

Summary

The challenge to traditional party families in Southern Europe: the cases of Podemos, SYRIZA and the Five Stars Movement

Podemos, SYRIZA and FSM were described by a conservative newspaper in Spain as an “anti-system trident”, which came “dangerously close to power”. From the one hand, their electoral success seemed to be related with the dissatisfaction with traditional political parties and the austerity reforms implemented by both progressive and conservative parties when in government. From the other hand, the raise of the three parties is also associated with the spread of the protests against austerity (especially in the first two cases) and political corruption.

However, what my research is intended to show is that SYRIZA, Podemos and FSM have institutionalized in different contexts with different political opportunity structures (POSs). Mostly, they are all but similar in their ideological and organizational features, despite sharing one crucial feature, a vote-seeking strategy along with an anti-establishment ideology. SYRIZA, before its unification under this label, was an alliance among different parties and associations, whose aim was the creation of a new way toward socialism. Podemos emerged out of a social movement – the so-called Indignados – thanks to the entrepreneurship of a group of political-science scholars and left-wing activists. Five Stars Movement, on the contrary, is a unique organization, centred on the founders, Beppe Grillo, a former comedian and Gianroberto Casaleggio, a web-entrepreneur died in 2016.

In order to reach this goal, I frame my work with two broad research questions, which are further detailed in a set of hypotheses in Chapter 4.

The first research question I want to address is the following:

1. In what ways, Podemos, SYRIZA and FSM may be considered different organizationally, ideologically and both in terms of the patterns of competitions and of the political opportunity structures?

Using Key’s distinction (1964) between party functions, namely party government, party in the electorate and party organization, my focus is on the latter and, partly, on the second, since from a sociological standpoint the ideological articulation of any party is aimed (at least in principle) at both giving voices to those issues raised in the society and to shaping electoral preferences. The study of parties-as-organization has a long history: Michels (1911 [1966]) and Ostrogorski (1912 [1991]) pioneering analyses were focused on those issues. More recently, Duverger (1954) was the first scholar to note in the first half of the XX Century a “contagion from the left” in the

organizational features of the bourgeoisie parties; the cadre party – with a small membership and with a loose coalition among the elected members – should have adapted to the by-then emerging mass parties in order to be better equipped to compete in democracies with a universal suffrage. Epstein (1967), on the contrary, highlighted a contagion from the right, that is an Americanization of party politics in Western Europe. Without going into detail here, even the catch-all (Kirchheimer 1966) and the cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995, 1996, 2009) in this perspective are a by-product of the analysis of parties “as-organizations”.

Yet, the mere description of the differences is inadequate to provide an analytical framework that is aimed at disentangling the puzzle of the rise of those parties and their success in their own contexts. I am aware that finding a mono-causal explanation in the three national is a too ambitious task and, more important, epistemologically and methodologically wrong for a supply-side analysis. The political system, the electorate, the economic performance of each countries, the policy records of the parties in governments, the politicization of new issues, may be regarded as valid elements to explain the electoral success of political contenders.

More modestly, using a Most Different Similar Outcome (MDSO) framework of analysis I try to encapsulate the “supply” of these political parties, rather than the “demand”-side. With this premise in mind, my second research question is:

2. Which supply-side condition(s) are better equipped to provide a partial explanation of the electoral success of SYRIZA, Podemos and FSM?