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Rico Motos, C., & Del Palacio Martín, J. (2023). Constructing the enemy: the evolution of Podemos' populist discourse from anti-system movement to power (2014–2021). *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2023.2219230>

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## **Constructing the enemy: the evolution of Podemos' populist discourse from anti-system movement to power (2014–2021)**

Carlos Rico Motos and Jorge Del Palacio Martín

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## Constructing the enemy: the evolution of Podemos' populist discourse from anti-system movement to power (2014–2021)

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### ABSTRACT

Podemos has been the object of extensive attention since its foundation in 2014. However, **most of the academic** works focus on its initial rise, which prevents a broader analysis of the evolution of its populist discourse after they reached the Spanish government in 2020. Covering this gap, this paper argues that Podemos' populism operates as a discursive logic aimed at constructing the political by spreading antagonisms. Following the post-Marxist theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Podemos' leaders understand politics as a cultural exercise whose essential component is a permanent redefinition of the people and anti-people categories according to context. Based on this framework, the paper develops a qualitative analysis of Podemos' discourse in the period 2014–2021. By focusing on the discursive manifestations of its main leaders, the paper shows the rhetorical turns that try to reconcile the contradictions between an initial street-level populism and a subsequent populism in power. Thus, the original people/caste antagonism is replaced by the classical left/right divide, which shows the difficult coexistence of two different approaches to populism within Podemos. Once in government, the reframing of the left/right dichotomy as democracy/fascism will lend continuity to a populist understanding of politics.

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### Introduction

On 29 October 2016, radical left groups called for people to surround the Congress of Deputies to protest against the 'mafia's coup' represented by the investiture of Mariano Rajoy – PP (People's Party, centre-right) – as President of the Spanish Government. All throughout that day, the two major leaders of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón, hailed an initiative that paradoxically, by disqualifying a 'Congress devoid of democracy', also denied their legitimacy as elected deputies. In January 2020, Podemos formed with the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party, centre-left) Spain's first coalition government since the restoration of democracy. It did so by collaborating with a party that just a few years ago it had considered, as the PP, a member of the 'political caste' that held Spanish democracy hostage.

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Similar to other parties associated with the populist wave that emerged after the economic crisis of 2008, Podemos has been the focus of extensive attention. There

have been academic analyses of its origins and main characteristics,<sup>1</sup> its communications strategies,<sup>2</sup> electoral performance,<sup>3</sup> or its relationship with nationalism,<sup>4</sup> among other aspects. Nevertheless, most of these works focus on Podemos' initial rise and **institutionalization**, which prevents a wider analysis on the reformulation of its populist rhetoric after reaching the government in 2020. Here, the literature states that, once in power, populists often face the tension between their anti-establishment profile and their new government responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> How has Podemos justified the contradiction of becoming a part of the institutions that it once **criticized** as being an enemy of 'true democracy'? Has its discourse changed after sharing governance with a party that it once considered part of the 'caste'?

This work argues that Podemos' populism operates essentially as a discursive logic aimed at constructing the political by spreading antagonisms. Assuming the post-Marxist postulates of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,<sup>6</sup> the leaders of this party have relied **on** a nimble use of discursive strategies to reformulate the semantic field of politics and to constantly redefine the categories *people* and *elite/oligarchy*, understood both as *anti-people*. We argue that this antagonistic approach, based on the capacity of political discourse to construct a *friend/enemy* dichotomy according to each context, is key to grasp Podemos' evolution from its emergence as an anti-system movement until its rise to power.

Based on this theoretical framework, a diachronic analysis of Podemos' discourse will show how this formation has adapted to the rapid transformation of the Spanish political system in the period 2014–2021. Among other aspects, the analysis will show that Podemos' stance relative to the Spanish Constitution of 1978, the idea of political representation or their own ideological self-definition is subordinated to the communicative strategy of their leaders. We shall see that the discourse of Podemos is sensitive to electoral competition, but also to the party split from 2016 onwards. The internal victory of Iglesias over Errejón led Podemos to reframe the *people/caste* antagonism in the terms of *left/right*, more in keeping with the culture of the Spanish radical left. Once in government, the strategic exacerbation of this dichotomy, reframed as *democracy/fascism*, seeks to sort out the contradictions of becoming a key actor of the political establishment. As we will try to show, the evolution from *people/caste* to *democracy/fascism* does not mean the end of a populist discourse in Podemos. On the contrary, it highlights the difficult coexistence of two different understandings of populism within this party. In the first one, represented by Errejón, populism is considered a project aimed to construct *the people* by transcending the traditional *left/right* cleavage. In the second one, represented by Iglesias, populism stands as a discursive strategy to strengthen a radical left agenda.

## Theoretical framework

### *Podemos and populism: preliminary considerations*

The academic consensus that places Podemos as a populist party mainly focuses on its initial rise, characterized by an anti-elitist challenge to the political order emerged from the Spanish Transition.<sup>7</sup> There is, however, more controversy about its political evolution after accessing the institutions and, finally, reaching the Spanish government in 2020.

This paper contributes to the literature by pointing out the continuity of Podemos' populism as a discursive strategy throughout the period 2014–2021, that is, from anti-system movement to power. 85

Academic literature on populism has grown significantly in past years, especially with the proliferation of case studies that have enriched the theoretical discussion regarding this phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Thus, populism has been theoretically conceptualized as an ideology; as a strategy at the hands of opportunistic leaders; or as a specific form of political discourse.<sup>9</sup> In this paper we rely on academic works that identify populism as a political paradigm whose main diagnosis is that a radical conflict between the people and the elite runs through every society.<sup>10</sup> From that standpoint, the case of Podemos shows that populism, as a discursive strategy in the political arena, can be alternatively used to replace the classical *left/right* divide or to reinforce it. Before addressing in the next section the theoretical foundations of Podemos' populism, we will highlight three relevant elements that have shaped the way in which it has been adopted. 90 95

Firstly, Podemos' connections to populism are ambiguous. The theoretical reflections of its founders make it clear that there is a positive assessment of populism as an instrument for the **radicalization** of democracy.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, and faced with public opinion, Podemos has sought to distance itself from a full identification with populism. This is due to the fact that, in public debate, populism appears as synonymous with 'demagoguery' and therefore it identifies with a pathological form of politics that is not free from anti-democratic connotations. In the book *Podemos. In the name of the people* (2016), by Mouffe and Errejón, Podemos' main proponent of the 'populist hypothesis' perfectly expresses the ambiguity that looms over the links of his formation with populism. Especially, given that populism is a form of understanding politics that Podemos practices but does not acknowledge. 100 105

In the intellectual arena, there is now a form of political construction in Spain that could be described as populist (provided we strip the term of the pejorative and anti-democratic connotations that are characteristic of the loose way it is used in the dominant discourse). But at the same time, we're also intervening politically, and to do so we cannot use a term that has been cursed by the media. Nobody with any pretension to win at some point can accept a definition which in the collective imaginary immediately is taken to mean demagoguery.<sup>12</sup> 110

Secondly, we must consider how the political culture of Podemos' leading class has conditioned its adoption of populism. Initially Podemos maintained the aspiration of replacing the *left/right* dichotomy for a new spatial division *above/below*, more in line with the idea of the *people* as a collective virtuous subject against a privileged minority identified as the *caste*.<sup>13</sup> In the opinion of Iglesias, leader of Podemos between 2014 and 2021, the anti-elitist protest of 15 May 2011 in Spain<sup>14</sup> 'crystallized a new culture of contestation that could not be grasped through the categories of left and right – something that the leaders of the existing left refused to acknowledge from the start'.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Iglesias is the author of a reflection on the need to leave the ideological and symbolic tradition of **the Spanish** left in the background as a condition for rising to power: 'In the 15-M movement of the squares it was plain that those plebeian sections of Spanish society felt very uncomfortable with the symbols of the left, especially in the first days. The Republican flag created a lot of discomfort – this is something that we didn't understand at first'.<sup>16</sup> 115 120 125

Nevertheless, the aim of placing Podemos beyond the *left/right* dichotomy has been progressively nullified by the tendency of the party ideologues to pepper their speeches with theoretical elements of the Marxist and post-Marxist traditions or tributes to the memory of anti-Francoism.<sup>17</sup> This contradiction can be explained by considering the internal tension in Podemos between a populist discourse and an ideological affinity to the European radical left.<sup>18</sup> The failure of communism in the 1990s led many anti-capitalist parties to assume a post-Materialist agenda and to call for the relaunching of democracy on a participatory, anti-elitist and anti-liberal foundation.<sup>19</sup> As Iglesias comments on Podemos' entry in the United Left Group of the European parliament in 2014: 'We were perhaps more modern, we came to politics with a different style and we came from another context, but we were clear about our ideological family'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, as we will see in the next section, Podemos' populism cannot be understood disconnected from the post-Marxist thought of Laclau and Mouffe.

Thirdly, similar to all parties that seek to consolidate a 'hunting ground' or a political space of their own, Podemos has made its discourse subservient to its fight for power.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the party's connection to populism and the way it was developed by its main ideologues must be interpreted in light of the strategic decisions taken to optimize its electoral competitiveness.<sup>22</sup> For example, Podemos assumed the lack of mobilizing appeal of the old Marxist discourse of class struggle and the need to adopt populism to achieve electoral success, especially after the window of opportunity that opened in Spain in 2011: 'The 15-M held up a mirror to the left, revealing its deficiencies. It also put on the table the main component of a new common sense: rejection of the dominant political and economic elites, systematically signalled as corrupt'.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, the electoral alliance with IU (United Left, the Spanish radical left party) in 2016, and Podemos' coalition government with the PSOE in 2020, are two milestones that explain the shift in its original discourse by the substitution of the *people/caste* dichotomy by the *democracy/oligarchy* and the latter *democracy/fascism* division, rooted in the tradition of the Spanish radical left. We argue that this change shows two different understandings of populism in the trajectory of Podemos, both of them derived from Laclau's populism as a 'way of constructing the political' through a radical simplification of the political space, 'replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise'.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, Errejón's populism as a national-popular project aimed to construct *the people* as a new historical actor that transcends the *left/right* cleavage. On the other hand, Iglesias' populism as a discursive strategy used to disseminate the ideas of the Spanish radical left.<sup>25</sup>

The initial coexistence (and later clash) inside Podemos of these different approaches to populism – both based on Laclau's ambiguous conceptualization of this term – allows us to defend the continuity of a populist understanding of politics in Podemos even after Errejón's internal defeat. These different approaches are confirmed by Errejón in his memoirs:

For us, for the group that shares the national-popular project, it is what we are: a cross-cutting force that goes beyond the left to articulate, with the materials of really existing common sense, a new majority aimed to reorder the country by focusing on the most humble people. For them, for Irene, Rafa, Juanma, Ione, Yolanda and, sadly, Pablo,

populism is a marketing clothing for campaigns. Perhaps or precisely because of that, they let me direct the campaign for the general elections: 'Do the populism'.<sup>26</sup> 175

### **Populism and post-Marxist tradition**

As previously mentioned, populism can be conceptualized as a political paradigm that denounces the radical conflict between the people and the elite that runs through every political community. In Laclau's words, populism 'involves the division of the social scene in two camps'.<sup>27</sup> From this viewpoint, it is possible to establish links between Podemos and populism by means of the crucial role that the party attributes to the dichotomies *people/caste*, *above/below*, *people/elite*, *democracy/oligarchy* and *democracy/fascism*. As Errejón points out, Podemos understands politics as an exercise in the production of identities whose fundamental component is defining who are *people* and who are *anti-people* for each context and situation. In his own words 'something that has been decisive in the construction of *the people* and its political direction is the *anti-people*, the adversary that marks the impossibility of what is currently perceived as legitimate. In our case, that meant pointing to the evident oligarchic evolution: *the caste*, the privileged'.<sup>28</sup> 180  
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On this point, the association between the construction of an *anti-people* and the idea of what a political community may deem legitimate is crucial to grasp the anti-liberal component of Podemos' populism. As we shall try to show in the empirical section, Podemos does not understand the **radicalization** of democracy as a process for greater integration in the pluralist sense, rather as exclusion of the agents whom it previously declared illegitimate (the *anti-people*). Following the success of the Five Star Movement in Italy, Podemos **popularized** the term *caste* to refer to the minority governing the country, or in Iglesias' words, 'privileged elites who have hijacked the power from the people'.<sup>29</sup> 195  
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Nevertheless, this core component, common to all experiences of contemporary populism, is not the sole defining characteristic of populism as practiced by Podemos. Specifically, the interpretative key lies in the way in which the post-Marxist thought of Laclau and Mouffe has shaped Podemos' discourse.<sup>30</sup> 200

In general terms, post-Marxism criticizes the prominence traditionally given by Marxists to the material base as opposed to the superstructure of ideas and, thus, understands politics as a discursive practice.<sup>31</sup> The emphasis placed by classical Marxism on social classes as economically defined objective truths lacks analytical and operational effectiveness in post-industrialist societies.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, in the post-Marxist version developed by Laclau and Mouffe, the analysis of ideology and its political operability is distanced from class determinism: 'What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class'.<sup>33</sup> 205  
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Through the works of Laclau and Mouffe the ideologues of Podemos entrust political **radicalization** to the *people/anti-people* opposition, just as classical Marxism trusted on the antagonism generated by class struggles. With one essential difference: the *people*, hailed as the new collective subject that challenges the established order, is not defined economically rather it is culturally constructed through discursive and historical practices that redefine who are 'we' and 'them'.<sup>34</sup> 215

Based on this postmodern reading of Marx, Podemos' goal of 'constructing the people' becomes synonymous with the discursive creation of a 'political *we*, with the will to govern, which always requires defining a *them* that is responsible for the problems'.<sup>35</sup> As we shall see in the discourse analysis, this anti-essentialist Marxism which understands politics as 'cultural practice' makes this party extremely confident in that political identities can be constantly reshaped, thanks to the performative properties of language.<sup>36</sup>

Also, through the reading of Mouffe, Schmitt becomes a key author that helps us to understand a *friend/enemy* dichotomy at the core of Podemos's discourse.<sup>37</sup> This populist discourse is therefore a strategic response to an antagonistic view of politics that understands that every society is cross-cut by conflicts between collective identities that are constantly redefined through discursive practices. Podemos understands politics as 'a struggle for meaning or as a historical, contingent struggle for values that is not resolved through any objective truth but only provisionally through the hegemony of an inevitably specific perspective that manages to become a general one'.<sup>38</sup>

When addressing the links between Podemos and Laclau's work we must acknowledge the ambiguities regarding Laclau's conception of populism, which has become broader in time and still remains a matter of academic discussion.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, as political actors, the leaders of Podemos show little interest in the ambiguities of Laclau's work. In their political interventions they embrace populism as 'a way of constructing the political' that allows them to challenge the political order. As mentioned in the previous section, this minimal definition of populism is compatible with the existence of two different approaches in Podemos. The first one, represented by Errejón, is aimed to overcome the classic cleavage *left/right* to broaden its social base by constructing the *people*. The second one, represented by Iglesias, uses Laclau's framework to identify the *people* with the *left* through a process of 'resignification'.

Finally, although it is not the main focus of this work, it must also be mentioned that Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism makes Antonio Gramsci a theoretical reference for Podemos.<sup>40</sup> Thus, this party has borrowed key concepts of Gramscian language – such as 'Common sense', 'Passive revolution', 'National-popular', 'Organic crisis', 'Historical bloc' and, above all, 'Hegemony' – to elaborate its discourse against the Spanish political system.<sup>41</sup>

## Analysis of Podemos' discourse

### *Analytical strategy and temporal framework*

As explained, Podemos' populism unfolds as a discursive logic that builds political order on the foundations of antagonism: the virtuous *people* is called to rebel against an enemy that, although it may adopt different identities, always constitutes an *anti-people* which must be excluded from the political community. Given that discourse has performative properties, political and social identities may be constantly reshaped. According to this idea, the effectiveness of a political narrative depends more on its appeal than on its ability to describe an objective truth. Thus, the party elites have a wide scope to adapt their narrative to any given context while keeping Schmitt's *friend/enemy* tension active.



The main object of analysis in this paper is Podemos' discourse, understood as the political statements directly issued by the party or its leaders and aimed at an external audience. Among the vast audiovisual and written materials produced by Podemos between **2014 and 2021**, we have narrowed the focus to the speeches delivered at key moments throughout the **analysed** period, such as political rallies, far-reaching parliamentary sessions, and Podemos' general assemblies. We have complemented these materials with relevant interviews and statements to the media. On the other hand, we have also included written documents such as opinion pieces in press, as well as Podemos' political manifestos and other relevant organic documents. In quantitative terms this corpus **contains** : 14 speeches at rallies or public events; 4 opinion pieces in press; 10 interviews or statements to the media; 1 tweet; 6 written documents from Podemos with political or organizational nature.<sup>42</sup> Within this corpus we have prioritized discourses on a series of key topics in the party's political agenda: the construction of *anti-people*, the political system born from the Constitution of 1978, the idea of representation, and their declared ideology.

These discursive manifestations have been subjected to a qualitative analysis. Thus, statements and semantic uses that show a performative use of language have been selected (shown in italics), in order to highlight the connection between Podemos' discursive strategy and Laclau's theory on populism. Special attention has been paid to the use of 'empty signifiers'<sup>43</sup> in order to 'resignify' words and give them a new meaning. Each verbatim fragment comes with an explanation of the discursive goal pursued at each political stage (fundamentally the dichotomization of the political field, the creation of new political identities or the reframing of the existing ones).

The temporal scope extends from the rise of Podemos in the European elections in May 2014 until Iglesias' resignation after his poor results in the Madrid regional elections in May 2021. Our goal is to cover the complete transformation of the Spanish party system due to the rise of Podemos. At the same time, the comparison between a pre-institutional (2014–2015) and an institutional period (2016–2021) in Podemos will reveal the discursive turns that try to reconcile the contradictions between Podemos on the streets and Podemos in the institutions.

Finally, the discourse analysis is complemented with the explanations offered by Podemos' leaders in academic works, conferences, political memoirs, etc. Far from being anecdotal, the unique relationship between theory and practice in this party led Iglesias and Errejón – both lecturers of Political Science – to openly reflect on their discursive strategies before these selected audiences. This 'public introspection' is especially relevant in order to understand the underlying motivations behind the narrative shifts detected in this party. Thus, we have **analysed** two academic articles and two books from Iglesias (including his memoirs) and one academic article and two books from Errejón (including his memoirs).

### ***Podemos on the streets: the people against the caste***

After their striking results in the European elections in May 2014, Podemos appeared in Spain with the intention of politically leveraging the impact generated **3 years** earlier by the 15-M movement. The promoters of this new party deemed the political disaffection created by this protest to open up a window of opportunity whereby the populism of

Laclau and Mouffe could be applied in Spain.<sup>44</sup> This formation sought to overcome the traditional clichés of the Spanish radical left to mobilize significant sections of an electorate hard hit by the crisis. In this regard, disaffection with representative institutions helped to reconfigure the political scenario through a populist discourse. In the words of Iglesias, the 15-M movement had created the conditions for ‘the Podemos hypothesis’.<sup>45</sup> 310

At this initial stage, Podemos’ discourse unfolds a populist challenge to the political order emerged from the Spanish Transition.<sup>46</sup> Benefiting from extensive media coverage throughout 2014 and 2015, its spokespersons are able to introduce a new antagonism in public debate, one that presents the *people* against the *caste* as counterpoint to the classical *left/right* antagonism. This strategy worked by dichotomizing the political arena in terms of *friend/enemy*, specifically one where *decent persons* confronted a corrupt elite that held democracy hostage: ‘There is a social majority of people who are aware that we are governed by swindlers, that the political parties of the regime are a part of the problem and not of the solution’.<sup>47</sup> With this narrative, Podemos set itself up as the voice of a general will that was being ignored by the institutions. 315 320

This antagonistic view forces a choice between Podemos, on the one hand, as the representative of *decent people* and, on the other hand, a *corrupt caste* that covers the entire Spanish political class, including the two major centre-left (PSOE) and centre-right (PP) parties which took turns to form the government.<sup>48</sup> It is a populist strategy that uses certain words – *the people*, *decent people*, *caste*, *those above* – as ‘empty signifiers’<sup>49</sup> in order to create a counter-hegemonic discourse. Taking advantage of the anti-elitist sentiment generated by the 15-M movement, Podemos reinforces the *people/caste* dichotomy with the *above/below* division. Thus, in the *March for Change*, organized in January 2015 at Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Iglesias states: ‘Those above depict change as experiment and chaos. We, those below, call it democracy’.<sup>50</sup> 325 330

At this initial stage, the strategy is to break the connection between democracy and the Spanish Transition to present the Constitution of 1978 as the result of spurious pacts between the reformers and pro-Franco groups.<sup>51</sup> With this goal in mind, Podemos popularizes the expression *Regime of 78*, especially powerful since it bore connotations harking back to the dictatorship as embodied in the expression ‘Franco’s regime’. This formulation retakes one of the 15-M slogans ‘Real democracy, now!’ and declares that the narrative of the elites has been hiding for decades that the Spanish Transition did not give way to a complete democracy, but to an oligarchical pact that excluded *the people*. Using Gramscian language, the members of Podemos present the Spanish Transition as a ‘passive revolution’, that is, a formal but undemocratic change since it did not include *the people* in a process of radical social change.<sup>52</sup> 335 340

To unmask what they denounce as a farce, Podemos presents the Spanish Constitution as a ‘lock’ that oppresses popular sovereignty.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, the ills that plague the nation are not attributable to specific actors, but to the original vices of a political system that maintains an implicit link to Franco’s regime. In this narrative, the Constitution is defined as the creation of *those above* to perpetuate the old order. Recovering democracy requires a ‘constituent process’.<sup>54</sup> 345

At this stage, Podemos’ discourse introduces a Manichean distinction between true and false representatives by taking up the 15-M slogan: ‘They don’t represent us!’. The dominant idea is that Podemos emerged as a ‘platform for people’s empowerment’ to 350

return sovereignty to the citizens.<sup>55</sup> It is, they state, about creating a regulatory framework ‘that would facilitate people’s initiatives so their voice could be heard in the institutions’.<sup>56</sup> In this narrative, political representation is a deformation of true democracy.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of praising direct democracy, Podemos’ manifesto does not propose a full alternative to representative democracy. 355

On the ideological realm, the discursive strategy during this period avoids the *left/right* dichotomy. Therefore, Podemos’ leaders do not express themselves in terms of social class or openly hail cultural myths of the Spanish left such as the Second Republic. They declare that Podemos belongs ‘neither to the left nor to the right’, a surprising statement if we compare it to 1) the previous belonging of several of its members to radical left organizations; 2) the integration of its European deputies in the United Left Group; 3) its frequent criticisms of ‘capitalism’ and ‘neoliberalism’; 4) its praising of Syriza, the Greek radical left party, as an ally with whom ‘to rebuild democracy in Europe against market totalitarianism’.<sup>58</sup> 360 365

Iglesias explains this contradiction in an interview in the newspaper *Público*, where he is highly critical with the Spanish radical left and its short-sighted vision on the key role that communication plays in framing the political context: ‘They can keep their red flag and their 5% share of the vote. We want to win’.<sup>59</sup> With a more academic language he states: When our adversaries dub us the ‘radical left’ and try, incessantly, to identify us with its symbols, they push us onto terrain where their victory is easier. Our most important political-discursive task was to contest the symbolic structure of positions, to fight for the ‘terms of the conversation’. In politics, those who decide the terms of the contest determine much of its outcome.<sup>60</sup> 370 375

Nevertheless, over the course of 2015, Podemos begins to reframe its discourse. Competing with the PSOE recommended, according to Errejón, moderating criticism to the Spanish Transition to grow among the large number of centre-left voters who still held a positive opinion of that historical period. Significantly, throughout 2015, the expression *Regime of 78* is replaced with *Pact of 78*, at the same time that the need for a constituent process disappears from Podemos’ discourse. In a series of opinion pieces published in the newspaper *El País* between July and December 2015, Iglesias presents a more amiable reading of the Spanish Transition: The Spanish political system that we call the 1978 system – in honour of its Constitution – is the result of our successful Transition: a process of metamorphosis, guided by the elites of the Franco era and of the democratic opposition, that transformed Spain from a dictatorship into a comparable liberal democracy.<sup>61</sup> 380 385

According to this discursive turn, the 15-M movement had risen to condemn ‘the betrayal of this agreement by the oligarchies’<sup>62</sup> and in order to open a ‘new Transition’ where ‘the fundamental protagonists will not be the political and economic elites, but the citizens’.<sup>63</sup> In this line, Podemos’ manifesto for the regional elections in May 2015 states: ‘We have institutions that we view with pride; we have come a long way. We have all the pieces, all we need is to arrange them, fit them, and balance them. Even though we have good quality materials, they have fallen into the hands of clumsy, short-sighted and wasteful governments’.<sup>64</sup> 390 395

In this new scenario, Podemos’ demands are rooted in the spirit of 1978 and seek to recover its institutions for *the people*. Similarly, its leaders introduce mentions to social

democracy as an ideological reference, Iglesias even calling on ‘true socialists’ to vote for his party.<sup>65</sup> This turn paves the way for Podemos to reach the institutions.

### ***Podemos in the institutions: from ‘left vs. right’ to ‘democracy vs. fascism’***

In the general elections of December 2015, Podemos obtained more than five million 400 votes and became the third group in the Congress of Deputies. This spectacular result started a profound transformation in the Spanish party system, making Iglesias declare ‘the end of the turn-based system’.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, the entry into parliament also laid bare the contradictions of Podemos’ anti-establishment rhetoric.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the leaders of Podemos began to moderate their criticism of representative institutions while present- 405 ing themselves as genuine representatives of the people. In January 2016, in an opinion piece published in *El País*, Errejón claimed that Podemos’ arrival to parliament constituted a ‘plebeian breakthrough [...] of those that until now had been excluded from the halls of power, to the extent that their arrival in the institutions is viewed with dismay’.<sup>68</sup> While, on the one hand, it is assumed the political pluralism represented in 410 parliament, on the other hand, Podemos maintains its original distinction between true and false representatives.

The new institutional period led to increasing tensions between two different understandings of populism within the party. Errejón’s supporters argued that Podemos’ success was due to a continued exercise of cross-cutting populism that could subsume 415 the *left/right* divide within the *above/below* dichotomy.<sup>69</sup> For its part, the dominant group, composed of Iglesias’ followers, was in favour of reactivating the traditional dichotomies and competing within the *left/right* continuum.<sup>70</sup>

Podemos’ discourse began to reflect this new scenario. In early 2016, references to the *left/right* axis gained ground in the party’s public documents and in the speeches of its 420 leaders. Along with this, the possibility of forming a coalition government with the PSOE led Podemos to include or exclude this party from *the caste*, based on how the talks were proceeding. Thus, in January, when Podemos failed to reach an agreement with the socialists, Iglesias stated: We do not trust the PSOE apparatchiks, but we admire their bases and their voters. While the old apparatchiks and their professionals miss no 425 opportunity to do the opposite of what they preach, negotiating with those that they themselves called ‘the right’, the socialist bases **sympathize** more with us than with these right-wing parties.<sup>71</sup>

Iglesias’ speech opened up a breach within *the caste*, until then composed of the PP and the PSOE. In fact, he explains, only the PSOE leaders are a part of *the caste*, since they 430 prefer to negotiate with *the right* betraying their bases, which had always been part of the *people*.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, the PSOE leaders could redeem itself by forming, together with Podemos and IU, a ‘government that was progressive and focused on change’ that would lead to a ‘new Transition’.<sup>73</sup>

If we analyse the *friend/enemy* dialectic during this period, we see how Podemos’ 435 strategists continue relying on the *people/anti-people* antagonism. Nevertheless, the difference with respect to the pre-institutional period is that now the *anti-people* is reconfigured depending on possible alliances. Thus, the circumstances invite excluding the PSOE from *the caste* and **emphasize** its left-leaning position as an ally against *the right* (the new *anti-people*). This strategic use of signifiers fits within the theoretical paradigm 440

of Podemos' leaders: Politics is a battle in which the composition of the sides cannot be taken for granted or determined by any social, physical or historical condition, but which is itself the result of a discursive struggle to articulate differences and determine the border of *us/them*.<sup>74</sup>

In March 2016, the failed presidential investiture of the socialist candidate, Pedro Sánchez, led to new elections to be held in June. In May, the election polls led Podemos' leaders to sign a coalition agreement with IU, considering that the resulting alliance – Unidos Podemos – could surpass the PSOE as the leading party of the left. This decision was a turning point in the evolution of Podemos, as it broke with Errejón's strategy of cross-cutting populism. Thus, during the electoral campaign, Iglesias presented Unidos Podemos as a group called upon to 'occupy the new social-democratic space'.<sup>75</sup> Faced with the contradiction of allying themselves with a party that only a year ago had been disqualified as a member of the traditional left ('they can keep their red flag') and which included the Communist Party at its core, Iglesias argued that 'Marx and Engels were social democrats' and that, in any case, 'signifiers are the least important'.<sup>76</sup> As Errejón explains, Iglesias was confident in the possibility of reframing the *left/right* axis through a populist logic: 'Pablo believes that from his position in the media he can handle this attempt to confine us and, thus, still represent larger majorities, something like "it doesn't matter to join forces with IU, as far as it is me who keeps appearing in TV"'.<sup>77</sup>

The alliance with IU led Podemos to frame political competition in *right/left* terms while also trying to keep the populist confrontation *oligarchies/'those below'*. Nevertheless, the poor results of Unidas Podemos in June 2016 – they lost 1.1 million votes compared to the 6.1 million obtained separately in 2015 – revived the internal debate. Errejón insisted on retaking the cross-cutting populism practiced in 2014 and 2015: only by resignifying the essential concepts by which the public understand politics – *people, democracy, justice* – could they create a new 'common sense' that would gain the support of large social sectors. From his viewpoint, the performative power of discourses was not unlimited and, therefore, the coalition with IU relegated Podemos to the leftmost corner of the political board. This criticism was expressed in the political document presented at the Second Citizens' Assembly of Podemos (known as Vistalegre II), held in February 2017: Oligarchies require a folkloric and impotent left. What can enhance and bring this process of open change to a successful conclusion is a wide-ranging popular, cross-cutting and democratic movement. The force exerted by those above cannot be countered by the left, but by the **heterogeneous** and hybrid majority of those below.<sup>78</sup>

However, the party base supported Iglesias' strategy, establishing a Podemos that was co-aligned with IU, anchored to the left and focused on public protests. This strategy sought to keep the party connected to the demands of social movements in order to prevent its assimilation within the system.<sup>79</sup> Errejón's defeat in Vistalegre II put an end to internal debate at the cost of excluding the critics from the party leadership.<sup>80</sup>

However, as explained in the theoretical section, the leftist turn imposed by Iglesias does not mean the end of populism in Podemos but rather the strengthening of its strategic dimension. From this moment onwards, Podemos' populism focused more than ever on the ability of discourses to create a political order not necessarily determined by an external objective truth. This approach, derived from Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist thought could work for the radical left agenda established in Vistalegre II by 'resignifying' the left as the *people* and the right as the *caste/oligarchy*.

Thus, after the general assembly, Podemos' discourse incorporates elements of the traditional left and hardens it with a rhetoric that evokes the fight against Franco's regime.

Within the period of 2017–2019, Podemos retakes its original challenge to the Spanish Transition, although this time explicitly remarking its betrayal of the legacy of the Second Republic and the anti-Francoist fight.<sup>81</sup> Iglesias also begins to openly attack the constitutional monarchy as the symbol of a political system that has not fully broken away from the dictatorship. In June 2017, at the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the first democratic elections, Iglesias **criticized** the speech made by the king Felipe VI as it drew an unacceptable 'correspondence between those who fought for democracy and those who defended the dictatorship'.<sup>82</sup> In December 2017, Iglesias again draws a connection between the monarchy and the dictatorship at an event that paid homage to the victims of Franco's regime: Here we've been sold a fabrication where Spain must be identified firstly with the monarchy [...] In the history of Spain, the monarchy is a symbol of corruption, of empire, of rigged elections, of limited suffrage, limits on constitutional and democratic development. In Spain the monarchy **symbolizes** the fact that a dictator chose a member of the House of Bourbon to succeed to the title of king. The monarchy is not something that any Spanish democrat can be proud of.<sup>83</sup>

In June 2018, during the no-confidence motion presented by the socialist leader, Pedro Sánchez, against the President Rajoy, Iglesias' discourse sought to integrate all the forces opposed to the system emerged from the Spanish Transition. The *friend/enemy* construction continued placing the PP as the *oligarchy (anti-people)* against which it was necessary to make a democratic front that integrated the Spanish left as well as the Basque and Catalan nationalist movements. For Iglesias, this group of ideologically disparate forces could be bound together by the elements of anti-Francoist resistance and the call for a pluri-national Spain.<sup>84</sup> Against this, the constitutional pact of 1978 constituted an oligarchic legacy. In the parliamentary debate Iglesias made the socialist candidate a proposal to overcome the *statu quo*: There is a new Spain that does not believe in kings, there is a Spain that calls upon you to establish a dialogue. Let us come together to build a Spain that will house a nation called Euskadi and a nation called Catalonia. We are willing to build this Spain, one of solidarity and multiple nationalities, with you.<sup>85</sup>

In December 2018, the main highlight of the regional elections in Andalusia was the rise of Vox, a radical right populist party<sup>86</sup> emerged from a split in the PP in 2014 but without political relevance until then. This grabbed the media's attention and led Iglesias to declare an 'anti-Fascist alert': It is time to **mobilize** to defend our freedoms, to defend social justice and to defend solidarity and ultimately, democracy [...] Against the far right, we shall demonstrate commitment and militant anti-Fascism. These elections in Andalusia will be remembered due to the revival of a far-right force, one post-Francoist that makes no bones about it, a neo-liberal force, a chauvinist political force against women and against the working people of our country.<sup>87</sup>

However, Errejón did not support Iglesias' call, considering that there were no 'four hundred thousand Fascist Andalusians' and calling for self-criticism regarding Podemos' poor results.<sup>88</sup> The former *number two* of Podemos distanced himself from Iglesias' new discursive strategy, one that took advantage of Vox's appearance to reframe the *left/right* antagonism not only as a fight *democracy/oligarchy*, but also as an ultimate fight between *democracy* and *Fascism*.

**Podemos in power: anti-fascism as democracy**

After the general elections in April 2019, Pedro Sánchez, acting President, rejected an alliance with Podemos. New elections were held in November and, this time, PSOE and Podemos agreed to form a coalition government with Iglesias as the Vice-President. These elections also resulted in a new distribution of power in the Congress, with a significant decrease for Podemos –7 MPs less than in April and 19 less than in 2016– and the growth of Vox, which won 52 seats, 28 more than in April 2019, its first entry into the Spanish parliament.

In this new scenario, Podemos – under the undisputed leadership of Iglesias after Errejón’s exit in 2019 – would reinvigorate its populist discourse through two thematic lines. Firstly, the discourse of Iglesias converts into interchangeable the concepts *oligarchy* and *fascism*, while, at the same time, highlights anti-Fascism as the key element that defines the *people* as the only legitimate actor in Spanish politics. Secondly, a new discourse on power, its nature and its true holders aimed at justifying Podemos’ presence and actions in a government headed by the PSOE (formerly identified as *the caste*).

Regarding the first thematic line, it could be considered the climax of Iglesias’ discursive turn. Just like Mudde and Rovira have underlined, one of the main meanings of *people* in all populist discourses is ‘sovereign’, that is to say, ‘source of political power’ and the ‘ruler’.<sup>89</sup> In this sense, the transition from *oligarchy* to *fascism* must be interpreted in the context of Iglesias’ conception of the Spanish Transition.

In Iglesias’ discourse, the very fact that democracy came to Spain through a series of agreements between, on the one hand, politicians who had formed part of Franco’s regime and, on the other hand, politicians that had opposed it, degrades the quality of democracy. Recovering Podemos’ original challenge to the political order, Iglesias denounces a certain illegitimacy of the Spanish political system by pointing out the continuity between the Spanish Transition as a reform and the covert survival of the oligarchic powers of Francoism, resulting in a flawed democracy: Spain’s post-1975 transition [...] left the Francoist economic elites untouched and helped to recycle a good part of the political and administrative leadership, who retained their positions within the state apparatus even after the landslide election victory of the PSOE in 1982.<sup>90</sup>

From Iglesias’ viewpoint, in the Spanish context, the fight against the *oligarchy* takes the form of the fight against the continuity of Francoism/fascism in the Spanish right. Here, the rise of Vox becomes a key element in Podemos’ discursive strategy, intended to boost from power the *friend/enemy* confrontation typical of populism. Iglesias especially opted to develop the principle of the ‘anti-Fascist alert’. In this sense, prior to the electoral cycle of 2019, both the PP and the new liberal party Ciudadanos (Citizens), represented the *anti-people*, the oligarchic powers against whom *the people* must stand.<sup>91</sup> However, Vox’s surge allowed Iglesias to associate the signifiers *right* and *oligarchy* with *Fascism* (as the continuity of Francoism) and the *people* with anti-Fascism as the core of democratic values. Thus, two ideas are predominant in Podemos’ discourse: ‘Fascism has been **normalized** in Spain’<sup>92</sup> and, as a consequence, ‘to be a democrat, one must be an anti-Fascist’.<sup>93</sup>

Specifically, Iglesias’ discursive strategy hardens the party’s anti-Francoist rhetoric as a Spanish expression of anti-Fascism. If Podemos’ strategy in 2014–2015 was to avoid any connection with the communist political and cultural heritage, at a later stage, Iglesias

advocates for a populist interpretation of communism that makes it compatible with the anti-oligarchical struggle that makes a real democracy possible: ‘Communism is a will to power to represent interests other than those of the oligarchy rather than a kind of utopia full of good intentions’.<sup>94</sup> As he explains, Podemos stopped using *caste* because the concept had exhausted its usefulness.<sup>95</sup> Instead, they decided to use *oligarchy* to retain their populist presentation of politics as a clash between *those above* and *those below*. 580

Thus, in parliamentary debates with Vox – a party that made anti-communism one of its main arguments – Iglesias would carry Podemos’ identification with the left to a new stage, assuming the representation of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE): Those in this Chamber speak much about communism, and for me it is an honour to represent a political group which includes a party with nearly a hundred years of history, the Communist Party of Spain, which made it possible to defeat the dictatorship, to build democracy in our country and the Constitution of 78, despite people like yourselves, who were never in favour of the Constitution, who were never in favour of democracy and that, by increasingly hiding behind the figure of the monarch, you weaken the position of the monarchy, because if the monarchy was successful in this country, it was precisely because it distanced itself from people like you. Your Honour, there would be no democracy in France or in Italy without the actions of the communists in those countries, who are **recognized** as heroes of the nation, who fought against Fascism which unfortunately, is sometimes resounding in your discourses.<sup>96</sup> 585 590 595

In this parliamentary speech, Iglesias draws a link between anti-Fascism, communism and the building of democracy in post-war Europe in order to support his new hailing of the history of the PCE as a part of Podemos’ political and cultural background. In Iglesias’ discourse Podemos and Vox embody the most extreme version of the *friend/enemy* political relationship and also **monopolize** the representation of Fascism and anti-Fascism in the history of Spain. While Vox represents a return to Spanish Fascism as a ‘reaction to democratic progress’, Podemos is the promoter of this progress given that it is at once the heir of the anti-Fascist tradition and the protagonist of the **democratizing** impulse – politically, socially and territorially – that began with the 15-M. 600 605

Fascism has always been a reaction to democratic progress and this is a reality. In Spain, there have been two great impulses that have defined the politics of the last decade. One impulse is related to the 15-M movement, and is a **democratizing** impulse, and surely Podemos is the electoral translation of this drive. Then we have the territorial question. What 1 October implies, that aggressive speech by the King where he undeniably interferes in politics, creates all the ingredients for these far-right ideas that were already noticeable in the PP and in Ciudadanos, to have a new subject that says, ‘look here, this is me, devoid of nuance’ and additionally with significant media support, helping these ideas to circulate. It is clear that the push for the transformation of the State in Spain has provoked a far right and antidemocratic reaction, which is basically Fascism.<sup>97</sup> 610 615

The elements of Iglesias’ discourse once in government constitute a **radicalization** of Podemos’ narrative about the Transition as a ‘passive revolution’ in Gramscian terms. Namely, as a process of political change that allowed the Spanish *oligarchy* –the economic and political elites sheltered by Franco’s regime – to survive the regime’s transformation, **neutralizing** the **democratizing** potential of *the people*. The presence of Vox enables Iglesias to take a step forward in redefining the antagonistic logic that structures his 620



populist discourse, overlapping the meanings of *elite-oligarchy-right-anti-democracy-fascism* in a ‘chain of equivalence’, as theorized by Laclau and Mouffe.<sup>98</sup>

The evolution of Podemos’ rhetoric shows Iglesias’ confidence in the performative properties of discourse. As we have seen, the categories of *caste*, *oligarchy* or *fascism* are fluid and applicable according to strategy. Just as the PSOE was included and excluded from the *caste*, the category of *fascism* may also be expanded to include PP or Ciudadanos, parties deemed conservative and liberal, respectively, in the European Parliament. In this line, Iglesias stood as Podemos’ candidate for the Madrid regional elections in May 2021 with a discourse that invited to choose between *democracy* or *fascism* in a situation diagnosed as dangerous for political liberties in Spain. Thus, on 25 April, coinciding with the Portuguese commemoration of the Carnation Revolution, Iglesias published a tweet stating: ‘Democracy or Fascism. 4 May’.<sup>99</sup>

To understand Podemos’ populist discourse once in power it is worth going back to the association made by Iglesias from 2019 onwards between the role of the *people* in the anti-Francoist resistance and the social advances in the Constitution of 1978, thus distancing itself from a wholesale rejection of the Constitution. Iglesias identified the social articles of the Constitution as the core achievements of the people’s anti-Francoist resistance, while also presenting its political aspects – the form of the State, its symbols, its powers and its territorial organization – as elements of continuity with Franco’s regime, whose defence is monopolized by right-wing parties: ‘My favourite article, Article 128: All the wealth of the country in its different forms regardless of its ownership, shall be subordinated to the general interest. Which party is willing to fulfil Article 128 of the Spanish Constitution?’<sup>100</sup>

Along with this selective appropriation of the Constitution, Iglesias develops a theory on power, its nature and its true holders, as outlined since the 2019 electoral cycle. His argument is that, in fact, political power in Spain does not lie within the parliament: ‘there are twenty families in this country that are more powerful than any member of parliament’.<sup>101</sup> Once in power, Podemos would keep up this populist narrative by highlighting the existence of ‘hidden powers’ who work in the shadows against the government. This is the key to understand, for example, Iglesias’ call to social movements to pressurize the government that Podemos itself is a part of: Civil society and social movements must accept that their capacity to exert pressure is a requisite for the possibility that the government can perform certain actions. We need you to put pressure on us, because if the only pressure comes from economic, media or hidden powers, then the result of this correlation of forces will be less propitious than what is required by society.<sup>102</sup>

Podemos presents its role in the government as an instrument of *the people* to denounce the lack of democratic legitimacy that, according to its own diagnosis, characterizes the Spanish political system. For example, Iglesias stated that ‘there is no situation of complete political and democratic normality in Spain when of the leaders of the two parties that govern Catalonia, one is in prison and the other in Brussels’. Strikingly, the Vice-President Iglesias took the side of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov – who, in reference to Catalonia, stated that there are ‘political prisoners’ in Spain – and against the opinion of the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, González Laya, who rejected Lavrov’s declarations.<sup>103</sup>

Aimed at highlighting the problems that prevent a true democracy in Spain, Podemos denounced conspiracies by state institutions to subvert the peoples' verdict that placed a leftist coalition in government. According to Iglesias: 'It is worth asking if there are State powers, military personnel, high-ranking officials of the police and the Guardia Civil and judges who conspire against democracy in Spain, attempting to revert what was made clear in the polls'.<sup>104</sup> 670

After his poor results in Madrid's regional elections, Iglesias surprisingly resigned from all his positions and abandoned institutional politics. His resignation closed a cycle in Podemos in which Iglesias and Errejón, regardless of their strategic and ideological differences, developed a populist style of politics based on the construction of antagonisms through discursive practices. In his farewell speech Iglesias denounced the existence of 'oligarchies that exert their immense political, economic and media power so that their institutions continue to defend their interests and not those of the majority'.<sup>105</sup> 675 680

## Conclusions

The growing literature on populism in power warns about the risk of populist leaders to undermine the institutions of liberal democracy and transform it into a competitive authoritarianism or even an autocracy.<sup>106</sup> However, populist parties greatly differ across each country and their actual performance varies depending on contextual factors,<sup>107</sup> which makes it difficult to raise generalizations. 685

Some authors state that populists in power face a strong tension between keeping their anti-elitist profile, on the one hand, and assuming government responsibilities, on the other hand.<sup>108</sup> Sometimes, this contradiction ends up with the loss of their original populist features.<sup>109</sup> In other cases, populist leaders resort to their communication skills to maintain a populist narrative regardless of their specific performance in government.<sup>110</sup> 690

In this context, our study of Podemos enriches the literature with a rare case in the European environment: a left-wing populist party that performs as a junior partner in a coalition government. The analysis of Podemos' discourse throughout the period 2014–2021 – covering its appearance, institutionalization and latter participation in the Spanish government – shows how this party has adapted its populist rhetoric to deal with the contradiction of being a privileged actor within a system that it once wanted to eradicate. In this sense, the article shows that, when unfolded as a discursive strategy, populism allows a great adaptability to political context. 695 700

Podemos' populism is based on the ability of political discourse to construct the political order by creating antagonisms, that is, a political 'we' (*people*), legitimized to govern, against a political 'them' (*anti-people*) to be blamed for all problems. In this sense, the ability to constantly reframe the *friend/enemy* dichotomy is explained by Podemos' leaders understanding of politics as a cultural practice focused on the generation of political identities. From this anti-essentialist viewpoint, indebted to Laclau and Mouffe, politics is a battle for discursive hegemony in which the 'we' and the 'them' can be successively redefined regardless of any criteria other than discourse itself. 705

The confidence of Iglesias and Errejón on the performative properties of political discourse works as an interpretative core of Podemos' narrative throughout 2014–2021. Thus, a diachronic analysis has shown that Podemos' populism evolves from the *people/* 710

*caste* antagonism, ever-present in its origins, to the *democracy/fascism* division, which marks its rhetoric as party in power. This entailed replacing the spatial continuum of *above/below* with the classical divide of *left/right*, more in line with the underlying culture of this formation. As explained, this shift shows the difficult coexistence of two understandings of Laclau's populism, which finally led to a party split. From Errejon's view, the performative power of discourses has its own limits, which recommended a cross-cutting populism to broaden Podemos' social base. Iglesias, however, was confident in 'resignifying' the *left/right* dichotomy through a populist discourse able to keep in force the *people/elite* tension.

From here, we can understand, for example, Podemos' changing relationship with the PSOE. A party initially considered, along with the PP, as the *caste* (*anti-people*) becomes, once in power, a necessary ally after reframing *people* as synonymous with anti-Fascism. Similarly, between 2014 and 2021, Podemos shifts from disqualifying the *Regime of 78* as a creation of *those above* to linking its demands to the spirit of 1978 and its 'successful Transition'; to eventually make a selective reading of the Spanish Constitution where its social articles constitute a democratic conquest while other articles show a continuity with Franco's dictatorship. Similarly, at the ideological level, Podemos shifted from rejecting the terms 'left' and 'right' in 2014–2015 to present itself in 2016 as a 'new social democracy', to eventually proclaim itself in 2020 the bearer of the anti-Fascist legacy of the Spanish Communist Party. In this discursive evolution, the rise of Vox as a radical right party allowed Iglesias to overlap the meanings of *elite-oligarchy-right-anti-democracy-fascism* in a 'chain of equivalence'.

Once in power, Podemos resorts again to the performative properties of political discourses to sort out the contradiction inherent in being an anti-system party that becomes a part of the government. Thus, the party strategists, led by Iglesias, have denounced the presence of 'hidden powers' (*anti-people*) who work in the shadows to prevent Podemos from executing its agenda for *the people*. Hence, this party has justified its role in government as a counterweight to the oligarchies that surreptitiously prevent the full **democratization** of the political system. In this way, Podemos completes a populist journey that took it, in barely **6 years**, from the streets to the institutions, and finally to government without renouncing its claim of being the genuine people's representative.

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24. Laclau, *On Populist ... op. cit.*, p. 18. 825
25. In fact, in the TV show (*Fort Apache*) hosted by Iglesias, Laclau was the intellectual reference in the program dedicated in May 2016 to the concept of populism and its relationship with the left. The program is available at <https://www.hispantv.com/showepisode/fort-apache/fort-apache—populismo-de-izquierdas/32138>
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27. Laclau, *On Populist ... op. cit.* p. 87.
28. Errejón and Mouffe, *Podemos. In the name ... op. cit.*, p. 57.
29. Iglesias, 'Spain on Edge ...', *op. cit.*, p. 28.
30. It is important to note the close relationship -academic, political and personal- between Podemos' leaders and Laclau and Mouffe. Even though Laclau died in 2014, the year in which Podemos was founded, Mouffe has been a regular guest in the TV shows presented by Iglesias in which populism has been topic of discussion. In addition, the book *Podemos. In the name of the people*, by Errejón in conversation with Mouffe is one of the main sources to understand the links between Podemos's populist discourse and the political thought of these authors. 835
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37. Errejón and Mouffe, *Podemos. In the name ... , op. cit.*, pp. 54–64; Booth and Baert, *The Dark Side of Podemos ... , op. cit.*, pp. 20–43.
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40. Booth and Baert, *The Dark Side of Podemos . . . op. cit.*; Del Palacio, 'El genio bolchevique . . .', *op. cit.*
41. Iglesias defines 'hegemony' as 'the power of the leading elites to convince subaltern groups that they share the same interests, including them within a general consensus, albeit in a subordinate role'. See Iglesias, 'Understanding Podemos', *op. cit.*, p. 10. See also Laclau, *On populist . . . , op. cit.*, pp. 248–249. 865
42. Since the qualitative approach of this research requires restricting the material to be analysed and interpreted, it is intended that the discursive manifestations are representative of the general strategy of Podemos. Thus, the analysis will focus primarily on the speeches of Pablo Iglesias, general secretary and leader of Podemos until May 2021, and Íñigo Errejón, political secretary and *number two* of the party until 2017. Both leaders have had a key role in the ideology and communicative strategy of Podemos during the analysed period. 870
43. Laclau, *On Populist . . . , op. cit.*, p. 129.
44. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony . . . , op. cit.*; Laclau, *On Populist . . . op. cit.* 875
45. Iglesias, 'Understanding Podemos', *op. cit.*, p. 14.
46. Franzé, 'The Podemos Discourse . . .', *op. cit.*
47. P. Iglesias, *Discurso en el acto de inicio de campaña de las elecciones europeas en Valencia* [Video], Youtube, 9 May 2014, min. 28:50, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8RGcUpK6fE>. 880
48. In this period, Podemos tried to assimilate the PSOE with the PP, redescribing its moderating role in the 1980s as an ally in Spain of the Reagan and Thatcher's neoliberal offensive. See Errejón and Mouffe, *Podemos: In the name . . . op. cit.*, pp. 28–29. To do so, Podemos could rely on the radical economic turn that the socialist president, Rodríguez-Zapatero, had taken in May 2010 in the face of the European sovereign debt crisis. This U-turn had been perceived by many citizens as a betrayal to PSOE's social democratic principles. 885
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## Disclosure statement

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**Q4** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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