por fecha, tamaño de muestra y empresa encuestadora.



Fuentes: Wikipedia, Electograph, Electomania, Metroscopia, Celestetel, Sigma Dos, Invymark, Simple Lógica, My Word, NC Report, Encuestamos, Demoscopia Servicios, DYM, GAD3, GESOP, GETS, TNS Demoscopia y CIS.

Kiko Llaneras | EL ESPAÑOL

Source: Llaneras (2015)

Even Podemos has never been self-presented as a radical left option; their connections with Syriza were explicit before, during and after the EU campaign. Most of their political and social policies appeal to the redistribution of wealth, to the recovery of a weakened welfare state and to a sense of social justice at different levels. So, they are a left-wing option refusing to be labelled as such, whilst other options are staying in that position. Izquierda Unida claims clearly the position of the radical left option for Spain, while Podemos is still keeping a somehow undefined spot with a left-wing discourse but still willing to play their game in the centre of the field. To which extent this position will be worth in terms of earning votes from both sides of the ideological spectrum is one of the main research questions for this party?

But, will the December 2015 general elections mean the end of a two-party system? Public opinion polls are enjoying a stimulating time in Spain, as these research processes are working hard trying to identify the distribution of attitudes and opinions. However, most of the times surveys are not solid enough to resist comparisons with the final outcome of any given election. It is only with an accumulation of polls when one can get an accurate image of the current trends, being able to draw some lines of attention.

All polls show that the conservatives will remain as the most voted party. However, their popular support will be significantly dropped down. In the meantime, the social democrats seem to keep their position, but do not have a real chance to win the elections. The irruption of Ciudadanos at the national scale has turned into something worrying the Podemos leadership of the renewal movement, as the ideological divergence may arise once again, reproducing old schemes but with four or five actors in the scene.

In this process, Podemos and Izquierda Unida has already announced that they will run for these elections independently, so the chances for a confluence among the two more prominent forces in the left-wing spectrum will lose part of their potential due to the election system. One of the classical claims coming from new political parties established around the whole Spanish territory points to the reform of the election system, as the proportionality between regional areas is under discussion. Certain provinces with smaller population are granted a higher quota in the Spanish Parliament, leading to a bias that favours the conservative options (Penadés and Santiuste, 2013). And even this topic remains away from the scope of this article and this special issue, the open conflict between the Spanish and Catalan Governments regarding the national status quo is yet another incognita in an equation that is extremely difficult to solve, and not a minor one if we keep in mind the strong presence of nationalist forces in the Spanish Parliament.

The option of a left-wing majority depends basically on agreements between PSOE, Podemos and Izquierda Unida, whereas other natural option of coalition would join PP and Ciudadanos. However, if one analyses the negotiations at the local and regional levels completed during 2015, the only clear thing is that there are too many options to solve this quiz and that any alternative will be take into consideration.

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