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Spanish State

The rise of Podemos

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A barely 100-day-old political party born out of the spirit of the Spain's indignados movement of 2011 won more than a million votes and five seats in the European Parliament, sending political shock waves through a country among those that have suffered the worst of the European financial crisis. Here, Guillem Murcia, an editor and contributor to the political analysis blog Rotkeil , looks at the sources of Podemos' election success, and explains the political backdrop to the surprising result.

On May 25, the leaders of the two dominant parties in Spain—the center-right Partido Popular (People's Party, or PP) and the center-left Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Worker Party, or PSOE)—couldn't believe what they saw on the plasma screens in their campaign headquarters.

Both parties had expected to take some electoral punishment from disgruntled voters for the way they had managed the current economic crisis in Spain. But they weren't prepared for the hemorrhage of votes they suffered. PP lost 2.6 million votes, 16 percentage points and eight members in the European Parliament—PSOE lost 2.5 million votes, 15.7 percentage points and 9 MEPs.

Why did both parties, which once dominated the political landscape in Spain, suffer such bad results in the European Parliament elections? One reason lies in their approach to the global financial crisis.

PSOE had ruled Spain from 2004 to 2011, right when the crisis hit. During the first years of the recession, it attempted a classic Keynesian response, increasing public investment to try to stimulate demand—but switching to deeper cuts in social services and welfare, as well as modifying Spanish labor laws, supposedly so the economy could become more competitive.

The PP won the elections in 2011 by promising to introduce measures to bring Spain out of the recession, but two years later, it has only accelerated the program that PSOE had introduced more tentatively: deeper cuts and yet another new labor law to curtail workers' rights and conditions. The PP has fully embraced austerity policies austerity being dictated by the European Union and foreign financial markets.

Six years after the global financial crisis began, Spain's unemployment rate stands at 25.1 percent [2], while for young people under the age of 25 years, it is 53.3 percent—and this is in the context of a constant flux of young Spaniards migrating abroad in search of a job and the fact that many employed people struggle with precarious or part-time jobs (often, as a result of the labor law reforms that both PSOE and PP introduced).

While all of Spain's minor parties improved their results over previous European elections, left-wing parties did the best. Izquierda Unida (United Left, or IU), a coalition that includes the Spanish Communist Party, gained six members of European Parliament. Several other left-wing coalitions from different nationalities within Spain, such as the Basque Country, Catalonia or Valencia, improved their results or sent representatives to European Parliament for the first time.

But the biggest surprise of all came from a new party that sent shock waves through the Spanish establishment: Podemos ("We can" in Spanish). Born just a few months ago, with little to no coverage by mainstream media and spending a tiny fraction of what other parties did, Podemos won 1.2 million votes, 7.96 percentage points and 5 members of European Parliament. This surpassed many other minor parties which, though they improved their results, had hoped to make bigger gains.

As with many success stories, however, Podemos' success is the visible result of years of hard work. There are

many influences that went into the project, including Izquierda Anticapitalista (IA, a Spanish Trotskyist party), as well as both experienced and new political and social activists—the latter having been awakened to activism through the “indignados” protests that began in Spain in May 2011.

But the nucleus of the project came primarily from a group of academics from the Complutense University in Madrid—people experienced in the Bolivarianist process in Latin America and with varying degrees of left-wing involvement: Juan Carlos Monedero, Ángel Errejón and, above all, the public face of the project: political science professor Pablo Iglesias.

The success of Podemos is based around two key factors—first, putting forward “common sense” ideas and values that are viewed as non-political and held generally, and engaging in debates with political opponents to expose why they don’t embody those values. Although the strategy was collectively developed among several of the key thinkers in Podemos, it is interesting to look at how Pablo Iglesias has represented it, since he is the public face of the project and the person who has talked and written most extensively about the theoretical approach behind this strategy.

The first factor involves wrestling away from the dominant parties (PP and PSOE) certain commonly held ideas that are seen as “pre-political” and not representative of either the left or right by the Spanish population. Iglesias claims to use “common sense,” not left-wing politics. He says he does not necessarily represent the left or the right, but the people from below against those who are on top—the corrupt elites.

He identifies himself as a “patriot,” but immediately follows such a statement with the idea that being patriotic means defending public services and the democratic right of the people to decide above all [3]—a contrast with the classic Spanish conception of patriotism as restricted to waving flags and denying the right to self-determination to the different nationalities within Spain.

Iglesias has also declared himself an atheist, but expresses deep respect and admiration for left-wing religious figures such as the radical nun Teresa Forcades or Javier Baeza, the leftist priest from the working-class neighborhood of Vallecas.

This has meant less stress, if any at all, on traditional left-wing symbols. Iglesias’ speeches do not use political jargon characteristic of the left—no hammer and sickle adorns the speakers’ platform, and no red flag is hung behind him.

Yet no one should be fooled into thinking that Iglesias believes that ideologies have been made obsolete. In interviews and articles, he has revealed how he is influenced by Marxist thinkers such as Lenin, Salvador Allende, David Harvey and Ernest Mandel. If anything, his approach reveals a mixed take on politics—part Gramsci, part George Lakoff—Iglesias has dropped old symbols that he believes could become liabilities because of negative historical associations with potential voters, and framed the debate around the question of the deprivations suffered by the majority of people in society, while the tiny elite becomes richer.

Iglesias wouldn’t dispute that most of these negative historical associations are the product of distortions or deceit. Instead, his point would be that politics is about having a real effect on the lives of real people, not engaging in historical debates. In short: if one is constantly on the defensive when trying to pull out a certain flag or use a specific term, why do so?

Instead, he has tried to challenge the dominant parties where they are weakest: how their policies and their management of the crisis have made the suffering of the majority of people living in Spain worse, but have been beneficial for the wealthy elite.

The emphasis on this message has made it possible for Iglesias to engage in public debates with representatives of

the main parties and win over disgruntled ex-voters from both to his side.

Back before Podemos was born, Iglesias was mostly known in left-wing circles as the host of the political debate program La Tuerka, which aired on a local television channel, but reached a wider audience through the Internet.

Although the program had its share of episodes focused on narrow issues where leftists tried to one-up each other with quotes from various theorists, one recurring feature was the ideological diversity of its guests: from social-democratic to libertarian or conservative politicians, anarchist or Marxist activists, Catalan or Basque independence activists, Keynesian or Austrian School economists, trade unionists or any other kind of social activist or thinker. This forced guests to drop the infighting so common in many debates on the left, and try to oppose the views people coming from a totally different political direction.

The next step for Iglesias was as a guest on mainstream TV shows on Friday or Saturday night, with large audiences and pundits from the mainstream political parties or media. He was able to put the rhetorical message described above to use before a television audience of thousands—talking about how a tiny elite was dictating the policies of both dominant parties, while the majority in society suffered the consequences.

This earned him the criticism from some on the left—some sectors of the Spanish Communist Party and certain independent communist groups—who prefer to stay away from mainstream media. Iglesias was accused of “selling out” or “dumbing down” his politics. He rejected these criticisms, on the grounds that participating in these shows meant he exposed people to his ideas who would not have otherwise read a Marxist book or watched a video on a radical YouTube channel.

What was striking was Iglesias’ success in disarming his enemies on those shows with the arguments he focused on. He was able to expose the hypocrisy of PSOE representatives who said that they agreed with him on fundamental issues, but couldn’t do anything because their hands were tied by the European Commission—and just as easily made PP-leaning pundits lose their temper by pointing out they were supporting the dismantling of the welfare state, while they could afford private health care or education for themselves and their families.

After announcing his intentions to run in elections as the leader of Podemos, Iglesias didn’t decrease his public appearances on TV. On the contrary, he increased his efforts to draw a sharp distinction between Podemos and what he called the “caste” of professional politicians, who were out of touch with the grim reality for the majority of the unemployed and working poor in the population.

Of course, this caste existed primarily among the leaders of the PSOE and PP—the two parties that have taken turns ruling the country, but agree on measures that take away democratic power from the citizenship: the reform of an article of the Spanish Constitution to allow a cap on the country’s structural deficit, necessitating deep spending cuts. The PSOE and PP capitulated to European Union pressure and agreed to this reform, with no intention of ever asking the people how they felt about it.

The election results seem to have confirmed the effectiveness of this approach. Several public opinion surveys [4] show that a large number of Podemos’ voters were disappointed ex-PSOE supporters [5], which backs up the idea that Podemos’ strategy managed to win over a significant section of the party’s base.

Other factors in the Podemos vote are a matter of debate, depending on who you ask or how you analyze available data. A survey by Metroscopia portrays a typical voter as between 35 and 54 years old, male, employed (no details are available on whether the jobs are stable or not, however) and mostly college educated.

Meanwhile, political scientist José Fernández-Albertos compared the percentage of votes and other variables by voting district in Madrid [6] and found that the strongest correlation with Podemos surge was the change in voter

turnout between the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament electionsâ€"which leads him to conclude that the party activated people who had abstained from voting in previous elections.

Fernández-Albertos also found a strong correlation between areas that went for Podemosâ€"and also those won by the United Left and the PSOEâ€"and the prevalence of poverty in a district and how its population suffered the worst effects of the crisis.

What does the success of Podemos mean for the labor movement in Spain? It is difficult to say, since the main union federations in Spain, Comisiones Obreras (Workers' Commissions, or CCOO) and Unión General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union, or UGT) are acting cautiously. Both are in the process of reconnecting with a working-class in which precariousness and labor flexibility have eroded traditional support for labor, especially among the youngest workers. Still, a representative of CCOO welcomed the success of Podemos and commented that it is a response to the neoliberal policies of the PP and PSOE alike [7].

Podemos' success has been cited as a major factor in the current talk in Spain about the crisis of the two-party system, which has only been overshadowed by the recent abdication of King Juan Carlos I [8]. Podemos' rise has also definitely shaken some other parties out of their stupor and into a process of renewal. IU, for example, has already started to increase the prominence of its young deputy, Alberto Garzón, a Marxist-influenced economist who is seen as the great hope of that coalition.

The mainstream media have alternated between trying to explain the sudden emergence of Podemos and using every opportunity to smear it, depending on their political orientation.

El País, the biggest daily newspaper, went from reporting almost nothing about Podemos to publishing a news article about one of the party's internal assemblies, claiming alleged internal conflicts without having interviewed any members of Podemos who attended the meeting.

Think-tank commentators and political analysts who before the elections failed to foresee a good result for Podemos or even a substantial setback for the main two parties found solace in the El País article by suggesting that the party was facing its first real problems as a political structureâ€"they may have hoped to recover from the blow to their prestige as election analysts by hoping that Podemos was a flash in the pan and would soon die off.

One should be very careful about trusting information from El País, however. A one-time progressive newspaper traditionally associated with PSOE, it has gradually adopted a hard stance against any leftist Latin American governmentâ€"it even published the picture of a patient in an operating theater that it claimed was Hugo Chávez at the time when the late Venezuelan president was being treated in Cuba.

The picture was later found to be a screen capture from an unrelated surgery video available on YouTube [9], and the newspaper had to apologize to its readers. But left critics pointed out that this was a symptom of the lengths it would go to spread negative propaganda about any leftist project.

For their part, the two dominant parties are dealing with their election setbacks in confused, contradictory ways. PSOE leader Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba announced after the European election results came out that he was resigning, triggering a power struggle within the party, with some of the top figures expressing a certain degree of sympathy for Podemos' message, while others condemned it as "populist."

PP has opted for the latter strategy of attacking the new party, while also attempting to give more media prominence to some of their young membersâ€"perhaps in the hopes that the crisis of the two-party system is a matter of image and marketing, and that younger faces could bring back lost voters.

If that is PP's or PSOE's thinking, it shows that the leaders of the two main parties don't understand the reasons for Podemos' success. A disgruntled and alienated pool of voters that perceives both parties as part of the status quo, defending their own interests and those of an elite standing above the population, won't be won over by new faces

exposing the same old politics. Specific initiatives to address their real, material grievances are necessary, and those will only happen if political leaders listen to what the people have to say.

It doesn't seem like the two main parties are receptive to this approach, however. Following the abdication of Juan Carlos I, both parties rushed to support the monarchic system [10]^{just as they did to comply with orders from the European Union to impose the cap on structural deficits.}

The PP and PSOE are proving that they are more than willing to perpetuate the kind of politics that caused their setback in the European elections. Their unconscious homage to Karl Marx^{in repeating history, first as tragedy and second as farce}^{has provoked a political challenge by voters who are tired of the old, undemocratic ways of mainstream politics, and that has only grown, like an overflowing stream.}

The success of Podemos is good news for socialists and workers. Although there is still debate about how strong the class basis of its vote was, Podemos' program has a clear focus on both labor issues and social issues that affect the working class^{for example, opposition to the latest labor law reforms imposed by the PP and PSOE, support for a ban on workers being fired from profitable companies, and a proposal to suspend all foreclosures and create a public housing program for evicted families. These measures would mean a great improvement in the lives of workers if implemented.}

Podemos is showing workers in Spain and around the world that there is an alternative to the politics of austerity^{that politics isn't public relations spectacles, beyond their influence, managed by experts in a neutral and antiseptic fashion, but the product of the class and social interests all around them.}

Only if they are organized and aware of their potential as a class can workers influence or determine what takes place in politics. Time will tell if the two dominant parties can reinforce the leaking structures of the old system^{or if the flood will break through.}

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[1] <http://rotekeil.com/>

[2] <http://www.ine.es/inebaseDYN/epa303...>

[3] <http://www.tercerainformacion.es/sp...>

[4] <http://www.metroscopia.org/datos-re...>

[5] <http://www.ibesinvestigacion.com/po...>

[6] <http://www.eldiario.es/piedrasdepap...>

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[8] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/20...>

[9] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/20...>

[10] <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/po...>