



Broken Promises: The Rise and Crises of Podemos

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Podemos' rise and descent into crises represents an interesting case study in progressive politics and offers broader lessons for parties wishing to deepen democracy in Spain and elsewhere.

Spain faces an electoral spring. General elections will be held on Sunday 28 April. One month later, on 26 May, European, local and regional elections will be held. The centre-left of the Socialist Party (PSOE) leads the surveys. But perhaps the decisive dispute will be between the two blocks of the left (PSOE and Unidos Podemos) and the right (Popular Party, Ciudadanos and Vox). This scenario contrasts with the anti-establishment momentum after the Great Recession, whose milestones were the outbreak of the 15M (or *indignados*) anti-austerity movement in spring 2011 and the irruption of Podemos (translated in English as "We can ") three years later.

The spectacular but brief rise

Podemos picked up the baton of the mobilisations for a "real democracy" and promised to bring this proclamation from the Spanish city squares into the country's institutions. Podemos championed a transversal discourse (the idea that the divisive left-right rhetoric could be removed) and painted itself as an alternative to the main political parties. Its approach was based on "common sense", rather than ideology.

In an environment characterised by a distrust in politics, ideologies and parties, Podemos pointed out the new way to break the Left's glass ceiling, avoiding its old dilemmas – such as how to gain a broad electoral support with a radical

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agenda or to forge democratic and effective organisations – while successfully defending a project of "democratic deepening" in the electoral arena.

Standing against the despotism of the free market and the elitist kidnapping of the political institutions, Podemos offered the promise of a democratising "new politics", in the wake of the international mobilisations of those years. The new party not only advocated redistributive policies in favour of common people (basic income, labor rights and public services), but defended a "constituent process" to make the political institutions more transparent, accountable and participatory.

However, that promise has suffered several setbacks and has since faded. The party's rise and descent into crises represents an interesting case study in progressive politics (sometimes called left-populism) and offers broader lessons for parties wishing to deepen democracy in Spain and elsewhere.

The success of Podemos was due to a combination of what Machiavelli referred to as *fortuna* and *virtú*. That is to say, a mix of perspicacity and audacity from its leaders and the good luck of being in the right place at the right time. The new party took advantage of the economic and political crisis that was corroding the legitimacy of traditional political actors and institutions, and its leaders succeeded employed a discursive strategy that connected with the anti-establishment social grievances of the time. It then converted all this into votes.

Podemos' rise was spectacular and unprecedented in Spanish politics. Shortly after its founding in January 2014, it achieved 8% of votes and won five seats in the European elections in May of that year. A few months later, it was the leading party in the surveys. The popularity of its leader, Pablo Iglesias, with the

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media contrasted with the bewilderment of his political adversaries. There was a "window of opportunity" for political change which Podemos exploited, although its content and scope were always somewhat fuzzy.

What is left of that democratising promise today?

The crises

In the light of what has happened since then, Podemos' promise now seems something of an illusion. In reality, Podemos' so-called transversal discourse, framed as "common sense", never really went "beyond the left and right" of the Spanish political spectrum – as some leaders of Podemos pretended. Instead, its voters were mostly left wings progressives.

The novel and refreshing language of its leaders, after so much repetition, gradually ran the risk of sounding clichéd. The intensive use of the media and the consequent public exposure ended up devouring the popularity (and private life) of many of the visible faces of the new politics.

But Podemos' organisational dynamic caused the biggest problems for for the party. Behind the participatory rhetoric, Podemos was built as an "electoral war machine" for the polls. For some time, that model was effective. But it eventually proved disastrous. The winner-take-all rule imposed a rough and endless power struggle with the party. Without clear rules for handling dissent and resolving internal conflicts nor a strong and cohesive party environment, each disagreement within the party was amplified to the point of provoking a public crisis. Even the use of primaries and referenda became a way for factions to continue the internal war by other means, with self-destructive effects. The permanent battle has impoverished political deliberation and

imagination and has moved the discourse of Podemos to places which it had previously tried to escape from.

During its first two years, Podemos was a rising star that treated the rest of the "forces of change" actors (municipal platforms, regional coalitions or other parties) with a certain disdain. Recently, its fall in the surveys and the erosion of its leadership have deteriorated their position in the progressive political constellation.

In this context, Podemos' leadership (increasingly identified with Pablo Iglesias, once the rest of its founders moved away, or were removed) has been the victim of its own arrogance. If Podemos was once a centripetal force that everyone was drawn to, today it is a centrifugal force from which many move away from to avoid being dragged into its decline.

The most high profile case of this has been the departure from the party of Iñigo Errejón – ideologist and for a long time number two in Podemos – who has launched a new party in Madrid, with the Mayor of Madrid, Manuela Carmena, called *Más Madrid*. The party is now a regional force – resolute to put the ‘transversal’ discourse into practice where Podemos failed. Its impulse could potentially reconfigure the progressive political space in Spain once again, though it remains to be seen if this project will be able to avoid the same errors Podemos did.

The "new politics" represented by Podemos has aged quickly in just five years due to a combination of external constraints and poor choices. It has not solved the old dilemmas of the radical tradition: how to fight for cultural hegemony without being trapped within the dominant ideology; how to forge

effective *and* democratic organizational tools; how to build broad social blocks without renouncing key political objectives; or how to combine institutional participation with social mobilisation. But Podemos has been an interesting laboratory to rethink them.

Thus, the democratizing promise that Podemos embodied has been largely unfulfilled. Its discursive renewal and media strategy have come up against social, institutional and organisational limits of the party and have become double-edged weapons. Their commitment to an "open and participatory" model, distinct from the old parties, attracted many people; only for them later to become frustrated with their plebiscitary and belligerent drift. Podemos' search for greater electoral support has not always been accompanied by a coherent policy project. The effort to "assault the polls" has taken many activists into political institutions, but this has emptied the streets and weakened social movements.

Unfortunately, the political situation in Spain has taken another turn that requires immediate responses. The crisis in Catalonia – the so-called *procés* – has awoken another form of previously dormant Spanish nationalism. In some ways, the "Spain of the squares" of 15M, which articulated various popular discontents around the idea of "democracy" – its absence and its vindication – has been followed by the "Spain of the balconies". The people who hung the Spanish flag on their balconies, after the (rather fake) declaration of independence of Catalonia, made public what was previously an underground discontent. Such grievances have been inflamed and capitalised by the right, displacing the public debate from a social cleavage to the national or territorial one.

The most alarming result of this dynamic has been the rise of Vox, a far-right party that has collected part of the disenchanting votes with the corruption and the lukewarm of the Popular Party. The major achievement of Vox has been to shift the public debate towards positions that so far no one dared to address in public – for instance, sowing doubts about gender violence or boosting welfare chauvinism against immigrants.

Looking forward to the Spanish elections

The political map of Spain, a quiet two-party system until five years ago, has once again turned around. The surveys for the general elections of 28 April offer a forecast of five parties above 10%: PSOE (around 30%), PP (20%), Ciudadanos (15%), Unidas Podemos (the alliance of Podemos and Izquierda Unida, 14%) and Vox (11%).

This new twist shows that Spanish politics is swinging to the right. This does mean that the current is shifting undoubtedly towards a conservative direction. But the previous perception from four or even seven years ago was that the current was clearly progressive and democratic - it is not so anymore. The belief that the 15M movement had changed the "common sense" – the way people framed and saw social and political life, its problems and its alternatives – was exaggerated. The fact is that there are several diverse and competing visions of the "common sense" vying for ground in modern Spain. Moreover, the democratising advances made are in danger of undergoing setbacks. Instead of an expansion towards greater democratisation, which was previously perceived as possible, today we are witnessing the danger of an authoritarian involution through the rise of the Spanish far-right. Nonetheless, those who are committed to deepening democracy can draw upon many lessons from the case of Podemos – both its successes and its mistakes – to help form a

broader effort to defend and deepen democracy in the face of the dark times that lie ahead.

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