Participation in left-wing populism

From the Indignados to the institutional challenge of Podemos

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Abstract

An increasing number of populist parties are no longer on the fringes of the party system, but are strongly integrated within their respective national political contexts. Academic and scientific research on populism has expanded exponentially in recent years and has largely dealt with the analysis of the discussed phenomenon of so-called 'right-wing populisms'. In response to the political and social changes of the 2008 economic crisis, so-called 'left-wing populist' forces have also gained consensus and media attention in the US and European context. This phenomenon has therefore also gained greater prominence within scholarly and academic analyses, although it does not yet hold the space commensurate with the importance that some of these forces currently hold in their respective countries.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to contribute to this reflection by analyzing the change in political participation that has taken place from the post-crisis social movements of 2008, the basis for the emergence of left-wing populisms, to their institutionalization. The analysis therefore aims to examine the evolution of political participation in the transition from social movement to institutionalized party-movement. More specifically, it aims to highlight the changes that occur within a populist movement-party when it reaches important governmental positions. The most exemplary case is undoubtedly Podemos: the party-movement was founded in 2014 as a result of the strong political mobilization of the 15M social movement, also known as the Indignados movement, which has developed in the Spanish state since 2011. Since January 2020 the Spanish movement-party is part of the Sánchez II government in which the secretary of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, held the position of Vice-President of the Council and Minister of Social Policies.

The analysis will use a comparative method, highlighting the transformations and points of convergence that occurred in political participation in Spain from social movements to the entry of Podemos into the Sánchez II government. In particular, we will analyze the organizational dimensions also through interviews with activists of the 15M and members of the movement-party. Podemos is a 'mutant gene', a fluid organization that has made the 'populist moment' and the bottom-up participation an essential instrument of its initial electoral and media success. Exogenous and endogenous causes have led to a repositioning on the left-right axis and, once in government, to a need for discursive, communicative and organizational change. The future of Podemos will depend on its ability to readjust to these changes, especially the need for greater participation and territorial presence and the change in leadership.

Keywords: participation, left-populism, social movement, movement-party, 15M, Podemos

INTRODUCTION

Left-wing populism in Europe, albeit still inadequately, has gained prominence within academic and scientific analysis. But much still needs to be investigated on the evolution of these forces and especially on their institutional momentum. In this paper we intend to focus on the level of participation, and in particular, on the evolution of political participation that has taken place from the post-crisis social movements of 2008, the basis for the emergence of left-wing populisms, to their

institutionalisation. The analysis therefore aims to analyse the evolution of political participation in the transition from social movement to institutionalised party-movement. This is only the beginning of a necessarily broader analysis, using the party-movement Podemos as a proxy [1] for this phenomenon and continuing an already intense work of analysis that has been carried out on this political subject. For these reasons, we will analyse the political participation of the so-called Indignados movement, or 15M movement, with reference to 15 May 2011 when hundreds of thousands of people filled the streets and squares in more than 54 cities throughout the Spanish state, prompting the creation of the social movement. A horizontal participation thanks to which (but not from which) was born the impetus for the creation of Podemos, the party-movement born in 2014 and currently holding a key position in the Sanchez II coalition government. Podemos that has experienced within itself an evolution from a transversal electoral movement-machine to a more institutionalised left-wing party-movement.

Social movements, parties and movement-parties

Social movements are not institutionalized organizations, but networks of groups or individuals who use unconventional forms of protest to pursue and obtain objectives of social and political change, usually united by an internal collective identification and in conflict with a particular authority or institution. Political parties, on the other hand, are highly structured and bureaucratized organizations, built with the aim of obtaining institutional power for their leaders [2], which in democracy implies standing in political elections and running for public office [3]. Social movements are relational networks that present an organizational structure that the Italian political scientist Panebianco would define as 'weak institutionalization'[4]: a structure with a low degree of bureaucracy and systematicity, i.e., close interdependence between the different parts of the organization. In this sense, this type of political subject is more open to its surroundings, 'less autonomous' and more inclined to reflect grassroots demands. An organization with low institutionalization is based at the participatory level on a 'system of solidarity' rather than on a 'system of interests', i.e., on the pursuit of ends shared by all participants rather than on a balancing of particular interests necessary for the organization's survival, and is therefore dominated by a clear and obvious ideology. The concept of a 'system of solidarity' is part of the theory elaborated by the sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno [5] to describe the development of political participation, for whom a system of solidarity is "a system of action with a view to solidarity between actors", which thus creates a community of equals in which the participants' ends coincide, whereas a system of interests is "a system of action with a view to the actor's interests". As much of the literature points out, political participation in this context is activated by two key concepts for the analysis of social movements: networks and identities.

The crisis of the traditional party system is a phenomenon now recognized in all the literature. Since the 1980s, we have witnessed a phenomenon of gradual 'unfreezing' of traditional social fractures -in particular that between capital and labour, foundational to the right-left axis- with the parallel emergence of new cleavages [6] and the birth of different political subjects and unprecedented organizational models. The gradual dissolution of the 'mass party' gave rise to the emergence of new party models and at the same time a transition developed from 'total' to 'limited and partial' participation in political life, reflecting the progressive weakening of collective identities. These transformations were accompanied by a radical critique of the 'party-form' itself and the triumph of the 'establishment/anti-establishment' (or 'us/them', 'people/caste') dichotomy characteristic of the 'populist appeal'. According to the three-tiered theory expressed by political scientists Katz and Mair [7], this progressive distancing from the grassroots has led to the decline of the "party in society" and the subsequent strengthening of the "party in institutions".

Against this backdrop, a number of parties have developed in recent years with innovative features in their organization, political practice and communication: the 'movement parties' [9][11]. In this type of organization, participation is of the 'social movement' type rather than, as in a highly institutionalized party, 'professional' participation. The incentives to participation are collective or, better, identity-based, rather than material (i.e., tangible rewards, such as monetary compensation, patronage or support services) or status advancement (also referred to as power incentives). In the party-movement, therefore, two opposing organizational ideal types, that of the political party and that of

the social movement, coexist in the same organization, as if, in a certain sense, the dividing line between these two categories were becoming increasingly blurred and the two worlds were thus contaminating each other.

METODOLOGY

We chose to use a qualitative method of analysis by comparing political participation practices within the 15M movement, the first Podemos (2014-2017) and the second Podemos (2017 until the 'governmental moment'). The comparison covered both the grassroots level of participation and, in the case of Podemos, the different levels of participation. The analysis was carried out starting from the existing literature on the subject [8][9][10], comparing it with the documents and statutes of social movements and of the party-movement. Semi-structured interviews on the topic were also carried out with Pablo P. Ganfornina, activist of the Andalusian 15M movement, Juan Carlos Monedero, Professor of Political Science and Complutense University of Madrid and one of the founders of Podemos, Angela Rodriguez Martinez, the Deputy Minister and Secretary of State for Equality and against Gender Violence.

THE 15M PARTICIPATION

The Indignados movement starts from an assumption: the existing anti-establishment organisations and structures have not been able to gather social discontent. That is why a 'new type' of movement is needed, new above all in its organisational and communicative forms. Participation is the central assumption, the essence of 15M, it is the programmatic element rather than the means to achieve the goals. A programmatic element that is articulated both as an outward claim and as an internal practice to be used as an instrument but at the same time as an example of alternative political practice. From this point of view, it is necessary to focus on a peculiar characteristic: the movement breaks with the traditional rhetoric of the left (often, however, also stereotyped) of the 'demand for more state', but within a general claim for the defence and recovery of the welfare state, it demands free spaces of self-management to re-appropriate central issues of collective, but also individual life. The 'public' is more than the State, it is a space of collective construction and co-creation. This is confirmed by the words of Pablo P. Ganfornina, activist of the Andalusian 15M movement and currently head of the Anticapitalistas Party in Sevilla,

"15M was not leftist. There was a 'political dispute'. Here in Andalusia, for example, the Psoe [Spanish Socialist Workers's Party] governed with IU [United Left]. That is why they could not capitalise on this movement. So, who does capitalise? The alternative left, but the movement was not left-wing per se, it was against the parties and against the unions. It was not a right-wing movement, but it was a movement of criticism." [12]

Thus, through the mobilisation of 15M, a profound critique of traditional representative democracy was established, towards an elaboration of a model straddling radical democracy (self-management) and participatory democracy ("institutions that open political agendas"). An idea of self-management that is based on "cooperation", "mutual aid", "spaces of shared knowledge". Words and practices that quickly spread among thousands of people in the squares and streets of the Spanish state. The 'how' to participate then becomes the characterising axis, as opposed to the 'to achieve what'. The participatory management of the encampments becomes itself a laboratory and metaphor for the political proposal of 15M. The demand for self-management is not so much concerned with representation in institutions, but that people can make their own decisions: participation is not so much about helping to choose who makes decisions, but about 'getting things done':

"Participation was widespread. People debated whether to debate. People voted on whether to vote. Those who spoke obviously came from a political background. But many 'normal' people began to do politics. The middle-class dream was broken. It was not a middle-class movement, but a very

transversal and representative one. And it was not just the week of demonstrations and encampments. It was a moment that opened up to the neighbourhoods: movement for the right to housing, health, the Green Tide for education. The protagonists of the issues were mainly us, university students, the middle class, but also the working-class sectors. The material motivation was the crisis." [12]

To summarise, three main features of the participatory method of the Indignados movement can be identified [13]: the first is identifying the assembly as the key structure of political participation. Obviously, during the encampments and moments that needed more organisation, the assemblies were accompanied by a complex structure of commissions and working groups, but these always referred to the decisions made in the assembly. The 'how' to make decisions is the second defining point of 15M, namely the use of the consensus method. "We don't vote, we arrive at consensus" is the phrase found in many documents, statements and interviews, indicating not only the will to always arrive at a decision 'by consensus', but, again, highlighting a practice as a programmatic element and distance from the methods of representative and parliamentary democracy. The last characterising element is the 'network' organisational structure. Real networks and virtual networks that build an organisational model understood as connections of nodes that renounce a 'centre' and a leadership or delegation of functions and offices. This reaffirms the inclusive nature of the movement that intends to involve a broad and above all transversal majority that builds another democratic model, characteristics that set it apart from other social movements.

THE PODEMOS PARTECIPATIONS

"I think we idealised what happened in the squares, in the occupations, in the demonstrations. That was the radiating core, of course, but the most important was what happened in the bars, in the workplaces. People started talking about politics. In this country people didn't talk about politics. People went to vote but they didn't talk about politics. This is what was really different. This is what Podemos was born on. Pablo Iglesias said the same thing in 2011 as he did in 2014, but he didn't have the same impact as he did in 2014. There were three years when people started to make politics about the right to housing, about their children's schools, about healthcare, about employment. However, the construction was more complex than the 'simple' class struggle. 15M created a remobilisation that went splendidly well. The media defined Podemos as the party of 15M, and the moment it smashed Podemos, it smashed 15M. It was a wrong correlation. One should not idealise. 15M was something completely different, something that was not given". [12]

Podemos is not the evolution of the 15M movement of the Indignados. Precisely because of its characteristics and the participative modalities just described, the movement has never had the intention of merging into a political entity aiming at electoral representation. On the contrary, it is precisely from this assumption that the new party-movement was born: according to the analysis of its leaders [14][15] Podemos is conceived as a political expression of a social movement that had rejected political representation, but from this movement it draws its *relato* (political discourse) and imaginary. In its first phase, Podemos thus acquires a connotation of detachment from the political identity of the traditional left, taking on the watchwords, symbolic stylistic features and claims of 15M. In addition, for a part, it integrates its activists and participative, organisational and communicative practices. It is the phase that Juan Carlos Monedero, one of the founders and ideologues of Podemos, calls the "destitute phase":

"When we achieved our first electoral result in the 2014 European elections, when we returned to the Reina Sofia Square, where we had put a stage if things went well, and it was full of people, when we went up, people greeted us shouting 'Que si, que si, que si nos rapresentan' [Yes, yes, they represent us], when the cry of 15M was 'Que no, Que no, Que no nos rapresentan' [No, no, they don't represent us]. The people greeted us with a cry of 'problem solving', it was not a cry of 're-inventing everything'. It was a cry of regeneration, not generation. What was the proposal with respect to the functioning of the parties? There was no new proposal as opposed to regenerative. A distinction must be made between the destitute moment and the constituent moment. The destitute moment is the moment of

illusion, of generosity, it is the Laclauian moment, of the empty signifier, of 'us versus them', of chains of equivalence. There is a saying that 'happiness lies in the eve'. The constituent moment is the phase of the child who must begin to know reality and that if he takes the game away from another child, the child will beat him up. It is the least exciting phase, unless it keeps the enemy alive, a clear tension that positions you." [16]

Podemos is not the evolution of 15M, of course, but without 15M Podemos would not have been conceived. Participation in Podemos is determined by the hybrid nature of its organisation: the fundamental characteristic is the, not always simple, integration between a horizontal-participatory axis and a vertical-decision-making axis. On the one hand, Podemos partly imitates the democratic practices of 15M since its foundation, pushing, also from a rhetorical point of view, for the participation of those who have been excluded from mainstream political life. For this reason, the basic units are *Circulos* (local party headquarters), representation of the party-movement at the local level, but also a place for discussion, debate and formulation of political proposals. At the same time, it uses forms of collective list-building for the 2014 European Parliament elections and programme writing. Since its inception, moreover, the use of the Network becomes for Podemos not only one of the main communication and consensus-building tools, but also the place of participation and direct democracy of its adherents, especially in a first phase in which any other coordination infrastructure was lacking. From the very beginning, in fact, online spaces for decision-making, deliberative and consultation processes were created. The overall trend in these processes is represented by a divarication between platform members and consultation participants, whereby the percentage of voters over members decreases over time [8]. In fact, there is a generalized trend in party-platform models whereby the outcome of consultations generally reflects the decision-making direction indicated by the secretary, reinforcing a plebiscitary dynamic [17]. If these are the characteristics of 'horizontality' peculiar to the first Podemos, there are strong limits to the identification of Podemos with horizontal movements [18][19]. Or rather, if Podemos on the one hand tries to replicate the practices and discourse of the social movement, it is on the other hand a traditional party with a strong centralisation of leadership and vertical organisational articulation.

Podemos was launched as a top-down initiative by a media 'leading figure' such as Pablo Iglesias and an affiliated group of intellectuals mainly from the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology of the Complutense University of Madrid, who have always maintained control over the politics of the new formation. Secondly, Podemos broke into the political context with a clear 'will to win' [20] and to get into government, against the anti-electoral animus of 15M. By Monedero's own admission in his book 'La izquierda que asaltò l'algoritmo' ('The left that attacked the algorithm'): "the electoral vector, with a large media presence of its leaders, with an executive power with many prerogatives (granted in the party congress where there was a discussion with those who demanded a more participatory and 'less Leninist' model), was designed to win elections and allowed the Executive (composed of 11 people) to make a large number of decisions, including that of altering the order of the lists elected compulsorily through a process of primaries" [20].

The two vectors "electoral-hierarchical" and "egalitarian, spontaneous, participatory" thus combine in this hybrid creature in an unbalanced manner, so much so that the first vector has, by the admission of its own leaders, devoured the second, particularly with regard to the prominence of the *Cirulos* in making decisions, driving the debate, electing candidates and party organs. This was confirmed by the Deputy Minister and Secretary of State for Equality and Gender Rights, Angela Rodriguez Martinez, also known as Pam:

"I: -How has grassroots political participation changed from the first Podemos to now?

ARM: -There is much less political participation. Podemos was a very horizontal structure, any person from any place could download materials from the internet to create their own Podemos space in their city, and little by little a more classic party structure has been created with municipal, provincial, autonomy groupings. There is difficulty in the participation of citizenship. This is a mistake. Much horizontality has been lost. One of the virtues of Podemos was a very Yankee primary system, very American, big television scenarios where there was primary debate that created a lot of participation,

people saw an internal debate of a party from home, which if you think about it is incredible. [...] With Vistalegre II the type of participation changed." [21]

Both Martinez and Monedero confirm that the main change occurred at the Vistalegre II Congress, after which Podemos started a phase of greater organisational structuring from an electoral machine with horizontal and transversal participation to a party-movement with a more vertical structure. As can also be read on the movement's website, the *Circulos* are "the basic unit for the political and social construction of Podemos as a democratic and popular organisation". The organisation must therefore be 'democratic and popular' and, in addition, the function of the *Circulos* should be precisely that of (re-)connecting Podemos to the web of the social movements of the Spanish state, almost as a participatory transmission belt between the outside and the inside: "the *Circulos* at the state level are the pillar on which Podemos' deployment is based and constitute themselves as an extra actor that participates in the popular movement of our country. They are, in short, an instrument designed for direct action from proximity to its territorial sphere" [22]. The 'grassroots' body at the state level is instead the Asamblea Ciudadana Estatal, which gathers all the members of the IT platform, who, as we have pointed out, are called upon to express themselves by voting in all choices of national importance. The Asamblea Ciudadana directly elects the executive organs of the party, the Secretary General and the Consejo Ciudadano, which is the political leadership body and which in turn appoints the Ejecutivo, which is the actual Podemos leadership group. The Congress of Vistalegre II was the watershed in the organisation's life: with the exit of the wing led by Inigo Errejon, a proponent of a more transversal and populist option and an evolution from electoral machine to decentralised and plural popular movement, the 'Pablista' organisational option became Podemos' strategic mantra, but not necessarily a practical realisation of the principles expressed in the congress document.

CONCLUSIONS

Podemos was born with the declared intention of winning and becoming the leading Spanish party, capable of leading a progressive government coalition in Spain. For this reason, especially in its first years, it structures itself as an 'electoral war machine' [23] using a populist cross-party rhetoric that allows it to break the Spanish two-party system for the first time in history. But above all, by using the discourses and certain practices of the 15M social movement, while translating its participatory modalities within an organisational system that over the years has become increasingly structured towards the composition of a party-movement.

Today, it finds itself in the government of the country, but as a minority partner in a social-democratic coalition, in continuous, albeit slight, decline in the polls [24] and, after Pablo Iglesias' exit from political life, with a political leadership that has to be reconstructed.

As can be seen by looking at Table 1, Podemos is in fact more centralised today than it was initially, despite the fact that the political document "Podemos para todas", drawn up by Iglesias' area and winner of the Vistalegre 2 congress in 2017, spoke explicitly of a reform of militancy, calling for greater territorial rooting and greater decentralisation and valorisation of the *Circulos*. Since the blitzkrieg, Podemos has not -yet- managed to completely restructure its internal organisation in order to survive the non-electoral moments and take root with a longer position war, or rather, to start a process of slow accumulation and underground wear and tear of the political enemy [25]. The inability to systematically root the party in society has exposed Podemos to continuous political volatility, as it has not strengthened the networks of participation, mediation and representation that are necessary to win the stable loyalty of a particular segment of the electorate.

Podemos is a 'mutant gene', a fluid organisation that has made the 'populist moment' an essential instrument of its electoral and media success. Exogenous and endogenous causes have led to a repositioning on the left-right axis and, once in government, to a discursive, communicative and organisational change that is still in progress. The future of Podemos will depend a great deal on its ability to readjust to these changes, especially to the need for greater territorial presence and participation and a change in leadership.

It will be crucial, in this regard, to continue the analysis of Podemos' evolution, moving away from a generic linear assessment of 'failure' or 'success', but going to see the actual lines of development:

"In the media there is often a tendency to see things in a linear way: a glorious beginning, an unexpected end.... But the reality is much more complex. Many phenomena, including populism, have a recurring nature. […] People suffer, there are inequalities and injustices, polarisations and cleavages are established, and someone will emerge from time to time to claim that he or she will be able to solve these problems. In the context of a crisis, for example, when these problems are exacerbated, this creates the potential for populist movements, leaders or parties to emerge and flourish. This is a recurring phenomenon because it is endemic to representative systems. It is therefore bound to return." [26]

Table 1- From 15M to Podemos. Evolution of participation, identity and organization.

	15 M	**Podemos** (2014-2017)	**Podemos** (from 2017)
Participation	Horizontal	Hybrid	Integration of horizontal-participatory and vertical-decisional axis
Identity	Transversal	Populist	Left
Organization	• The assembly as a key structure of participation • Decision making through the consensus method • Horizontal networks	• Circulos • Electoral machine • Digital platform.	Party-movement

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