

Podemos: Is a maverick leftist party mutating into the standard bearer of devolution?

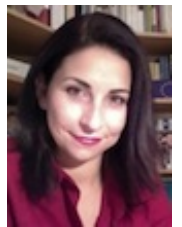
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Pablo Iglesias reasserted his leadership over Podemos in a vote in early February, following a period of tension within the party between Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón. [Juan Rodríguez-Teruel](#), [Astrid Barrio](#) and [Oscar Barberà](#) track the party's development, writing that the schism between Iglesias and Errejón reflects just one of the fault-lines over Podemos' development. They highlight the role of new organisations in the Spanish regions and suggest that much of Podemos' future will depend on whether it can maintain this regional support while strengthening its own left vote across the country.



Since the 2015 Spanish elections, a million-dollar question for Podemos is how the party should be presented to the general public. Is Podemos willing to be a new and slightly bigger reincarnation of the radical left [Izquierda Unida](#) (IU, United Left) or is it keen to become a new and governing social-democratic party such as [PSOE](#) (the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party)?



This debate is intensifying in the wake of Podemos' second general assembly, held in February. One party line is clearly identified with Podemos' young leader, Pablo Iglesias, while the other one is closely linked to his deputy and long-time friend Íñigo Errejón. So far it is unclear whether the debate is truly reflecting the moderate or extremist views and ideology of both sides. What seems more clear is that in less than three years the leader and his deputy have become bitter rivals. This shouldn't be a surprise because as we point out in our recent [research](#), everything in Podemos has moved extremely quickly, such as the bold makeover of Podemos' populist rhetoric into a more conventional left-right discourse.



Podemos' transformation since its origins is not only marked by changes in its rhetoric and leadership politics. An even more relevant problem is how the party has dealt with the territorial cleavage. In Spain, this means addressing, at least, three different issues: recognition (or not) of the different regional/national identities; articulating Spain's self-government and shared rule; and tackling the Catalan secessionist movement. In our research, we argue that the fundamental changes in Podemos' evolution and organisation have (and will have) to do more with these territorial issues than with anything else.

Indeed, Podemos was born with the intention to protest against the austerity policies implemented since 2010 by both the [PSOE](#) and the [Partido Popular](#) (PP, People's Party) governments. Its populist rhetoric, the ability of the party leadership to mobilise people through social media and its presence in the mainstream mass media were key elements of Podemos' [breakthrough](#) in the 2014 European Elections. Its [electoral support came from angry voters \(indignados\)](#) with anti-mainstream sentiments and unfulfilled expectations ([something that distinguishes Podemos supporters from established radical-left parties](#)).



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Its peculiar combination of a very centralised decision making system with an inclusive party membership and direct democratic procedures (i.e. primaries and referendums) were also part of the equation. When put in context, Podemos' success is astonishing: in less than three years the party has been able to build an organisation with hundreds of thousands of members/supporters, has made its breakthrough at the EU, Spanish and regional level, and is now the main left party in the latest opinion [polls](#).

The other side of this stunning evolution has to do with Podemos' presence at the local and regional level. The party leadership decided not to contest the [2015 local elections](#) in order to better control its growth. That said, its party members were actively involved in these elections and the party largely benefitted from the election of new left mayors in big cities such as Madrid and Barcelona. However, Podemos' withdrawal from the local level allowed the emergence of new local and regional leaderships not directly accountable to Pablo Iglesias.

Ada Colau is probably the most relevant example of these emerging leaderships: A former activist of the PAH, the Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages, Colau became the new mayor of Barcelona in 2015. The success of Colau's platform in Barcelona set off the expansion of Podemos in Catalonia. Shortly after the local elections, Colau started building a regional party that is ideologically very close to Podemos but remains fully independent. After the 2015 regional elections, Podemos also launched electoral alliances with regional leftist parties in Galicia, Valencia and later on in the Balearic Islands (but not in Euskadi or Navarre). These alliances were indeed instrumental in the party's success at the 2015 and 2016 general elections, but were not enough, even with the cooperation of the United Left, to surpass PSOE.

The results and implications of Podemos' growth and competition strategies are hugely significant: Coming together with the regional left has prompted a change in its rhetoric and agenda. After some efforts to adapt its populist discourse to the regional arena by presenting itself as the best alternative to the regional and local establishment, Podemos was forced to openly embrace the agenda of its regionalist allies. The most obvious example is the bid for a Catalan self-determination referendum as a key feature of its campaign for the [2015 general elections](#).

But the same could be said of the (unfulfilled) proposal to grant separate parliamentary groups for its Valencian or Galician allies. So far, the most crucial issue is proving to be the organisational links between Podemos and the

regional leftist parties. In Galicia, a new party *En Marea* (En Masse) with direct affiliation has been built from scratch. Similar debates have been held in Catalonia and the Valencian Community. This will probably affect the highly hierarchical and centralised organisation built during Podemos' first Assembly because its regional branches such as Andalusia are also calling for more autonomy.

Interestingly, [our data](#) suggests that these transformations have also had an impact on Podemos' electorate. Our evidence shows that Podemos' voters are replacing the PSOE's ones as the standard bearers of territorial reforms and devolution. Amongst other already [known](#) factors such as age, residence, use of ITC, ideology or views on the economy, preferences on territorial issues appear to be some of the determinants of voting Podemos (as opposed to PSOE or Ciudadanos). Furthermore, territorial preferences are also a factor of heterogeneity amongst Podemos' voters, especially when the independence of Catalonia is the issue. In Catalonia and other regions with strong regional identities, Podemos is seemingly becoming the strategic option for regionalist and left voters that otherwise would probably have opted for PSOE in general elections.

In our view, Podemos' future depends on whether it can maintain this regional support while strengthening its own left vote. This mix was instrumental in PSOE's victories for many decades and might be the key to Podemos gaining eventual access to government. This will not be easy, though. Podemos risks getting trapped in its own short term success and the complexities of Spain's territorial issues. The party's electoral and organisational growth has benefited from an extraordinary wave of public malaise and disaffection but so far it has hardly seemed capable of fulfilling any of its populist or devolutionist promises.

In addition, institutionalising the protest and canalising regionalist demands are indeed great achievements, but they might come with electoral trade-offs in the future. What will happen to the maverick leftist party if the economic and social context improves? Will Podemos join the other parties if they agree on incremental but limited devolution to the regions? Whatever the answers are to these questions, there is a bumpy road ahead... a road that might see the party hit new heights, or become mired in Spain's social and territorial problems.

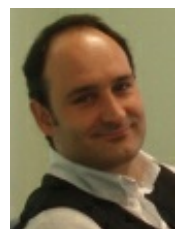
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About the authors

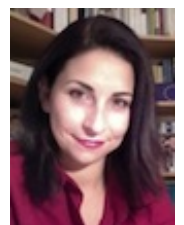
Juan Rodríguez Teruel – *University of Valencia*

Juan Rodríguez Teruel is an Associate Professor at the University of Valencia. He is also editor of the Spanish political blog [Agenda Pública](#). His research focuses on political elites, political parties and decentralisation. He was awarded the 2007 Juan Linz Prize for his PhD on Spanish ministerial elites.



Astrid Barrio – *University of Valencia*

Astrid Barrio is an Associate Professor at the University of Valencia. Her main areas of research are party politics and nationalism. She was awarded the AECPA prize for the best Spanish PhD in 2008. Her latest contributions are published in *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe: Dimensions of Success* (Routledge) and *Party Members and Activists* (Routledge).



Oscar Barberà – *University of Valencia*

Oscar Barberà is an associate professor at the University of Valencia. His main areas of interest are party politics, decentralisation, and political elites. His latest contributions are in *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe: Dimensions of Success* (Routledge), *The Politics of Party Leadership* (Oxford), *Party Primaries*

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