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Streets and institutions? The electoral extension of social movements and its tensions

In recent years, radical forms of political innovation have appeared in the electoral field, most intensely in Southern Europe. These include the creation of new parties, influence over traditional parties, and new forms of political articulation. These activities have distinctive roles in different countries, but similarities can also be analysed.

The financial crisis that erupted in the US aggravated existing political crises and disaffection. As Zamora-Kapoor and Coller (2014) point out, the increasingly weakened role of the State, combined with its subordination to the demands of the European Union’s austerity policy, led to unpredictable consequences.

In this context, the development of radical left political parties (Syriza in Greece) or the emergence of new political parties (Podemos in Spain or M5S in Italy) have transformed perspectives on the traditional role of the radical left in government (Olsen et al. 2010). Furthermore, these parties have brought new social demands to the electoral field, thus becoming their legitimate (or illegitimate) representatives within the institutions.

We will therefore address two hypotheses in this study. The first is that the window of opportunity that has opened for the emergence of new political actors in the electoral field is not only marked by the economic crisis, but also by the political crisis of representative disaffection that was developing before it (Lobera, 2015). This disaffection was motivated by a dominant bipartisanship in Greece and Spain (Iglesias 2015a; 2015b; Rodríguez 2013, 2016; Katsourides 2016).

Our second hypothesis presents the existence of an *inclusive* populist model. Against the exclusionary politics emerging in European populist movements – UKIP, Front National, etc. (Mudde 2015) – the emergence of inclusive social protest movements has allowed for the dispute about the social construction of the ‘people’ to avoid displacement towards a cultural struggle associated with exclusive populism (Zizek 2016; Mudde & Rovira-Kaltwasser 2013a).

This chapter is divided into three parts: in the first, we analyse the distinct types of radical political innovation that have emerged, and the socio-political context that has favoured them. In the second, we analyse the political changes that have occurred in Spain and Greece, as the maximum exponents of the dynamics examined in this chapter. Finally, we analyse the characteristics of new parties, specifically Syriza and Podemos, based on three dimensions

(materialist, political and symbolic). The emergence of these new parties is connected to previous theoretical frames.

Radical innovations in the electoral field: the electoral extension of protests

Despite responding to different political and social contexts, the last decade's protest cycles in diverse world regions have some common characteristics. Their dynamism and organization respond to an "emerging model" of social movements, called by different authors "network social movements" (Castells 2012: 213), "on-line multitudes" (Sampedro 2005), "network-system" (Sánchez-Cedillo 2011) or "network-movement" (Monterde 2013: 294). The growth of political dissatisfaction in contemporary democracies, aggravated by the economic crisis in some regions – especially in Southern Europe – resulted in an increase in "orphan voters" who were more willing to identify with new social movements.

In this context of double crisis (political and economic), new types of protest movements emerged that were not based in strong pre-existing organizations, but rather in a process of decentralized, social media-based, "swarm" style self-organizations: #SidiBouزيد in Tunisia, #15M in Spain, #aganaktismenoi in Greece and #OccupyWallStreet in US in 2011; #YoSoy132 in Mexico in 2012; #PasseLivre in Brazil and #OccupyGezi in Turkey in 2013. These years were characterised by very high levels of social mobilisation. Despite their many differences of cultural and economic context, all these movements certainly have points in common. They are part of a new cycle of contention where engagement and conflict are directed toward neoliberal economics, liberal democracy, and the institutions that promote them (Hughes 2011: 412–13). Nevertheless, not all of these mobilisations had the same electoral impact and, of course, not all of them resulted in the emergence of new political parties with significant influence in the electoral field, as in Spain and Greece.¹

These movements succeeded in developing a collective identity and sharing connective frameworks. They could be qualified as *reflexive*, which is to say that they possessed a significant power of persuasion in public opinion, as well as a capacity to raise normative controversy around previously-unquestioned issues (Laraña, 1999; Melucci, 1989). Thus, they acted as "agencies of collective significance", spreading new ideas in society (Gusfield, 1994; Snow & Benford, 1988). These centred on traditional political parties' inability to represent the will of the citizens and respond to the grave economic crisis that affected their countries. This would be of paramount importance for the subsequent changes in political systems, since these mobilisations were not *one* movement, but rather acted as a sounding board, giving form to a new "consensual dissent" shared by millions in their countries (Sampedro and Lobera 2014).

On the one hand, these movements performed a cultural task by building and advancing new repertoires of protest and cultural practices. On the other hand, they performed an

¹

It is important to note that a certain transnational diffusion of these social movements did take place (Díez 2017; Romanos 2016; Flesher Fominaya 2014; Tejerina et al. 2013; Voulgarelis 2012; Castells 2012). This transnational diffusion "was not only ideational" in relation to the agency component of the collective action frames; it also "included forms of action such as occupying the main square of the city with the aim of achieving a certain permanence" (Romanos, 2016: 114).

instrumental task, managing to popularize core demands such as institutional transparency against corruption and government responsiveness, as well as more democracy and socioeconomic justice. The power of these “reflexive organizations” (Gusfield, 1994) lies not in their organizational potential, but also in their capacity to persuade citizens of the veracity of their mobilisation and to get support for the solutions they promote (Laraña 2009).

The “reflexive convulsion” that these movements produce is not electorally inert, but rather has sensible impacts in the electoral field. Protest can be interpreted as a non-institutionalized form of political impact (Kasse 2007: 789). Thus, it is not surprising that a protest movement can – and that part of it desires to – extend itself towards the sphere of political representation. This extension can be multi-faceted, from influence in the regeneration of existing parties, through the active promotion of voting patterns, to the creation of new political formations (Lobera, 2015). This electoral extension, however, does not resolve the tensions among the participants of the protest movements themselves. Although the protesters agree on the objective of influencing institutional politics, they have different opinions on how to actualize that goal. The drivers of the 2011 mobilisations mistrusted the classical parties and demanded non-party participation, in Greece as much as in Spain. As Vogiatzoglou points out for the Greek case: “the party and organizations’ members were obliged to refrain from openly referring to their political identity. This characteristic gradually changed in time, as the movement became more and more politicized” (2017: 110). In the Spanish case, several activist sectors expressed their fear of the co-optation of the movement (Gitlin, 2012, Calvo y Álvarez, 2015), as well as being trapped within the margins of what is simply considered to be electoral (Rodríguez 2016).

Changing in the voting patterns in Greece and Spain

One of the principle concerns of these movements is to have an effective impact on institutional policy while simultaneously generating changes in public opinion through the development of new frame alignment processes. The data show that protest movements in Spain and Greece have been successful; both in their extent and intensity at the moment of mobilisation. However, in the cases that we have analyzed, success in the street does not usually reflect immediately in the electoral contest.

In 2011, the 15-M movement in Spain inspired a pre-existing electoral boycott campaign called *No Les Votes* (²‘Don't Vote for Them’). *No Les Votes* began during the municipal and regional elections on 22 May 2011. Aside from in the Autonomous Community of Madrid, where the protests had a measurable effect on public opinion surveys and in the electoral result, the electoral repercussions were minor. The movement carried on into the general elections in November, where the effect was most pronounced among left and center-left voters. This dispersed the vote to alternative parties and buried PSOE, which had not received so few votes since the Transition (Bosco 2013:21).

²

In its own words, *No Les Votes* (‘Do not vote them’) was a ‘grassroots anti-campaign’ aimed at the main parties (*Partido Popular*, *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* and *Convergència i Unió*) which at the same time called for people vote for alternative parties

In Greece, the signing of the Memorandum by Yorgos Papandreu is considered to be “the final blow to PASOK’s socialist character” and the beginning of a period of social contestation. This included 27 general strikes (Katsourides 2016: 95) against the structural adjustment plan entrusted to Greece by the Troika (Central European Bank, European Commission and the International Monetary Fund). Following SYRIZA’s spectacular ascension in the 2012 elections, the formation of a coalition between PASOK and New Democracy to instate the European Memorandum represented a solidification of the cleavage between pro/anti-memorandum camps (Katsourides 2016:96) and between old/new parties (Tsakatika 2016). These strengthening relationships displaced, as they did in Spain, the cleavage between the left and right. Additionally, several Greek analysts affirm the key role of SYRIZA’s turn to a populist discourse.

Tables 1 and 2 about here

Tables 1 and 2 show the electoral results in Spain and Greece respectively. In these we can observe the strong increase in support for the radical left in Greece and a surge in support for a Spanish alternative populist party in the 2014 European Parliament elections (Pavía *et al.* 2016). The effect of electoral dissatisfaction was observed to be asymmetrical in left-right terms, with greater effects seen in social democratic parties (Keating & McCrone 2013; Lobera & Ferrándiz 2013). In this context, these parties are not generally seen as “parastatal agents” (Van Biezen & Poguntke 2014:214) or as a sufficient and effective option for solving the problems citizens face. This aspect is most significant in the case of Greece. The signing of the European memorandum and the coalition with the New Democracy (ND) sent PASOK’s share of votes plummeting from from 43.9% in 2009 to 4.7% in the January 2015 elections, in which SYRIZA triumphed.

A new electoral space: the populist hypothesis

McAdam and Tarrow (2011) propose an analytical framework of electoral contest, focusing on processes that show a reciprocal relationship between social movements and elections. This specifically regards social movements that amplify protests during the election period and social movements that strategically use elections to gain political power. Sociologist Emmanuel Rodríguez argues for a significant connection between social movements in Latin America and the development of populist governments, ignited through strong social movements or picking up their slack when these weakened (2013: 299). However, there is more to the “populist moment,” understood as the rapid convulsion of the electoral field, than the collective action of social movements. Studies on populism, with specific intensity and focus on Latin America (De la Torre 2010; Mudde&Rovira-Kaltwasser 2013a; Stavrakakis *et al.* 2016), note the development of charismatic leaderships where civil society has already retroceded. Such charismatic leadership is present in both Syriza and Podemos (Katsambekis 2016; Stavrakakis 2015), as well as in related municipal political parties in Madrid and Barcelona such as Ahora Madrid, with Manuela Carmena, and Barcelona En Comú, with Ada Colau.

There exists, therefore, a timeframe, a “populist moment”, coming after the break from the cycle of protests and the creation of new frameworks for reflexive movements to oppose traditional parties. In that moment, the emergence of charismatic leaderships allows for the development of a new electoral option that would bring in, at least apparently, the main proposals developed during the protest cycle. This rapid growth has occurred in Spain, Greece and Italy, in different ways, and it is not exempt from organizational and ideological problems.

The characterization of the new emerging parties in the “populist moment” has not been evident. At the beginning, the “anti-systemic” category or “radical left” category were adopted. The former has often been applied to parties that challenged established party systems (Sartori 1976; Keren 2000). Even Iglesias used this category several times to describe his own organization (Iglesias 2015b, 38-39). However, the “anti-systemic” concept cannot be applied rigorously to these new parties – the main objection being that they do not oppose electoral democracy itself.

Rather, they are populist alternatives in the sense used by Laclau (2001, 2005), who states that social antagonism has returned to politics in a context where the right and left compete for the concept of “the people” (Errejón & Mouffe 2015). This competition is divided between two perspectives, exclusionary and inclusionary. Podemos and SYRIZA adopted the latter (Katsambekis 2016), steering away from an exclusionary perspective based on cultural fundamentalism (Stolke 1999), which seeks to build the idea of “the people” around an organic community that excludes the migrant (Errejón & Mouffe 2015: 98). Thus, left-wing populism in Europe “emphasizes egalitarianism and inclusivity rather than the openly exclusivist anti-immigrant or anti-foreigner concerns of right-populism (i.e. its concern is the demos not the ethnos)” (March 2012: 122).

Unlike Podemos, whose roots can be traced back to the 15-M movement, Syriza was essentially a collection of mostly radical leftist groups that came together in early 2000, but gained popularity after Greece plummeted into debt (Katsambekis 2016). As discussed earlier, the party turned to inclusive populism, not for moral reasons, but for economic and political ones. As Katsambekis explains, to SYRIZA the populist category “the people” is a pluralist concept: “the people” are the working class, the middle class, the LGBT movement, young people, feminist movements, and so on. Podemos shares this inclusionary approach and its leaders have repeatedly stated it. For example, Pablo Iglesias states: “these immigrant workers, no one has the right to call you foreigners in Spain” (Iglesias 2015b: 184).

In Greece, the increased popularity of an extreme right party has prevented the total displacement of the “left-right” cleavage by the “people-elites” one (Katsourides: 2016: 96). Voters who support Golden Dawn (GD) in Greece have high levels of disaffection not only with politics but also with democracy. They also openly support the use of violence (Lamprianou & Ellinas 2016), particularly against immigrants (Dinas et al. 2016).

Conversely, Podemos enjoys an undisputed space to construct the concept of “the people” in Spain (Iglesias 2015a, 2015b, Errejón & Mouffe 2015). In his dialogue with Errejón, Chantal Mouffe questions whether this discourse could work as easily in other countries. She argues that if Podemos’s leaders were to confront Marine Le Pen they could not simply say “we are the people” (Errejón & Mouffe 2015: 99), since the Front National has already appealed to “the people” in its discourse.

Similarities and dissimilarities between Podemos and Syriza

The dots linking SYRIZA with Podemos seem fairly obvious. Both parties share discourse and political practice, lead the movement of the new European left and have shared the stage in rallies. We can identify three dimensions (material, political and symbolic) in the demands of both organizations: eliminate austerity politics, end the “bipartisan” system and preserve citizens’ dignity (Katsourides, 2016 :101).

Material dimension

Both Syriza and Podemos support the restructuring of external debt, advocate for progressive state intervention in the economy, support tax reform and anti-austerity measures.

SYRIZA seeks to raise income taxes on yearly earnings over 500,000 euros, secularize Greece (ending special favours to the Church), cut military spending and military operations, create a mandatory minimum wage, nationalize banks, and fund initiatives free child meals and housing for the homeless. It also wants to restructure the national debt so that bailout money from the European Union would be used to fund some of their social welfare initiatives.

Initially, the Podemos economic platform included “a basic universal wage for all citizens” (instead there will be more state aid to those in poverty), the nationalisation of “strategic sectors of the economy,” the lowering of the retirement age to 60 (instead it will drop from 67 back to 65) and the cancellation of the Spanish state’s debt (now the party is in favour of renegotiation, a cue most likely taken from Syriza). These ideas no longer appear in the Podemos platform.

Instead, after the 2014 European Parliamentary elections, its platform included progressive taxation, the establishment of a public bank, the repeal of the Popular Party’s labour reform, a 35-hour week, and a tax on selling and buying operations on the stock exchange. Many of the proposals would be funded by ending rampant tax evasion and the establishment of a level of taxation similar to the average rate in the EU.

Electoral tactics have led both parties to a certain deradicalisation of many of their proposals, adapting them to a contested electoral space. During the 2016 electoral campaign, Podemos claimed to be a Social Democratic party. These electoral tactics have led to ideological tensions within the organizations, overlapping with leadership tensions.

Political dimension

Both parties focus their political dimension on ending bipartisanism and giving “the people”³ more of a voice, tapping into public discontent with how democracy functions. Even if their supporters are mainly leftists, they focus on the political discontent with traditional parties rather than on classic left-wing ideological questions.

³

In Spain, in June 2011, 70% did not feel their interests represented by any political party and 83% considered that who really commands in the world are no longer the states but "the markets" (Lobera y Ferrándiz, 2013:51-2).

Syriza was a bottom-up “social movement”, made up of many left-wing parties (Katsambekis 2016; Katsourides 2016). It brought together several different identities such as feminists, anti-capitalists, and especially those concerned about the environment. At the beginning, its identity was mostly about being radical and against the establishment-European elite.

Conversely, Podemos was created “top-down” – in opposition to the 15M spirit of horizontality and popular assemblies. It thus went beyond *movimentismo* and its motto “There are no shortcuts”, linked to the Italian workerist tradition. The Podemos hypothesis claimed that the electoral field can also be a space for the articulation and construction of new political identities. Their leaders and activists strategically use social media and television to disseminate their political discourse. Iglesias himself defends this strategy, arguing that people do not participate in political parties in Spain, but they would affiliate with TV channels (2015a, 2015b).

Symbolic dimension

Syriza appealed to Greeks by simple empathy for the recuperation of their dignity, which they felt had been robbed by the intense economic crisis and, by extension, by the European Union (Stavarakakis 2015). SYRIZA links symbolically with the National Liberation Front (EAM for its acronym in Greek) and to particular events that occurred during the resistance period against fascism. As an example of this, the presence of a resistance hero, Manolis Glezos, in some SYRIZA meetings can be interpreted as a clear appeal to dignity against austerity imposed by present-day Germany (Katsambekis 2016; Tsakatika 2016). We can find similar past references to dignity in speeches by Pablo Iglesias and others on the night of 20 December 2015, after the general election results.

The Greek people were promised to be Syriza's first priority, even in the international arena. This makes the party even more appealing, and people identified with it in a way some may call charismatic (Stravakakis 2015: 277-280). Syriza represented a voice and inspired hope that had been missing at a time when many Greeks were feeling powerless. It appealed to their humanity and common goals of reclaiming dignity and being more independent from the European Union. This position, as that of Podemos, is not so much about euroscepticism as about questioning the pillars on which the European Union is founded. As Della Porta (2017: 230) points out, “the issue was not the country's participation in the EU, but the EU itself, a ‘social’ versus a ‘neoliberal’ Europe”.

Podemos puts more emphasis on moral discourse: “unjust laws”, “indecent elites”, and “decent people” (Iglesias 2015b: 179). “The people” is identified in moral and socioeconomic terms, because “the people is diverse” (Iglesias 2015b), while “the caste” is used for corrupt politicians and businessmen. The slogan “We are not anti-system, the system is anti us” perfectly sums up the symbolic approach taken by Podemos: a corrupt minority that uses great economic and political power to subdue the decent majority, the people.

Tensions and transformations

The populist moment is a moment of exceptionality, a window of opportunity to extend protest to the electoral field over a new, consensual form of dissent. However, in this populist

hypothesis a separation with the original social movements takes place, as well as a certain deactivation of the movement based on tactical electoral reasons – a deactivation going beyond the cycle of the protests. There is, then, an intrinsic tension in this populist moment, between activism in the streets and its institutional extension, between the logics of collective action and populist action.

Core activists in 15M and the Greeks Indignants promoted new ways of organizing and “doing” politics and democracy. They have often been linked to the autonomist workerist tradition and anarchist movements (Rodríguez 2013, 2016; Monge 2017), which proposes that a strong civil society can subvert social relations and transform them on the margins of the state. In fact, the populist hypothesis proposes the change of political institutions from within by playing in the electoral field with new tactics and taking advantage of the framework of the new social movements to reach cross-sectional majorities.⁴ This leads to a greater level of ambiguity and a lack of explicit radicalism in the electoral proposals, in order to adapt them to a “rapid and effective electoral warfare machinery”, as Errejón describes it.⁵

Chantal Mouffe (2013) reduces this tension through her concept of “agonistic politics”, where antagonism itself is reduced: from the “other as an enemy” to the “other as an adversary” that can be respected. This point of balance becomes a knot of tensions, however, when internal power dynamics come into play within the organizations themselves. Both Syriza and Podemos experienced extraordinarily rapid electoral and organizational growth. This growth has not always occurred in a harmonious way, causing leadership rivalries at all organizational levels. These rivalries often leverage the tension between street and institution in the struggle for internal power.

Positions thus are established within the parties: those closer to the street are more radical in their approach to confrontation; while others who are closer to electoral tactics utilize seemingly more cross-sectional approaches among potential voters. Narratives are developed to justify these internal rivalries and power struggles: “they are not with the streets, they are sold to institutionalization”; “they are not pragmatic, they will never win in the electoral field with such explicit radical proposals”. These narratives are continually used to strengthen or conquer positions within these very young organizations.

These main narratives tend to binary frames, allowing various groups in conflict within the party to be recognized (‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘the ones closer to street, to the essence of the movements’, ‘the ones closer to pragmatism, to the electoral victory’). They create at least two political “families” within the party, two “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983: 15) in the sense that most of their supporters will never meet or even hear of each other, yet recognize themselves as a part of the matrix of belonging. At the same time, these two narratives generate distrust of the “others”, the inner “enemy”. The development of these narratives of “streets or institutions” generates tension among the participants and, therefore, reinforces

⁴ The doctoral thesis of Pablo Iglesias (2008) was an appeal to an autonomist movement to being able to renew itself and open up new opportunities for social change. Later, Iglesias (2015b) himself acknowledged that the development of Podemos implies a revision of his own thesis (2015b).

⁵ Público, 23/10/2014, available at: <http://www.publico.es/actualidad/construir-maquinar-guerra-electoral.html>

leadership positions. Leaders in both subgroups identify these two predominant narratives and employ them in their discourses to legitimize their actions and their leadership within the party.

The resolution of the “street-institution” tension is complicated. Firstly, because it fulfils functions in the struggle for leadership in these rapidly growing organizations. Secondly, because populism is fundamentally reactive, contrary to radical emancipatory praxis which is proactive (Zizek 2009: 61). Podemos and SYRIZA have already faced internal crises that have shaken the formations and still cannot be considered concluded. In the case of Podemos, the Second Citizen Assembly of Vistalegre (February 2017) consolidated the leadership of Pablo Iglesias over Íñigo Errejón. The narrative of “more street” came out stronger in this case. The party proposes “a chain of transmission” between the institution and the street, “democratizing and integrating, meeting again with social movements and becoming a mobilizing agent”.

In the case of Syriza, despite having revalidated the government after the elections of September 2015, the referendum on the EU memorandum caused the party to split, with Popular Unity emerging from the eurosceptic wing of the party (Tsakatika 2016). Shortly after, SYRIZA's youth wing also broke with the party as a result of the acceptance of the third memorandum (Syriza Youth Central Committee 2015).

Over the past year and a half, the Tsipras administration has been heavily contested in the streets for its austerity policies. It has faced 3 general strikes and lost a significant amount of its electoral support – down to 16% and surpassed by ND (25%). As of 2017, Alexis Tsipras's approval ratings as prime minister are at an extraordinary low of 12%. The populist tension in Greece is flowing into a fragmentation of the inclusive populist movement, potentially weakening its advantage over exclusivist options like Golden Dawn, which could reach 8% in an election.

In addition to this, we can observe two risks frequently associated with the use of the concept of populism. First, as Jacques Rancière (2014: 120) suggests, the use of this term by the traditional parties is aimed at discrediting its political rivals. In this context, the term “populist” is associated with “demagogue”. Second, as Stavrakakis (2015: 274) points out, there is a risk of including under the same label divergent policy options, such as Golden Dawn and Syriza, and pervert in this way the analysis of left-wing, egalitarian and inclusive populist movements.

The question remains: streets or institutions? In the Spanish case, alternative routes out of this dilemma have been opened in the form of Popular Unity Candidacies. With the important but not hegemonic participation of Podemos, these candidacies were constituted for the local and regional elections of May 2015, obtaining triumphs in the main Spanish cities. They were constituted out of social movements linked to 15M, and to campaigns to protect public health, education and civil rights. They took the form of an “instrumental party” establishing open primary processes for the election of candidates, being more participative and horizontal than Podemos during those same elections. The Popular Unity Candidacies continue to carry the intrinsic tension between streets and institutions of the populist moment; nevertheless, this tension is not as strong because they are perceived to be more closely related to social movements than Podemos and Syriza.

As Klandermans and Stekelenburg (2011: 179) point out, each specific national context generates a specific context of mobilisation. In the case of the new parties, moreover, the specific moment in its development stage is determinant for its analysis. The exceptionality of the populist moment makes the landscape of all these parties susceptible to change rapidly. Speeches and strategies are subject to abrupt changes in the conjuncture of communication and political organization. In this context, the intrinsic tension between the forces of institutionalization and the forces of mobilization will be a central element in the analysis of the evolution of these parties in the near future.

References

Available upon request

Tables

Available upon request