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Article

Politics of Left Populism in Power. The Institutional Challenge of Podemos

Abstract: *This paper is inserted in the analytical framework that focuses on the participation of populist forces in governments. It aims to contribute to the scientific debate analysing the left-wing populist in power in Europe.*

One of the most exemplary case is undoubtedly 'Podemos' that, since January 2020, has been part of the Sánchez II government in Spain. It is interesting to understand how this political subject that is born in response to the economic, political and social 2008 crisis and that defined itself as anti-system as to be the system. Further, starting from its integration into the institutional system, it will be analysed the role it covers within the government and the practical results achieved. Then, this will also allow the analysis of the change of left-wing forces in the European context.

The analysis of the Podemos participation in government focuses on a particular moment of the European and world context, i.e., during and after the Covid-19 crisis. The aim is to show whether Podemos, once in government, carries out policies responsive to the main cleavages that characterise its discourse and what effects on the political context. The analysis will be carried out by comparing the most representative policies of Podemos' ministries and through semi-structured interviews conducted between May and November 2022 with leading members of the party and Spanish government.

Keywords: *Covid-19; government; left; politics; populism*

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1. Introduction

Academic and scientific research on the phenomenon of populism has expanded exponentially in recent years, becoming a veritable field of study within Political Science, while largely privileging the analysis of the discussed phenomenon of so-called 'right-wing

populisms' (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019). For this reason, it is particularly interesting to fit within the strand of analysis that in recent years has undertaken the study of the other face of populism, the 'left-wing' one (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019; Charalambous and Ioannou, 2019; Damiani, 2020; Campolongo

and Caruso, 2021; Fittipaldi, 2021). This phenomenon has gained prominence in the media and scientific analyses, although it does not yet occupy a space commensurate with the importance that some of these forces have occupied and occupy in their respective countries.

The analysis is part of the studies and in-depth analysis that Political Science has dedicated to the topic in question, with the aim of contributing to the scientific debate through the study of a specific phase of left-wing populist action, namely participation in a government experience. The research thus fits within the analytical framework of the relationship between populist forces and government (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016; Dieckhoff, Jaffrelot and Massicard, 2022): taking power or participating in government coalitions raises important challenges for populist forces and so-called traditional parties, becoming a breaking point for these subjectivities and for the political-institutional context in which they act.

One of the most exemplary and interesting cases of left-wing populism in government is undoubtedly Podemos: since 13 January 2020, the Spanish party has been part of the Sánchez II government, the first coalition government in the Spanish context. Former secretary and founder of the movement Pablo Iglesias served as Vice-President of the Council and Minister of Social Policy and 2030 Agenda until March 2021, when he was replaced by Ione Belarra, the current Secretary General. Irene Montero, the Secretary for Government Action, has been the Minister of Equality since January 2020.

Therefore, we will use the analysis of a specific case, namely Podemos, and a specific socio-institutional context, that of the Spanish state, to construct the research hypothesis: Podemos is an ideal case study to study a broader political phenomenon, such as left-wing populisms in government. Furthermore, the study of Podemos' governmental experience is even more interesting if we consider the social and political context in which it developed: only two months after the Sánchez II government was sworn in, the health and social emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic occurred across Europe, which put a strain on the governments of most states, which were forced to put in place policies to cope with a situation that had been unimaginable until then. Furthermore, in February 2022, the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict began, which led to great instability in European governments due to international political positioning and the escalating energy crisis.

Although a comparison between two or more cases is not provided here, which is considered a necessary and almost natural development of this research, the in-depth analysis of a single case has indirect comparative weight, especially when used as a 'tool' to understand similar dynamics within the European socio-political context. This 'implicit form of comparison' (Mazzolini and Borriello, 2021) has been referred to by the American political scientist Richard Rose as an 'extroverted case study' (Rose, 1991: 454), i.e. a research strategy that pursues the ambition of generalising part of its findings to a wider range of political phenomena while still allowing for an in-depth examination of a specific context.

2. The research hypothesis and methodology

These considerations and a review of the literature on the subject led to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H1 Podemos in government pursues policies responsive to the main cleavages that characterise its discourse, namely those inherent to GAL (green, alternative, libertarian) issues and the social and economic issues characteristic of the left-right axis.

The conclusions drawn by Albertazzi and McDonnell are espoused here, who, in contrast to much of the literature, believe that populists can effectively combine responsible approaches with responsive approaches, i.e., they can be political operatives who act responsibly in different ways, while not abandoning their radicality. Indeed, the literature agrees (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019) that a populist leadership, once in power, must implement more specific policies that give a particular boundary to the ‘empty signifiers’ of populist discourse, thus risking losing the ‘transversality’ typical of generic terms such as ‘change’, ‘real democracy’, ‘justice’. Mobilising terms that hold together transversal social sectors, referring to them through generality and the possibility of being interpreted differently. Establishing a ‘people’, a reference social sector one might say, has the risk, according to Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, of reducing the consensus of the populist force in certain portions of society. To avoid this, populist leaders ‘need, among other things, to propose a range of different policies aimed at a variety of electorates at the same time’ (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019: 5). Whether this is possible is one of the research questions of this paper.

The analysis will be carried out by qualitative method, comparing the most representative policies of Podemos’ ministries and through semi-structured interviews conducted between May and November 2022 with leading members of the party and Spanish government. Tab.1 summarises the interviews conducted for this specific research:

Table 1. Details of the semi-structured interviews conducted

	Date	Name	Role
Interview 1	17/11/2022	Pablo Iglesias	Founder of Podemos, former Vice-President of the Spanish Government Council, founder of <i>La Base</i>
Interview 2	19/06/2022	Ángela Rodríguez Martínez	<i>Secretaria de Estado de Igualdad y contra la Violencia de Género</i>
Interview 3	27/10/2022	Lilith Verstryngne	<i>Secretaria de Estado para la Agenda 2030</i> and Secretary Organisation of Podemos
Interview 4	13/05/2022	Juan Carlos Monedero	UCM Political Science Professor and Founder of Podemos

Source: author’s elaboration.

3. Analysis of governmental practices

“*La fuerza que transforma. Un país feminista e donde nadie quede afuera*”¹ is the new slogan that Podemos has been using since November 2022, when the new communication campaign was launched on its social pages, which also included a variation of the historic symbol of the *morada* formation. It is interesting to analyse this slogan because it sums up, more than many analyses, the strategic vision of the current Podemos and the type of government action it is carrying out.

First of all, Podemos perceives itself as a transforming force, a force that is therefore able to change reality and improve it. The historic ‘*Si, se puede!*’ was a slogan expressing a condition of possibility, of being able to change things, to get into government, to represent the will of the majority. This slogan remains the one most often used in public speeches, at rallies, in the choruses of the militant base. However, Podemos now perceives itself in a new guise, as a

force that is already succeeding in transforming society, in achieving important advances for the social majority, in opposing the forces that would like to stop change. It is a present condition, not a future will.

The task that Podemos attributes to its governing practice is to ‘pull to the left’ the action of the coalition: a Council of Ministers without Podemos would not have created the possibility of tangible advances, not even in the case of external support for a one-party PSOE government. The only possibility for change, with all the consequent contradictions, is for Podemos to govern the country. This is the ‘mantra’ that recurs several times in the interviews conducted for this analysis, in which there was a general appreciation for the decision to join the coalition with a ‘hostile’ force like the PSOE. In this regard, for example, Pablo Iglesias argues:

“The strengths [of participation in government] are that it has achieved an unprecedented transformation in the practice of government with some of the most progressive laws. To have gained experience in government and somehow be an inescapable actor. I think that this also explains the obsession of many sectors to make Podemos disappear and, let’s say, to assume that there could be another type of leftist more comfortable in power than Podemos, which is at the same time a very radical force in its ideological approaches and at the same time with a will to state and govern. What they would like is a political force that is less radical from an ideological point of view and that, let’s say, also assumes not to be involved in management.” (Iglesias, 2022, Interview 1)

The only member of Podemos, among those interviewed, who gave a discordant answer is Prof. Juan Carlos Monedero, who has no formal position within the organisation, but continues to be considered an important theoretical reference. Despite this, his line about joining the coalition government was not followed:

“J.C.M.: When we founded Podemos, we were aware that the transformation capacity of neoliberal governments is poor. We already had the experience of *SYRIZA*. So there were two main opinions. On one side was Iglesias and Errejón, who thought we would govern, and on the other side was me, who said we would not govern because they would not let us. There will be a grand coalition between right and left. The Socialist Party will dissolve. So we will create a Broad Front and when people from the Socialist Party join our ranks, we will have a little more credibility. Because it is not true that there is a regime crisis like those in Latin America and, therefore, the transformation processes needed even more time. It was a wrong analysis, from my point of view, to think we were going to govern.

A.: But Podemos was born to govern.

J.C.M.: It was born to govern, but accumulating strength to do so. From the beginning, for example, I was very clear from my Latin American experience that it is not enough to take control of the government, because when you have the government you don’t have the power, you have the government” (Monedero, 2022, Interview 4)

This question of power is particularly interesting. Although, as pointed out, most of the responses regarding participation in government were positive, it is admitted in all cases that there are strong weaknesses in this process. That is to say: everyone acknowledges that if they could go back they would still decide to participate in the coalition government. At the same time, however, such participation brings with it contradictions that are difficult to overcome and require a different governmental practice.

First, they recognise what Monedero said in the interview: being in government does not necessarily mean having power. For Iglesias, in fact, the presence of an “ideological and radical” force generates many weaknesses in government action that “have to do with the size of the enemy. In other words, Podemos has become an actor that serves to organise the whole reactionary movement against it, which is a reactionary movement of power, where there are judges, the media and sectors of the security forces” (Iglesias, 2022, Interview 1).

Secondly, the main weakness is the difficulties of having to carry out a government agenda in the minority and in constant bargaining with the PSOE. In this regard, Rodríguez Martínez, *Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Equality*, describes in the interview the great tension that exists between the two forces within the Council of Ministers, which not only forces Podemos into continuous bargaining over the policies to be implemented but also returns an image of a weak and quarrelsome government:

“Now, the problem is that we have entered a communicative framework that we call ‘marriage’. We are like a marriage in which everyone conceives everything that happens in government as a matrimonial fight in which the man, who is the PSOE because he is the strong one, says ‘this is what will happen’. Then the ladies come and protest and say ‘no, this is not what will happen’, because in reality what has to happen is what the PSOE says multiplied by two. So, I think that right now the only thing people think Podemos can do is to say ‘well, they are ready to ensure that the *Partido Socialista* is able to go further’. But is that enough? No, it is not enough.

And then there is the problem of day-to-day internal management. In other words, my life is that of all of us in the government, ministers and secretaries of state, is a constant negotiation with the Socialist Party. Their answer is always ‘no, no, no!’. This negotiation is hell that makes us position ourselves ideologically against the *Partido Socialista*. And I think it is good because it can put us back on the ‘high-low’ axis and take us off the ‘left-right’ axis again” (Rodríguez Martínez, 2022, Interview 2).

The ‘marriage’ relationship within the Sánchez II government is highly visible from the outside, and of course is very often exalted by the media debate that underlines all the lines of tension in the executive. This element during the first year caused objective management difficulties for Podemos, squeezed between the need to carry out policies responsive to the will of the electorate and the impossibility of being able to do so in order not to split the majority and thus bring down the government. Subsequently, it has become a real battleground through which the *morada* formation attempts to gain media space, electoral consensus and advances to implement its *policies*. Thus, Podemos does not intend to appear as a merely responsible force that accepts the decisions taken by the majority, but has decided to bring ‘outside’ the points of divergence with the PSOE’s institutional and strategic will, making them a fundamental element of the communicative narrative with which it constantly updates on the advances of government action.

This change came about as a result of two fundamental events. Firstly: the pandemic emergency that the Sánchez II government had to respond to two months after taking office, which crushed the entire first part of the political and media action and debate on the issues of Covid-19 and the social and economic crisis that resulted from it, is over, at least for the moment.

Secondly, the Vice-Minister herself admits that Podemos entered the government with a political staff that had never held institutional positions at the national level, thus causing a glaring lack of cadres that were properly trained after a few months of institutional practice:

“We entered the government without having any government cadres and the pandemic broke out immediately. In other words, we had been in government for three weeks when the state of alert was decreed. And as an anecdote, during the negotiations it was planned that Podemos would take the Ministry of Health, but in the end we didn’t get it. I’m not a believer, but I said that it was God who wanted this, because if we had had the Ministry of Health...maybe not, or maybe it would have been great, but we didn’t know how to do things, we didn’t know how to manage it. We’ve learnt that now, which makes me think it’s extremely relevant for the next election cycle that we don’t have a flight of cadres from government. At this time it is extremely important to preserve these cadres. This is a very important idea for me” (Rodríguez Martínez, 2022, Interview 2).

Podemos, therefore, is pursuing this ‘second phase’ of the government experience by displaying two clear characteristics: first, as has been pointed out, to be a ‘challenging’ force even from the benches of the Council of Ministers, appearing as the ‘left-wing goad’ against the PSOE and not hiding criticism and outbursts in the case of disagreements and clashes within the majority, indeed using those very moments as an opportunity for media relevance and the subjectivation of its electoral base. Secondly, as will be explained in the following section, it carries out a practice of government that is responsive to specific needs and demands of particular social groups, which then make up its militant and consensus base.

4. Responsive government action

The *Unidas Podemos* coalition, as the minority force in the agreement, currently has 5 ministries out of the 22 that make up the Sánchez II government: the Ministry of Labour, which is held by Yolanda Díaz (IU), who since 12 July 2021 is also Vice-President of the Council; the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, which is held by the Secretary of IU, Alberto Garzón; the Ministry of Universities, which as of 20 December 2021 is covered by Joan Subirats as *En Comú Podem*; the Ministry of Equality, covered by Irene Montero for Podemos; the Ministry of Social Policies and Agenda 2030 covered by the Secretary General of Podemos Ione Belarra.

Here we will only address the analysis of the ministries related to Podemos, but a small clarification is necessary in this respect. Although, as will be shown, Podemos’ outward communication of government action is mainly centred on the achievements of its two ministers, there is also constant reference to the achievements of the other ministries related to *Unidas Podemos*. In particular, given its new leadership in the coalition, the ministry of Yolanda Díaz is given special attention. The issue of women workers, as has been shown, is a central part of the discursive *framework* of Podemos, even if the particularity is that it was decided to appoint in that role a trade unionist and militant of the PCE and IU, forces of the Spanish traditional radical left. In addition, the major changes implemented by the labour law brought about by Yolanda Díaz gave her an additional opportunity for media and, probably, electoral consensus.

Instead, Podemos has decided to carve out its role in government within two fundamental themes: that of gender issues, feminism, the rights of the LGBTQI+ community and the fight against machist and patriarchal violence, and that of social rights and the 2030 Agenda, i.e. the Sustainable Development Goals. It is no coincidence that the second part of the aforementioned new Podemos slogan reads precisely ‘for a feminist country where no one is excluded’.

There is thus a clear identification of the area of intervention, in which not only the technical areas of the ministries are represented, but a real choice of field, a choice of ‘people’.

While this is of course natural in any ‘division’ of ministries, in this case it takes on an even more symbolic significance because Podemos thus begins to centre its entire governmental strategy, and hence its discursive strategy, around the social sectors represented by its ministries. It also begins to support and carry out *policies that are* extremely responsive to the two main fractures that characterise its discourse, namely those of social rights and the fight against poverty, through the Ministry of Ione Belarra, and above all those related to gender issues, the fight against machista violence, and the rights of LGBTQI+ communities, on which Minister Irene Montero is the central image and which becomes a strategic asset of Podemos. As also argued by the *Secretaria de Estado para la Agenda 2030* Lilith Verstrynge:

“When you govern, you make laws for sectors. It is true that you make laws for a very broad sector, like, for example, all Spanish workers, but at the same time you have to govern for women. Or you have to govern for trans people. So, I think there is something in that and in the way Podemos has evolved, in the sense that it has actually governed and it has also governed by making social policies and so social policies are very clearly divided by sectors. This is where Podemos is strong in government, in social policy, and so it has to legislate according to the sectors or divisions that are created in society in order to reach everyone” (Verstrynge, 2022, Interview 3).

From this point of view, it is interesting to analyse some of the responsive *policies* actually implemented by the Sánchez II government under Podemos. It has been decided to delve into those that have been the most transformative *policies* and that have had the greatest communication and media prominence.

The first is undoubtedly the law that has gone down in the news as “*Solo sí es sí*”. The original name is *Ley de Garantía Integral de Libertad Sexual* and was approved in August 2022 by the Congress of Deputies. “*¡Es ley!*” was the cry of jubilation and the slogan that accompanied the approval of this law, which brought Minister Irene Montero to the forefront of Spanish and European news. The law represents a decisive intervention in the juridical and legal conception of sexual violence, bringing a clear change compared to all the legislations of EU member states. In fact, the law defines sexual violence as “one of the most common and hidden human rights violations in Spanish society, which specifically and disproportionately affects women and girls, but also children. Sexual violence is considered to be acts of a sexual nature that are not consensual or that affect the free development of sexual life in any public or private sphere, including sexual assault, sexual harassment and the exploitation of the prostitution of others” (*Ley de Garantía Integral de Libertad Sexual*, 2022).

The most relevant novelty of the law is therefore to consider as sexual violence any act carried out without the explicit consent of the person concerned and for this ‘consent shall be deemed to exist only when it has been freely expressed through acts that, in light of the circumstances of the case, clearly express the person’s will’ (*Ley de Garantía Integral de Libertad Sexual*, 2022). The concept of ‘sexual violence’ is thus broadened by considering any sexual conduct without consent as an assault and punishing it with different penalties depending on the circumstances and aggravating circumstances of the case. The distinction between sexual abuse and sexual aggression is eliminated, which means that for Spanish jurisprudence sexual violence does not necessarily imply the use of force or that the victim tried to resist. Digital sexual violence, which refers to sexual extortion through networks or non-consensual pornography, is also considered for the first time as ‘sexual violence’ in its own right. More-

over, the law deals in a large part not only with the prosecution of the phenomenon, but also with state help and support for victims. For victims of sexual violence who earn less than the Spanish minimum wage (EUR 14,000 per year), the law provides for financial assistance and priority access to public housing. It also implements the creation of at least 50 24-hour crisis centres throughout Spain, where victims, their families and relatives can receive psychological, legal and social assistance.

*

The other historic law in the Spanish and European context implemented by the *Ministerio de Igualdad* is the *Ley Trans*. The law, approved in February 2023, is revolutionary with regard to the recognition of gender identity in the European context. It provides for the possibility of changing one's sex at the registry office without judicial authorisation, medical reports or hormone treatments – hitherto necessary – from the age of 14 (from 16, parental consent is not even required). For those between the ages of 14 and 16 who want to go ahead with the sex change in disagreement with their parents, it is possible to proceed with a court-appointed advocate. Thus, if between the ages of 12 and 14, every application must go through a judge's approval and the sex change is without restrictions or demands. Under the age of 12, children can change their name and be treated according to their identity in schools, but not legally change sex.

This bill is symbolic of the strong tensions that exist between PSOE and Podemos. The first difficulty, in fact, for Montero was not the test of the courtroom, but the acceptance of this bill by the government partner both within the Council of Ministers, theatre of a great clash on the issue, and in Congress, where the PSOE abstained in the first votes. The *Partido Socialista* itself split internally, with one side firmly opposed led by former Vice-premier Carmen Calvo, an exponent of the 'feminist' wing of the Socialists. Again, Podemos has 'taken out' the clash, making it a real inescapable point for the continuation of relations between the government partners. The clash has also been fuelled by the support of the mobilisation of trans-feminist movements, in whose square meetings Irene Montero and Ángela Rodríguez Martínez have participated several times. Podemos also waged a tough battle on social channels, both during the confrontation with the PSOE and in the hours immediately following the approval. On 28 October 2022, for example, a series of interviews with 'ordinary people' who spoke out in favour of the law and against the blockade by the socialists were published in a video entitled 'People have a message for the PSOE on Ley Tans'². On 22 December 2022 a video of triumph "*¡Hay ley Trans!*"³ was published in which the approval of the law was celebrated through the image of the Minister's celebrations with the garrison organised for the occasion by the social movements outside the building of the Congress of Deputies. That relationship between 'institutions and the square' discussed in the previous chapters is shown plastically here.

The approval of the Ley de Aborto in December 2022, which includes public health care as a central reference for the voluntary interruption of pregnancy, the guarantee of sex education at all stages of compulsory schooling, the inclusion of menstrual health as a women's right, and the restitution of the ability to decide independently whether or not to have an abortion to women aged 16 and 17 and those with disabilities, has further characterised these first years of Podemos' governmental action, so much so that it has been called a 'legislature of feminist advances'.

*

The other landmark law is the so-called *Ley de Familia*, implemented in this case by the Ministry of Ione Belarra. It is a package of measures aimed at favouring work permits and leave to enable *conciliación*, the work-life balance, i.e., caring for children, partners, or the elderly. For example, the regulation extends leave to care for a family member for health reasons or hospitalisation to nine paid days per year. It provides for eight weeks unpaid leave per year to care for children, either continuously or by spreading out the weeks. In addition, it extends parental income by including a ‘child-rearing income’ of EUR 100 per month for children aged between 0 and 3 years. The core of the bill is that these measures apply to all types of families, such as single-parent families with two or more children, who are equated with ‘large families’, or ‘de facto couples’ who will have the same rights as married couples. The slogan of the campaign for the law’s approval was in fact ‘*Todas las familias cuentan*’, ‘all families have value’.

The action of the Ministry of Ione Belarra also played a central role in the approval of the so-called *Escudo Social* of the Sánchez II government, a package of regulations aimed at counteracting the effects of the economic and energy crisis and price inflation of basic goods. Within these measures appear regulations that, starting with the guarantee of social rights, intersect with other *cleavages*: the ecological issue, with the reduction of the price of public transport, the lowering of urban and interurban transport prices by 50% and the free use of certain lines in large metropolitan areas; the issue of the right to housing, with the cap on the price of rents that will be allowed to rise by a maximum of 2%, the extension of rental contracts for six months under the same conditions and protection measures against evictions for people in a vulnerable situation; the issue of poverty, with the €200 allowance for families with incomes below €27.000; the energy issue, with the prohibition of power cuts until 31 December 2023.

5. Conclusions

From this review, Podemos’ governmental action seems to fit more into GAL issues. This data therefore makes the H1 hypothesis only partially verified, since, although they implement responsive *policies*, these are not primarily assimilated with those attributed to the ‘left’, which are more purely related to the economic sphere. Indeed, part of the literature agrees that the GAL-TAN axis is not necessarily superimposable on the ‘left-right’ axis. On the contrary, the characterisation on the values and issues of civil and social rights, personal freedoms and identities create a variety even within the same macro-world of forces that are ascribable to left-wing or radical left-wing positions on socio-economic *issues*.

Some authors believe that, from this point of view, a tendency can be identified among Western European left-wing forces to use, or rather, overlap with the GAL axis. As if to say, Western European left-wing forces are in most cases also GAL, and vice versa (Marks et al., 2006). This is also confirmed by Norris in his survey, already mentioned in the previous chapters, in which it appears that Podemos is precisely one of the few forces analysed that share both left-wing discourse and ‘progressive’ positions, as also depicted in Fig. 1:

“But almost as many populist parties around the world (95/288 or 42%) were estimated to be socially conservative towards issues such as gender and minority rights but located on the left towards the economy, for example, favouring generous public spending on welfare

state benefits and health care, and redistributive taxation. Of the rest, only a small minority of populist parties (20/288 or just 9%) were in the progressive quadrant, like Spain's Podemos, Greece's Syriza, and the Bernie Sanders campaign, expressing economically socialist and socially liberal values. And finally, even fewer populist parties (9/288 or just 4%) were in the classic libertarian quadrant favouring a minimal role for the state, being economically free market and socially liberal in their values" (Norris, 2020).

	Leftwing economic values	Rightwing economic values
Conservative social values	E.g. Hungary's Fidesz, Polish Law and Justice Party, Danish People's Party 42% (95)	E.g. Swiss People's Party, Likud, India's BJP, Greek Golden Dawn, US Republicans 46% (104)
Liberal social values	E.g. Spain's Podemos, Greece's SYRIZA, Italy's Five Star Movement 9% (20)	E.g. Bangladesh Jatiya Party, Norway Progress Party 5% (9)

Source: Norris, 2020.

Figure 1. The distribution of the variety of populisms on the 'left-right' axis and GAL-TAN

However, placing the government action implemented by Podemos within this interpretative scheme would require a necessary comparison with other similar cases both in the Spanish context (e.g., *Izquierda Unida*) and in the European context.

Moreover, only since the end of 2022 and the first weeks of 2023, Podemos is showing a clear countertrend to what has been argued in this chapter. Just to mention a few examples, Ione Belarra and his entire government team took the lead at the beginning of January 2023 in a major public initiative to propose a law for the establishment of the *renta garantizada*, i.e., the guaranteed minimum income.

Furthermore, in a post published on 17 January 2023 to celebrate the anniversary of Podemos' birth, the advances that the *morada* force has brought to the Spanish context are highlighted. The first measures mentioned are the increase of the SMI, the average inter-professional wage, and the cancellation of the cuts in social spending made by the PP following the economic crisis. If these small signals are a symbol of a greater insertion of Podemos' discourse and governmental practice towards economic and social issues more relevant to the 'left', it is a central question for a future development of the research that must necessarily be pursued.

In conclusion, the H1 hypothesis was thus only partially verified: Podemos was indeed a force responsive to certain cleavages within governmental practice. But rather than on issues inherent to its discourse that are placed on the left-right axis (i.e., socio-economic issues), its governmental activity has been placed more on the GAL-TAN axis. Most of the policies implemented concerned issues related to civil rights, gender issues, the fight against violence against woman, and the rights of LGBTQI+ communities, on which Minister Irene Montero has become a true symbol not only in Spain, but also internationally. Similarly, the policies implemented by Ione Belarra's Ministry, namely those of social rights and the fight against poverty, still appear to be included within the GAL framework, although there seems to be a sign of a countertrend in recent months, which will have to be investigated soon.

These data open the way for a subsequent analysis that attempts to identify the causes of this phenomenon. On the one hand, it can be assumed that, as Hooghe and Liebster argue, in the Western European context "parties that are Left tend to be GAL; parties that are Right tend to be TAN" (2006). However, this would require a more in-depth investigation comparing the current characteristics of the party forces present in the Spanish political context. Another possibility could derive from the fact that Podemos, being a minority force, has not been able to occupy central ministries on economic and redistributive issues, traditionally presided over by socialist forces. Indeed, the relationship with the other coalition force, the PSOE, is not serene and is a source of much tension within the Council of Ministers. On this front, Podemos does not always want to appear as a responsible force that accepts the decisions taken by the government majority; on the contrary, it brings to the outside the points of divergence with the PSOE's institutional and strategic will, making it a political and ideological battleground. Podemos thus remains a 'defiant' force even while occupying government positions, but with two main characteristics: it focuses mainly on the issues of its ministries, incorporating within the advances actually made by its government action also those obtained thanks to the action of the other three ministries belonging to the Unidas Podemos coalition, especially that of Yolanda Díaz's labour (more akin to the right-left axis). Secondly, it is clear that while appearing as a 'left-wing goad' for the PSOE even within the government, Podemos has in recent years, especially since the exit of Pablo Iglesias, has evolved its discursive style in favour of a more responsive communication to the demands of what it has identified as its main social base.

Endnotes

1. Trad. 'The transforming force. A feminist country where no one is excluded', source: Instagram page @ahorapodemos.

2. The video is available at this link: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CkRF0tIKn-O/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>

3. The video is available at this link: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CmeZH6FjS30/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the author

Matteo Giardiello graduated with full marks in 2015 in Political Science and International Relations at University of Naples L'Orientale, submitting a thesis in Political and Economic Geography. In 2019 he obtains a Master in "International Relations and Institutions of Asia and Africa" at the same University, graduating with 110/110 cum laude in Comparative Politics. Since November 2019, he has been a PhD student in Public Policies of Cohesion and Convergence in the European Scenario at the Department of Political Science, University of Naples Federico II. In April 2023, he discussed his Ph.D. thesis titled 'When (left) populism comes to government: the Podemos case of study'. His research interests focus on populisms and on the organizational forms, practices and communication of political parties and social movements.

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