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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND NEW FORMS OF POLITICAL ORGANIZATION: PODEMOS AS A HYBRID PARTY

**Daniela Chironi**

*European University Institute*

**Raffaella Fittipaldi**

*University of Florence and Turin*

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, the restructuring of the party systems in several European countries was accompanied or preceded by massive waves of anti-austerity protests. Although the causal relation between these mobilizations and the rise of new parties has already been assessed, the organizational features remain understudied. To fill this gap, here we analyse the impact of the cycle of anti-austerity and pro-real democracy protests which emerged in 2011 with the birth and organizational development of the Spanish party Podemos. Bridging two subfields of social and political sciences—movement studies and party studies—we pay particular attention to the dichotomy between horizontality and verticality within Podemos' organization. In particular, we address the issues of social movement effects as well as party foundation and organizational development. Our main findings suggest that movement mobilization played a large role in shaping Podemos' foundational choices, particularly with reference to the fundamental principles of the party and its strategic positioning. Podemos is also experimenting new democratic methods internally. Nonetheless, empirical analysis shows that, overall, the influence of movements' organizational models on the organizational structure of the party has been limited. Yet, the result is a "hybrid" party that finds a balance between the horizontalism of social movements and the efficiency of parties.

**KEYWORDS:** Horizontality, Indignados, Podemos, Political Parties, Social Movements, Spanish Politics

**CORRESPONDING AUTHORS:** Daniela Chironi, email: [daniela.chironi@eui.eu](mailto:daniela.chironi@eui.eu); Raffaella Fittipaldi, email: [raffaella.fittipaldi@unifi.it](mailto:raffaella.fittipaldi@unifi.it)

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## **1. The Influence of Anti-austerity Movements on Emerging Parties in Europe**

In recent years, several European countries have seen a restructuring of their party systems, as illustrated by the crisis of mainstream parties, the electoral success of radical parties and/or the rise of new parties (Chiaramonte & Emanuele 2013; Gomez Fortes & Urquizu 2015; Newell 2016). In particular, the emergence of SYRIZA (Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás; Coalition of the Radical Left) in Greece, the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S; Five Star Movement) in Italy, and Podemos (We Can) in Spain has led scholars to analyse both the reasons behind their electoral appeal and their ideological/organizational features (Spourdalakis 2014; Biorcio & Natale 2013; della Porta et al. 2017). Empirical studies have highlighted that the social and political processes favouring the rise of third parties in bipolar party systems are related to a context of economic and democratic crisis. Both in Latin America and in Europe, the rise of new parties has often been accompanied or preceded by massive waves of protest against austerity policies (Roberts 2015; della Porta et al. 2017). Indeed, the European anti-austerity movements (Flesher Fominaya & Cox 2013; della Porta 2015) not only opposed cuts to public spending, privatizations, and neoliberal reforms of the job market, but also challenged several aspects of representative democracy, attacking mainstream parties as oligarchic and corrupt. They demanded increased redistributive policies and exhorted a greater involvement of citizens in politics through participatory and direct democracy. This request led Oikonomakis and Roos (2016) to pinpoint them as “real democracy movements”.

Along these lines, this article aims to assess the influence the Spanish anti-austerity movement had on the birth and evolution of Podemos. This analysis builds on evidence documented in literature (Roberts 2015; della Porta et al. 2017; Bergan Draege et al. 2016; Bartels & Bermeo 2014; Hutter 2014) that anti-austerity protests and bottom-up requests for increased participatory democratic opportunities have fed significant changes in party system dynamics over recent years. Although the causal relation between the conditions spawning Podemos and the preceding cycle of anti-austerity and pro-real democracy protests has already been assessed (Fernandez & Portos 2015; della Porta et al. 2017), the impact of this context of origin on the new party’s organization remains understudied. In order to explore this aspect, we shall pay particular attention to the dichotomy between horizontality and verticality within the Podemos organization. Indeed, Podemos combines “two divergent approaches to democratic politics: the horizontal, open, diverse, networked and assembly-based mobilizations of the multitude [...] and the vertical, hierarchical, unified, formal and representative structures of party formations” (Kioupkiolis 2016, p. 100).

To capture why and how movement claims and conceptions spilled over to the party, we will bridge two subfields of social and political sciences: movement studies and party studies, thus responding to the appeal recently launched by movement scholars for more interaction between cognate literatures (McAdam & Tarrow 2010; Tarrow 2015). In particular, we will address the issues of social movement effects as well as party foundation and organizational development (Panebianco 1988; Janda 1970a, 1970b). We believe that the focus of this research provides a significant contribution to both literatures of reference. Firstly, it fills an important research gap in the study of the consequences of social movements and helps us better understand the connections between protest and party politics. Similarly, it stresses the importance of an undervalued topic in party literature, updating our empirical knowledge of the influence of social movements on the logics of party foundation and organizational change. Secondly, it promotes a dialogue between cognate literatures, thus broadening the scope of both fields. Thirdly, it provides new empirical evidence on a party which is still little-studied but is acquiring growing importance in the Spanish political system, as well as in the European panorama.

This article is based on a case study research design. The data come from fourteen original semi-structured interviews, secondary literature, official party documents and press sources. The timespan of this analysis goes from the anti-austerity movement uprising (15 May 2011) up to the latest national elections (26 June 2016). Within this timeframe, we focus on a crucial phase in the party's evolution, namely its genesis and earliest organizational development, which coincided with an intense electoral effort. The outcomes of this process are still uncertain as the institutionalization of the party is yet not complete.

Below, we first provide a literature review and discuss the research design and methodology. Then we briefly present the nature of the Spanish anti-austerity movement. The paper continues with an in-depth analysis of Podemos (electoral results, genesis, organizational structure, internal workings and membership). In the concluding section, we verify our expectations about the impact of the movement on the party.

## **2. Movement Outcomes and Party Change: Letting Cognate Literatures Speak**

Empirical studies on the impact of social movements on institutional politics have abounded since the late nineties, explaining some of the processes through which collective mobilizations bring about social and political change (Bosi et al. 2016). This lit-

erature has focused on three types of outcomes: the biographical, cultural, and political transformations that movements produce. Most literature has focused on political outcomes (Amenta et al. 2010), however the effects of social movements on party politics remain largely unexplored (Piccio 2016). Moreover, several scholars have highlighted the role of political parties, particularly left-wing parties as mediators between social movements and state institutions. In addition, their supporting role has been considered decisive for the birth and evolution of movements, influencing both their levels of mobilization and outcomes (Kriesi 1989; Kriesi & al. 1995; Tarrow 1998). In brief, movement literature has proved the explanatory power of the presence of institutional allies for the success of social movements; to date, there have been no systematic analyses of a complementary aspect: the influence of social movements on the organizations of new parties.

Moving beyond the conceptions of movements as “challengers of” (Tilly 1978) or “outsiders to” (Gamson 1990) the political system, more recent contributions have shown that the boundary between institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics is nowadays “fuzzy and permeable” (Goldstone 2003, 2). Hence, if movements cannot be studied independently of their context, including the operation of political institutions, the reverse is also true: state institutions and parties are interpenetrated by social movements, often developing out of movements, responding to them and acting in association with them (Goldstone 2003; McAdam & Tarrow 2010; Tarrow 2015).

Studies on the evolution of Western political parties have stressed that party features depend strongly on their relations with state institutions, party systems and voters (Gunther & al. 2002), but the response of established political parties to the emergence of social movements has been little researched (Kitschelt 1990; Piccio 2016). Party literature has dedicated more attention to the emergence of new political parties from the labour, libertarian-left and green movements. In this regard, Kitschelt’s work on the foundation of left-libertarian parties illustrated how “any account of left-libertarian party growth would be incomplete without an examination of the major role of social movements” (1989, p. 25). Accordingly, the new left-libertarian parties were spawned by coalitions of social movements seeking to change not only particular policies, but also the form and substance of politics and to construct a more participatory and egalitarian political model (*ibidem*). However, the concrete translation of participatory aspirations into new party organizational models has been little studied. The most relevant exception is the work of Poguntke. By the end of the 80s, Poguntke suggested that the new participatory claims and behaviours promoted by various social movements might have influenced both the ideological and organizational dimensions of political parties founded in the wake of these specific social mobilizations (Poguntke

1987a). He also provided an in-depth analysis of the organizational dimension of the German Greens (1987b), singling out how the participatory norms and aspirations of the movements were reflected in the organizational structure of the party, although the full realization of democratic ideals was hindered by the “parliamentarization” of the party and a very weak membership basis.

Drawing on the above-mentioned literature, it is possible to identify the following expectations as to how the anti-austerity movements might have influenced the organizational features of Podemos.

According to the first expectation, the 2011 wave of anti-austerity mobilization will have been a key determinant for the emergence of the party, leaving its mark on the fundamental principles of the organization. In direct connection, considering the movement’s self-framing as the voice of the “common people” outside the traditional left-right positions, the new party’s rhetoric will have invested in a continuity with this strategic positioning. This position is endorsed by anti-establishment rhetoric and, more specifically, new parties’ tendency to portray themselves as “pure” options that have not been perverted by traditional politics (see Bolleyer 2013). Moving towards the main focus of the analysis, we expect that the movement’s flexible and bottom-up organizational model will have shaped (directly or indirectly) the organizational settings of the new party, privileging horizontal governance. As such, the movements’ emphasis on horizontal practices and requests for increased participatory democracy should have brought open participatory internal decisional methods to the new party organization.

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

In order to assess our assumptions, we shall focus on a single case analysis, and more specifically the Podemos case.

From a methodological point of view, this choice allows us to perform an in-depth analysis of the party dimensions through which our expectations can be more accurately tested (Yin 2009). Moreover, we consider Podemos a crucial case (Eckstein 1975), which fulfils both a descriptive and a heuristic aim. Firstly, it allows us to gather empirical data on a recently-created party, overcoming the difficulties deriving from the scarcity of secondary literature. Second, this case study can be considered “hypothesis-generating” (Lijphart 1971; Eisenhardt 1989): departing from previous evidences on the connections between grassroots politics and party politics, we formulated some expectations on the factors influencing the organizational features of Po-

demos. Considering Podemos as a manifestation of a broader class of events (Ragin 2000), our analysis could provide insights for the study of similar cases, particularly the Italian M5S. In fact, despite the doubts raised by methodologists on taking single case study designs to verify assumptions that might involve a broader class of political actors (George & Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007), we believe that Podemos is a representative case of the possible *fil rouge* linking the recent cycle of mobilizations and the emergence of innovative parties in Europe.

Our analysis is mainly based on qualitative data coming from fourteen original semi-structured interviews we carried out with a sample of movement activists, rank-and-file party members, and party representatives in Spain. The interviews were collected in Madrid between February and April 2015, through a snowball sampling technique<sup>1</sup>. Despite being unusual in party studies, this method allowed us to gather basic empirical data on Podemos, and to give voice to the interpretations of its protagonists. The opinions of rank-and-file participants, usually overlooked by media sources (della Porta 2014), helped us to reconstruct the degree of party innovation and how this is perceived within the party and the movements.

The questionnaire was divided into five sections:

- Socio-demographic data and sociological composition of both Podemos and the “Indignados” Movement;
- Information about the role of party activists, their connections with the social movements and their previous political experience;
- A personal account of the events that led to the foundation of the party and its development;
- Information on the development of the movement and its legacy, and information on the structure and the strategy of Podemos;
- Information on the political and ideological positioning of the interviewees, the movement and the party.

Other data presented in this article come from an exercise of critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2008) conducted on party documents published online.

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<sup>1</sup> Madrid was chosen as the sample city due to the very recent birth of Podemos when the research was started. Madrid is not only the city where it was founded, but also the place where its national headquarters are still located. Considering the scarcity of secondary literature on this party, and consequently the very limited availability of empirical data at the time we wrote the present contribution, we decided to focus on the national level. Therefore, although since its foundation Podemos has decentralised in various cities and autonomous communities (regions), here we analyse the data emerging from the fieldwork done in Madrid in 2015, and leave the study of the party’s territorial decentralization for further research in the future.

Further sources were interviews released by key party figures. What emerges is a picture of the party drawn from within and interpreted by the two authors of this paper.

#### **4. The “Indignados” Movement**

In this article, we are primarily concerned with examining the influence of the anti-austerity movement on the genesis and organizational development of Podemos. For this purpose, we need a brief presentation of the nature of this movement before we can proceed to analysing its effects on party politics.

The Spanish anti-austerity movement emerged in May and June 2011 to protest against austerity policies and the political status quo in advance of the upcoming municipal and regional elections. The press labelled the thousands of citizens who demonstrated all over the country “Indignados” (“Outraged”) referring to their resentment over the way politicians were handling the economic crisis and over political corruption. First appearing on May 15th (this is why the movement is known as the “movimiento 15M”, Castañeda 2012), the marches opening this cycle of contention were called by the digital meta-organization “Real Democracy Now!” (“Democracia Real Ya!”) under the slogan “We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers”. If a sharp critique of representative democracy and a parallel quest for participatory democracy appeared as the core claims of the movement, the main targets of its attacks were the economic and financial elites and the political establishment. The latter was accused of defending its own interests and those of the banks rather than citizens’ rights.

The roots of this feeling of indignation were in the economic crisis that struck in 2007. Originating in the US from the bankruptcy of large financial institutes, bailed out with huge quantities of public money, this crisis sparked a chain reaction involving Europe too, particularly the Mediterranean countries and Ireland. Here it was addressed with two key measures: restructuring of the labour market and austerity programmes, i.e. policies of public spending cuts, which brought about a contraction of the Welfare State.

Against this management of the crisis, the slogan “We are the 99%” set the majority of the population against a restricted oligarchy, the so-called “1%”, who would take advantage of the crisis to increase their profits. Activists also criticised political parties, seen as subordinate to economic potentates, corrupt and incapable of proposing alternative solutions to the crisis (Muñoz, Anduiza & Rico 2014; Andretta & della Porta 2015). The rejection of “minimalist” representative democracy, i.e. the mere process of

selection of the ruling elites, was complemented with the quest for a greater capacity of citizens to influence politics through forms of direct, participative and deliberative democracy.

These claims were further elaborated in a second phase of the mobilization, characterized by occupations of public squares. As the massive march of May 15th in Madrid was met with state repression, some protesters decided to permanently occupy Puerta del Sol square. Over the next few hours, square occupation spread to other cities. Here the movement introduced an inclusive assembly-based structure founded on consensual decisional processes and forms of direct participation, such as self-representation and the refusal to have leaders (Romanos 2011; 2015).

In a third phase, when the movement decentralized through neighbourhood assemblies, the meta-question of democracy still remained central. The failure of movement activities to achieve an actual policy change led activists and key movement figures to reconsider their strategy and opened a window of opportunity for innovative electoral coalitions between a new set of parties and social forces (Fernandez & Portos 2015). Our interviews confirm that the more pragmatic sectors of the movement (Asara 2016) felt the need to support a new political project that would be effective in transforming the indignation and claims of the movement into actual policies. Podemos represented this project, as “[it] proved able to read the breaking of the consensus toward institutional politics that the ‘Indignados’ had taken to the streets” (Interview 1). As a movement activist affirmed: “Podemos is something new, far-removed from existing corruption and with approaches that basically are close to 15M for various reasons: they took up some of the claims that came from the assembly on economics [and...] they represent a type of organization more committed to assembly-based participation as compared to the classic structure of political parties” (Interview 10).

## **5. The Case: a Sudden Electoral Rise**

Standing for the first time in the 2014 European elections, Podemos won 8% of the vote, emerging as the fourth party and expressing five European MPs. In 2015, it did well in regional elections. In March, it collected 15% in Andalusia, becoming the third party in the region. It came third again in the regional elections held on 25 May, with 13% of the vote—a result lower than forecasted in the opinion polls but nonetheless significant for a party founded just one year previously. These elections unveiled the crisis of the regional two-party system, due to the decline of the major parties and the emergence of new competitors (Gomez Fortes & Urquizu 2015; Rodon & Hierro 2016;



Rodríguez Teruel & Barrio 2016). Voters punished the party in government, the conservative Partido Popular (People's Party; PP), which obtained 29.2%, losing 13.7% compared to the 2011 regional elections. The leading opposition party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party; PSOE), also lost votes (24%, minus 4%). Two new parties—Podemos and the centre-right “Ciudadanos” (“Citizens”, 8.4%)—won seats in all regional parliaments and proved decisive in forming regional governments. No party reached an absolute majority in any of the thirteen autonomous communities where elections were held. Still in May, municipal platforms, which included Podemos candidates, triumphed in the local elections in Barcelona and Madrid. Finally, in September, the party participated in the regional elections in Catalonia within a coalition of forces that won 9%.

In the 2015 national election, Podemos (with its allies) totalled 20.7% of votes, becoming the third party in parliament after the PP (28.7%) and the PSOE (22%). Ciudadanos ranked fourth (14%) (Source: Spanish Ministry of the Interior)<sup>2</sup>. These results produced the most fragmented parliament in the history of democratic Spain, revealing that the Spanish two-party system was also suffering a crisis at the national level (Orriols & Cordero 2016). Ensuing negotiations failed to produce a stable governing coalition, paving the way for a repeat election in June 2016. Ahead of the election, Podemos and Izquierda Unida (United Left; IU) formed the electoral alliance “Unidos Podemos” (United We Can; UP). Contrary to opinion polls, UP did not perform as expected, just maintaining the previous national results of Podemos (21.1%) and remaining the third national force. The PP reaffirmed itself as the largest party (33%), but failed to secure an overall majority. With 22.7% of votes, the PSOE clung on to second place despite losing five seats. Similarly to Podemos, Ciudadanos did not grow but merely confirmed its previous result (13.1%).

## 6. The Foundation of the Party

Podemos was founded in 2014 by a circle of young intellectuals—mainly political and social sciences scholars with past experience in social movements and left-wing parties—coalesced around Pablo Iglesias, who later became its Secretary-General. A ceremony held in Madrid on 17th January, at a small theatre in the multi-ethnic district of Lavapiés, officially marked its birth. Preparatory meetings had taken place at the Madrid Marabunta library, where the group met to discuss politics. These intellectuals and

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<sup>2</sup> All data reported in this section refer to the Congress of Deputies.

activists had recognized the window of opportunity opened by the recent wave of popular mobilization focusing on the crisis of capitalism. The protests had indeed contributed to re-politicizing public discourse on the crisis, reframing it in terms of a conflict between a financial and political oligarchy and the majority of the population. Taking up this discourse, the new party claimed continuity with the anti-austerity movement (see for instance Dolan 2015). Movement claims had already gained widespread popular support (Sampedro & Lobera 2014), forging the strategy of Podemos' founders: "What is the possibility of victory? To set up the strategy starting from the new political language that 15M produces, because [...] here the issue is not between right and left, but between selfishness and decency; it is the opposition between those above, and those below, because there is an oligarchy set against a social majority that sees itself impoverished" (Iglesias, Interview with Vallespín 2015).

Movement claims and organizational features also influenced the focus on participation that inspired the construction of the party. Born of a top-down initiative, Podemos developed in subsequent months through an open "Citizens' Assembly", held in Madrid from 15th September to 15th November, to define the party's political and organizational principles. During this large assembly<sup>3</sup>, moments of debate and deliberation alternated. Any member of Podemos could present a document; these documents were then discussed and adopted or rejected through an online voting procedure open to all members. After the definition of the party model, internal elections took place, again with the participation of all members, to select the political team.

In October the founding documents of the party were discussed and voted for online. The majority of the Citizens' Assembly (81%) supported the project "Claro que Podemos" ("Sure, we can") presented by Iglesias and his team; while the alternative proposal "Sumando Podemos" ("Together we can"), from three European MPs, was rejected (12.4%) (eldiario.es 27/10/2014). The documents established the ethical and political principles of the party and designed its organizational structure. This structure is pyramidal and centralised, with the local units ("circles") at the base and an executive body (the "Citizens' Council") and a Secretary-General at the top. The real novelty is the Citizens' Assembly, comprising all "cyber members" (Scarrow 2014, p. 12), which would be the actual decisional body.

The choice of a two-month open assembly to define the genetic model of the party is praised by party activists: "During this long process, we drafted the great documents that are now at the base of Podemos in a participatory way: the ethics, political and organizational documents. [...] The document that finally won designed an organization

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<sup>3</sup> Press sources talk of around 8,000 participants (Publico, 17/10/2014).

that gives prominence to internal coherence, verticality and governability. The document 'Sumando Podemos' envisaged an organization with a greater distribution of power, less centralization, and a greater role for the circles. Personally I understand both models, each has its pros and cons. The former allows a defined strategy to be followed and thus has a chance to contend for government in the short term" (Interview 2).

### 6.1. *The Genetic Model*

Podemos is a party with "extra-parliamentary origins" (Duverger 1959), founded by a group of young leftist scholars already engaged in social and political activities. Adopting the categories suggested by Panebianco (1988) for the analysis of the party's dominant coalition, its leadership appears internally cohesive and stable, with the presence of a charismatic figure (Iglesias) who symbolically represents the new party (art. 23 of the "Organizational principles", Podemos 2015). The organizational power is centralized (Interviews 2, 3, 5, 12), and the construction of the organization comes through territorial penetration, with the centre committed to stimulating and monitoring the construction of the periphery of the party, i.e. its local roots and intermediate bodies (Interview 4).

However, the emphasis on horizontal participation can be considered a genetic element of the party. The two-months online Citizens' Assembly described above represented a first attempt to import into the party the assembly-based decisional method adopted by the movement. The political officers at different organizational levels were also selected through elections open to all members.

At a first glance, this genetic process shows some similarities with trends recently highlighted by party literature. In several countries, political parties suffering a membership crisis have reacted by giving members the formal power to select their leaders (Pilet & Cross 2014) and party candidates (Hazan & Rahat 2010), mainly through primary elections. However, they have generally failed both to enrol new members and to improve the quality of the participation of existing members, often demotivating the activists (Hazan & Rahat 2006, 2010). Moreover, primary elections in mainstream parties would be basically aimed at a symbolic re-legitimizing of the leaders (Offerlé 2006). But Podemos appears to pursue a different aim. Apart from the founding core of leaders, both the long-lasting, participatory Citizens' Assembly to establish the principles of the organization, and the open elections for the selection of all officers are indeed innovative participatory procedures for the founding of a party.

## 6.2. *Strategic Positioning*

The strategy adopted by the leadership has been not to locate the party on the left-right axis, but rather claiming to represent “the Spanish people” as a whole (Mountain et al. 2015). Despite advocating for social rights and egalitarian values, Podemos refused the traditional symbols and language of the left in order to appeal to a broader constituency. Consequently, competition has been stronger against the major parties rather than IU, which aimed to maintain its radical-left electorate. In the last general election, this non-competition evolved into collaboration under the common label of “Unidos Podemos”.

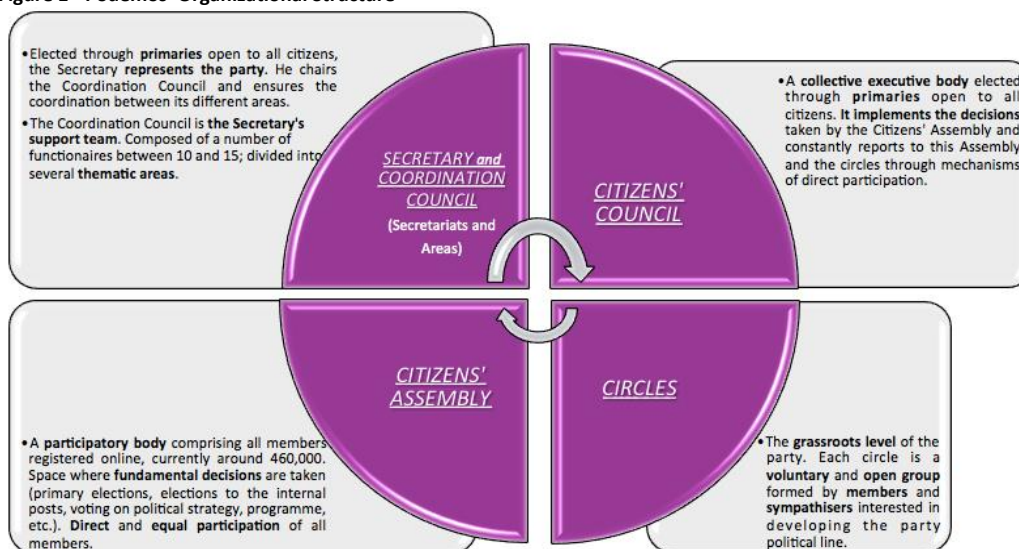
The positioning of Podemos cannot be understood merely by analysing the political culture of the leadership. If it is true that its leaders have been influenced by Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism (see Laclau 2005), Podemos’ strategy can also be interpreted in light of the political opportunities opened by the 15M. Social movement studies have often focused on political opportunities—both the availability of potential allies and the presence of channels of access to political institutions—to explain collective mobilization and its forms (Kriesi et al. 1995). Recently, research has moved from considering opportunities as structurally given to paying attention to the ways in which protest itself can create opportunities (della Porta, about to be published). From this perspective, Podemos appears positioned in the strategic groove traced by 15M, which had left a strong imprint on Spanish political culture, diffusing the image of a powerful and corrupt economic and political oligarchy adverse and hostile to the “common people”. Podemos’ recovery of the main slogan of the international anti-austerity movement—“we are the 99%”—testifies to this heritage.

## 7. **Podemos’ Organizational Structure**

Podemos was launched as an innovative political party aiming to renew Spanish political culture and conventional political participation (Dolan 2015). This proposal was generally welcomed by movement activists (Interview 10), and also by broader public opinion, as its swift electoral rise proves. Later on, scholars pointed out that emerging parties in Europe tend to be diffuse, taking up the movements’ claims for a horizontal, rhizomatic structure (della Porta et al. 2017). In this section, we provide a description of Podemos’ formal organization as it emerges from the official party documents. To facilitate the analysis, we split up party organization into three faces (Katz & Mair

1993). We also single out the innovative and horizontal elements and highlight where the party has maintained a traditional verticality.

Figure 1 - Podemos' Organizational Structure



The two arrows represent internal decision flows. The upper arrow is thicker because the descendant decision flow is greater. The lower arrow is thinner because the incidence of bottom-up decision making is lower.

Podemos shows a pyramidal and layered structure with different territorial levels (Figure 1). This model is crystallized in the official document "Organizational principles" ("Principios organizativos"), approved by the Citizens' Assembly in 2014. At the base of the pyramid lies the party on the ground, i.e. the party members organized into local circles and in a national "Citizens' Assembly" ("Asamblea Ciudadana Estatal"). Considered the maximum decisional organ, this is a participatory body formed by all party members, who coincide with those party supporters (over eighteen) registered on Podemos' website. According to official data, they currently number around 460,000 (<https://participa.podemos.info/es>). Conceived as a space for direct participation where all members have equal right to express their opinions and vote, the Assembly takes decisions regarding some main aspects of party life (such as primary elections, elaboration of the political line and the programme, election of internal political staff) and elects the other organs. Contrary to 15M practice, where decisions were made via the consensual method, Citizens' Assembly decisions follow the majority rule.

Still at the base of the pyramid, but diffused over the whole country, there are an undefined number of "circles" ("circuitos"), the organizational units where active party

members meet, discuss and organize initiatives that are always open to outsiders. As in most contemporary parties, these basic units are separated into territorial and thematic circles.

The party in central office, i.e. the central party organization, comprises an executive collective organ, the “Citizens’ Council” (“Consejo Ciudadano Estatal”) and a restricted secretariat formed by the “Secretary-General” and his close collaborators. The Citizens’ Council is the organ of political direction elected by the Citizens’ Assembly. It is made up of 81 members, who operate in twenty-six different thematic areas, such as “Women and equality”, “Economics”, “Participation”, “Social networks” and “Press” (“Regulation of the State Citizens’ Council”, Podemos 2015).

The Citizens’ Assembly also elects the Secretary-General (“Secretario General”), who represents the party. He is supported by the “Coordination Council” (“Consejo de Coordinación”), which has a number of members varying from 10 to 15, proposed by the Secretary and elected by the Citizens’ Council. This small circle constitutes the leadership of the party and holds a large share of organizational power.

Finally, a “Committee for Democratic Guarantees” (“Comité de Garantías Democráticas”), elected by the Citizens’ Assembly and composed of 10 members, assures that all party bodies respect the rights of the members and act according to the fundamental principles of the organization.

The same model is replicated at the municipal and regional levels, so that the layered structure covers every level of government. At the same time, it allows distribution of organizational power by guaranteeing that a great part of it lies in the hands of the Citizens’ assemblies.

The building of the party in public office, i.e. the party in parliament and in government, started in 2014 with the election of five MEPs, a group which included the leader of the party, who resigned in October 2015 to run in the next general election. In this election, the party won 47 deputies, as well as a further 18 representatives elected with its regional allies, making a total of 69 MPs: 65 of them formed the parliamentary group “Podemos-En Comú Podem-En Marea”<sup>4</sup>. A similar group was created in the Senate: it had 23 representatives, 17 of whom directly belonging to Podemos<sup>5</sup> and 6 to its regional allies<sup>6</sup>. The presence of Podemos in the national parliament remained substan-

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<sup>4</sup> Four deputies elected with the regional coalition “Compromís” refused to enter the parliamentary group of Podemos and joined the so-called ‘mixed group’.

<sup>5</sup> The Spanish Senate is formed through a mixed method of election: 208 senators come from a direct election and 58 are chosen by the regional parliaments. In 2015, Podemos won 9 senators through direct elections and 3 were chosen in secondary elections by regional parliaments.

<sup>6</sup> In this case, the two senators elected with “Compromís” accepted to enter the group.

tially stable after the June 2016 election, when Unidos Podemos (with its allies) won 71 deputies (45 elected with UP and 26 with the regional lists) and formed a parliamentary group with 67 members<sup>7</sup>. The unified group in the Senate comprises 21 representatives: 16 belong to Podemos and 5 to its allies (Sources: Web sites of the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, Congress and Senate). The party representatives in the regional parliaments are 155 (<https://transparencia.podemos.info/cargos-publicos/>). The 17 regional secretaries of Podemos—14 of whom also elected to the regional (or national) parliaments (<https://transparencia.podemos.info>)—are ex officio members of the Citizens' Council (art. 17 of the "Organizational principles", Podemos 2015): an overlapping of roles that provides them with a remarkable share of power as well as media visibility. Moreover, 10 members of the 13 currently sitting in the Coordination Council (including the Secretary), as well as 48 of the 77 members who make up the Citizens' Council (i.e. 62%) are also elected representatives at different levels (local, regional, national), again holding a double decisional role<sup>8</sup>.

The structure of Podemos reflects a balance between the leadership's intuition of responding to the quest for popular sovereignty and real democracy coming from below and the need for efficiency of a party aiming at occupying institutional spaces. The result is a hybrid structure where grassroots participation is left to local circles and democratic participation should be ensured by the Citizens' Assembly, whilst the top bodies (the Citizens' Council, the Secretary-General and the Coordination Council) ensure the centralised coordination needed to develop electoral policies and institutional intervention.

This still fragile balance allows Podemos to partially mitigate the effects of the evolutions characterizing Western political parties, whereby the party on the ground is suffering a constant decline, while the party in central office and that in public office have grown in importance and power (Katz & Mair 2002; Van Biezen et al. 2012), with consequences in terms of their political legitimacy and ability to perform their channelling function (Mair 2006; Crouch 2004). However, as highlighted above, Podemos has chosen to concentrate a certain amount of power in the hands of an internal elite comprising major figures who hold both managerial and elected office. Moreover, the leader-

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<sup>7</sup> Again, four deputies elected with the regional coalition "Compromís" preferred to join the so-called 'mixed group'.

<sup>8</sup> For the composition of both the Coordination Council and the Citizens' Council, we base our analysis on the names published on the Podemos web site (<https://transparencia.podemos.info/cargos-internos#>). For the Citizens' Council we added the names of the 17 regional secretaries and the Secretary-General, who, according to the Organizational Document of the party, are ex-officio members of this decisional body. However, we find a discrepancy between the number of members who should make up the Citizens' Council (81) and the number of members shown on the party web site (77).

ship itself has publicly acknowledged assigning greater importance to effectiveness than to horizontal participation. For instance, Íñigo Errejón, Party Officer for Policy, Strategy and Campaigning, described Podemos as an “electoral war machine” (Errejón, Interview with López De Miguel 2014), stressing that, in this historical phase, the primary goal of the party is to grasp power and promote social change. The prominence of the vertical element in the actual workings of the party is also highlighted by Kioupkiolis (2016).

If these limits have discouraged some movement activists more concerned with horizontalism (Interview 12) as well as critical intra-party minorities (Interview 4), other movement activists recognized that the features of an organization cannot coincide with those of a movement, and lauded the organizational innovations: “the party structure is naturally pyramidal and a bit vertical. However, the circles break with the traditional hierarchy and make of Podemos a new experiment because they are truly involved in the life of the party” (Interview 3).

In general, rank-and-file members also consider effectiveness to be preferable to extreme horizontality because the latter often risks blocking the process of deliberation and curbing democratic procedure through the use of individual vetoes (Interview 2).

## **8. Internal Participation**

Our analysis highlights that Podemos introduced some innovations in the internal participatory method (see also Ramos Pérez 2015). As one interviewee put it, “Podemos is [...] a rather vertical party. However, it is democratic: everything is established through voting procedures” (Interview 5). Direct participation is stated as one of the founding principles: “Podemos promotes the direct participation of all its members in the decision-making processes which significantly affect the organization” (art. 9 of the “Organizational principles”, Podemos 2015).

To implement this principle, the party makes extensive use of social networks, the party website and its web TV (see also Ardanuy & Labuske 2015). The web is seen not only as a means of spreading information, but also as the primary channel of participation. Indeed, the production of documents and the approval of policy decisions take place online with the involvement of members. A platform in the party website is devoted to participation from below (<http://podemos.info/participa/>): after an easy registration process, members can discuss and vote on a motion, provide suggestions for writing a document and approve it, propose an issue, express opinions and participate in primary elections or in referendums.



Examples of these forms of online participation are the elaboration of party manifestos for the 2014 European elections and 2015 national elections. The “Final Document of the collaborative programme” for the European elections was prepared through three online steps. The first step was a collective debate and individual proposals for changes. In a second stage, collective amendments from party circles were uploaded, and in a third stage an online referendum on all proposed amendments was held. At the end of the process, a party team finalized a synthesis.

This model was again adopted for the creation of the 2015 general election manifesto. Every member registered on the Podemos website could contribute online to its elaboration, expressing his/her point of view on various issues. The prologue of the final manifesto summarises the different stages: “Over ten thousand people expressed their ideas in ‘Podemos Square’ [‘Plaza Podemos’], our platform for digital participation, and over three thousand programmatic assemblies were held. More than twenty-five working groups collected proposals, invited experts and studied the reports of dozens of civil society organizations. And, in the final stage, over fifteen thousand people chose almost all the proposals it [the manifesto] comprises” (Podemos 2015, “Queremos, Sabemos, Podemos”, p. 10). The result was a manifesto divided into six macro-areas—social democracy, political democracy, civil democracy, international democracy, proposals for the municipal and regional level—each of which was further divided into several sub-fields. Finally, this model was replicated for the 2016 general elections.

Experiments of e-democracy are being carried out at the local level in the two cities where Podemos is part of the governing coalition<sup>9</sup>, bringing online participatory democracy into public institutions. In September 2016, the municipality of Madrid opened a web platform ([decide.madrid.es](http://decide.madrid.es)) to promote direct citizens’ participation. The platform provides three tools for participation: a space for debate; a space where citizens can propose initiatives; a space where they vote on policy proposals. If a proposal is approved, the local government is committed to implementing it. In February, the municipality of Barcelona copied this model and launched a web platform ([decidim.barcelona](http://decidim.barcelona)), inviting residents to contribute to drafting the “Municipal Plan” (“Plan municipal”) to be implemented from 2016 to 2019.

The online decision-making processes and the experiments of e-democracy described above are linked to other ways of using the internet and its instruments, such

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<sup>9</sup> Madrid is governed by “Ahora Madrid” (“Madrid Now”), a coalition between the social project “Ganemos Madrid” and Podemos. Barcelona is governed by “Barcelona en Comú” (“Barcelona in Common”), a citizen platform supported by Podemos.

as web portals through which citizens can interact with the candidates (“oigo”) or exchange ideas with one other (“apgree”, “plazapodemos”).

Online participation coexists with the presence of local circles, defined as “voluntary and open groups of people interested in social change” (art. 42 of the “Organizational principles”, Podemos 2015). Their boundaries are not limited to party members: anyone can found a circle and ask for its official recognition (Interview 2; <http://podemos.info/organizacion>). The type of activism that develops at this level is more similar to traditional party militancy. Also for this reason, rank-and-file members view the circles positively (Interview 3). One interviewee also explains why the mix of online and traditional activism is useful for implementing internal participation and democratic practices: “Podemos operates in a very democratic and participatory way, through the assemblies of the local circles as well as the web [...] Moreover, the representatives of Podemos within the City Councils (‘Consejos Ciudadanos’) are people who participate both in the City Council and in a circle of reference, thus connecting the two levels. Thanks to this model, the circle can channel its plans to the Council and vice versa. Similarly, there is a stairway between the City Council and the Council of the autonomous community, and again between the latter and the state. At the top of all these levels is the Secretary-General. [...] The secretaries at different levels, de facto, retain a broad decisional and organizational capacity, and the circles could be more horizontal. However, there are many instruments of political control, such as the abrogative referendum, the rotation of posts and the fact that proposals made and supported by a certain percentage of the circles are binding” (Interview 2).

Although the circles are still active, recently a process of bureaucratization of the party has been noted, particularly criticized by the internal minorities (Eldiario.es 14/10/2016; “Functions and relations of the circles within Podemos”, En Madrid Podemos 2016). As a consequence, several proposals emerged within the party to revitalise territorial circles, granting them more power and greater involvement in the decision-making process. From the analytical point of view, the incipient bureaucratization along with the parallel emergence of a strong internal elite suggest that Podemos risks following the typical evolutionary process of party organizations traced by Michels in his influential essay on the transformation of socialdemocratic parties into oligarchic structures ([1911] 1962). However, it will be possible to assess whether Podemos has managed to adopt some corrective mechanisms to help it escape the grip of Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” only once the process of party institutionalization (Panebianco 1988) is concluded<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The party form will be the core issue at the II Congress of Podemos which will be held in Madrid on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> February 2017. However, a scientific study of the institutionalization of the party cannot limit it-

### 8.1. A Multi-Speed Membership Party

Party studies have not only underlined the crisis of membership-based party organizations (Van Biezen et al. 2012), but also the attempt to experiment with “new organizational styles and new ways to strengthen links with supporters” (Scarrow 2014, p. 1). To overcome voters’ disaffection, some parties are introducing several “initiatives that deliberately blur the lines between members and other supporters” (Ibidem, p. 9). From this point of view, Podemos can be understood as a “multi-speed membership party”, i.e. an “organization that offers supporters multiple ways to engage with the party” (Ibidem, p. 9). Compared to other parties, Podemos is even substantially erasing the difference between formal members and supporters. Indeed, to become a party member and participate in online deliberation, it is enough to register on its website. This subscription assigns all membership privileges, without entailing any specific duty, such as the payment of an annual fee or exclusive affiliation. This organizational choice reflects a specific narrative that identifies the main source of party legitimacy in its ability to involve citizens in policy formulation and party decision-making processes. As one of the members of the State Citizens’ Council, Jorge Lago, has affirmed: “The sovereignty of the party does not lie with its militants, but with the citizenry, in all those who register on our website and can vote for candidates for political elections and to internal posts, manifestos, coalitions, and also decide on revocability and referenda. The subjects of decision-making are the people” (Interview 1).

This narrative resonates well with the claims put forward by the real democracy movement, which advocates greater involvement of citizens in politics, identifying the fact that major parties are out of touch with common people as one of the causes of the crisis of representative democracy. Similarly both the “light membership” and “cyber membership” (Scarrow 2014, p. 12) that Podemos promotes present similarities with movement-type participation, more fluid and irregular than traditional party militancy. However this latter type of membership does survive in the local circles.

Originally, the multi-speed membership party model responded to an external need, i.e. to adapt to a changed society, in which few people are available to devote much of their spare time to politics. It allowed a broadening of the party base: if Podemos’ core active group was formed by leftist activists or ex party militants, this base has gradually expanded to include common people and former 15M protesters. Cases of overlapping membership between the party and grassroots organizations are indeed frequent (Interviews 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). As Lago noted: “Initially, movements did not look favourably on

self to considering the decisions made by the Congress, but will have to examine the actual implementation of the same.

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Podemos, especially because it has a leader, while the 15M rejected representation. [...] After the European elections and the conquest of five seats in the European Parliament, the party gained more consensus, and movements also looked at it more favourably [...] For example, we have good relations with the 'Pah' ['Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca'], with the movement fighting for a public health system, and with that for public education" (Interview 1).

The relationship between Podemos and social movements was strengthened during the process of creation of the electoral lists for the municipal elections in 2015. Although our interviews were carried out before the identification of the candidates and the subsequent formation of municipal platforms such as "Madrid Now" or "Barcelona in Common" to run for these elections, they clearly highlight the linkage between the two political actors at the local level, particularly during the electoral period (Interview 12).

The multi-speed membership party model also responded to an internal need, i.e. to keep a high degree of centralization of power, again ranking efficiency above the achievement of a fully horizontal model. The web is used to create direct contact between national leadership and "light" members, diminishing the power of the intermediate organizational levels and the core of locally-active members. While the party minority "wants to strengthen the power of circles and many [within the party] think this would diminish the party's efficiency" (Interview 4), most of our interviewees (Interviews 2, 5, 6, 13; see also Gerbaudo 2014) accept the predominance of efficiency over horizontalism, as theorized by party leaders (Interview 1). As one movement activist and Podemos member explained: "Being a new and weak party, Podemos needs a strong leader. Of course I would prefer more internal democracy and a greater distribution of power, but if we moved in this direction now, we would not win" (Interview 5).

Similarly, an activist in the Madrid Lavapiés' local circle affirms: "Often it is necessary, in order to obtain results, to make quick decisions on some political and formal issues, within the timeframe defined by the external agenda [...] In reality, horizontality in its extreme version only works in small-scale processes, whereas in our case the challenge is on a larger scale [...] In the everyday functioning of our organization there is a mix of both tendencies [horizontalism and effectiveness]. However, at the decisional level, effectiveness must be the prime consideration" (Interview 2).

A difference between traditional parties and Podemos is also recognized in independent movement sectors: "I would say that Podemos is democratic in its functioning, although it could be more so. However, I certainly admit its qualitative leap forward compared to other parties" (Interview 13).

## 9. Conclusion

In this article we have addressed the issue of party formation and organizational development under the influence of social movements. In particular, we have looked at the organizational choices that the Spanish party Podemos has adopted in response to the search for spaces of horizontal participation coming from below. We presented Podemos as a party born from a top-down initiative, which was however stimulated by a massive wave of popular mobilization in times of financial, economic and democratic crisis. At the centre of this mobilization was indignation over the growth of social inequality as well as over political corruption and oligarchic politics, coupled with a claim for social justice to be pursued through greater involvement of citizens in the democratic process. Confirming something previously noted of the rise of left-libertarian and green parties in Europe in the seventies and eighties (Kitschelt 1989, 1990; Poguntke 1987a, 1987b; 1989) and radical left-wing parties in Latin America in the nineties (Roberts 2015), we argue that the movements' claims for a radical renewal in the forms of political participation were crucial to the emergence of Podemos.

The movements' organizational models also marked the party's organizational development, resulting in a mixture of vertical and horizontal elements, which balances the quest for internal democracy with the need for efficiency. However, similarly to Poguntke's (1987b) findings on the evolution of green parties, the full realization of a horizontal model has not been accomplished as, in the actual workings of the party, the vertical element finally prevails. Nevertheless, if we place the rise of Podemos within the recent wave of successful populist parties in Europe, it emerges as a rare example of a democratically organized party. Considering Mudde's thin definition of populism (2004), Podemos can indeed be understood as populist because of its ideological appeal to "the pure people versus the corrupt elite" (p. 543) combined with the quest for more direct democracy as an instrument for the expression of the general will. However, as comparative research has shown (Heinisch & Mazzoleni 2016), despite attacking the elites for excluding the masses from the decisional sphere, and consequently calling for direct democracy, most contemporary populist parties fail to organize themselves internally according to democratic principles. Indeed, they tend to adopt both formal and informal mechanisms to concentrate the power in the leadership and limit intra-party democracy (Heinisch & Mazzoleni 2016, pp. 221-246). In contrast, Podemos, as shown here, displays a relatively high degree of internal participation and democratic accountability.

On a closer look, the findings seem to confirm our first expectation on the impact of the anti-austerity mobilization on the fundamental principles of Podemos. Emphasis on

horizontal participation can indeed be retraced as a genetic element: despite being born as a top-down endeavour, both its core principles and political staff were established through assembly-based procedures. Moreover, direct participation is officially stated as one of the founding principles of the new party.

Second, the movement self-framing as the voice of the “common people” also influenced the positioning strategy of the party. In fact, while adopting an anti-establishment rhetoric, Podemos refused to place itself on the left-right axis, claiming rather to represent “the 99%” (of the population).

Our expectation on the influence of movement organizational models on the structure of the new party is only partially confirmed. Indeed, the structure of the party, although including a participatory body—the Citizens’ Assembly—still appears pyramidal. In addition, the weight assumed by the party in central office and the party in public office is in line with the evolution of contemporary parties. However, for the first two years of Podemos’ existence, the presence of the Citizens’ Assembly and of the local circles have balanced this verticality. Yet it is still too early to ascertain whether these balancing mechanisms will be preserved over time or whether the ongoing process of institutionalization of the party will lead to a further hierarchization, as described in Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy”.

Finally, Podemos is experimenting new internal democratic methods, particularly through the use of online platforms and social media. These new forms of participation are also transforming the traditional concept of party membership, making it more fluid and open. However, the push for democratization does not translate into the realization of a fully horizontal model. As an organization with multi-speed membership, Podemos is indeed not only “digital” and “accessible”, but also “centralized” (Scarrow 2014, p.10), with the leadership maintaining direct contact with party supporters through the web and television.

In sum, our analysis suggests that movement mobilization played a large role in shaping Podemos’ foundational choices. The result is a “hybrid” party that, in order to flourish in times of crisis of representation, has found a balance between the horizontalism of social movements and the efficiency of a party that aims to manage a share of state power. Overall, its genesis, as well as its evolution and organizational features, confirm our evaluation on the crucial nature of this case study. We believe indeed that other new parties, born under conditions of protest and crisis, may have followed similar paths of emergence and organizational development. For these reasons, it seems that the type of analysis we deployed on Podemos could provide useful insights for the study of other similar cases, in particular the Italian M5S.

### **Interviews:**

Interview 1 (03/03/2015): Jorge Lago, 38, responsible for the 'Culture and Training' area for Podemos, Madrid.

Interview 2 (04/03/2015): Ernesto Leiva, 28, member of Podemos, activist in the Madrid 'Lavapiés' circle.

Interview 3 (02/03/2015): Hector García, 30, member of Podemos and 'Juventud Sin Futuro', Madrid.

Interview 4 (26/02/2015): Toni García, 30, member of Podemos and activist of Patio Maravillas, Madrid.

Interview 5 (27/02/2015): Alba Mendez Pez, 25, member of Podemos and of the Internal Gender Committee, activist of Patio Maravillas, Madrid.

Interview 6 (27/02/2015): Pablo Padilla, 26, member of Podemos and of the City Council, activist of Patio Maravillas, Juventud sin Futuro and Oficina Precaria, Madrid.

Interview 7 (25/02/2015): Sara Porras Sanchez, 30, member of Podemos and activist of Ganemos Madrid.

Interview 8 (26/02/2015): Anonymous, 29, 15M activist, Madrid.

Interview 9 (04/03/2015): Rafael Fuentes, 34, 15M activist, Madrid.

Interview 10 (25/02/2015): Anabel Garrido, 34, 15M activist, Madrid.

Interview 11 (03/03/2015): Ana Iriñana, 49, activist in 'Feminism Sol Committee', Madrid.

Interview 12 (26/02/2015): Celia Mayer, 33, activist of Patio Maravillas and Ganemos, Madrid.

Interview 13 (01/03/2015): Pepin Rosillo Más, 33, 15M activist, Madrid.

Interview 14 (05/03/2015): Adrian Ruiz, 30, movement activist, Madrid.

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<http://podemos.info/organizacion/>

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<http://podemos.info/participa/>

Participatory platform of the Municipality of Barcelona at:

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### **AUTHORS' INFORMATION:**

**Daniela Chironi** is a PhD Candidate in Political Sociology at the European University Institute. Her research interests concern the relation between social movements and political parties. She is currently investigating the role of social movements in setting off organizational changes within left-wing parties in Western Europe, focusing particularly on SYRIZA. A recent publication is 'Social Movements within Organisations: Occupy Parties in Italy and Turkey' (with J. Bergan Draege and D. della Porta, *South European Society and Politics*, 2016).

**Raffaella Fittipaldi** is a PhD Candidate in Social and Political Change at the Universities of Florence and Turin. Her main research interests include political parties, social movements, populism, new forms of organization and participation. She is currently analysing Podemos and spending research periods at the Complutense University of Madrid.

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