



Tensions between populist and feminist politics: The case of the Spanish left populist party Podemos

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the interplay of left populist and feminist politics through a case study of Podemos (‘we can’), a Spanish left populist party that reproduces a dominant gendered logic of politics despite its feminist interpretation of democratic renewal. I argue that this is the result of fundamental contradictions between the feminist and populist projects of political transformation that coexist in the party. Even if left populism offers a more productive terrain for gender equality than right populism, central tenets of populism disrupt feminist commitments and goals. Chief among these are the oversimplification of the political field based on a limited diagnosis, the exclusionary appeals to the homeland and to a homogenizing collectivity of the people, the dominant masculine and personalistic logics of charismatic leaders, the prioritization of electoral success over other forms of political transformation, and the resulting gendered political culture that marginalizes empowerment, inclusion, and participatory democratic practices.

Keywords

Left populism, feminist politics, Spain, gendered political culture, political transformation

Introduction

As a growing force in nations across the globe, populism has been variously defined as a political style, a strategy, a discourse, an ideology, and a political logic—typically

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interpreted as a right-wing phenomenon. In analyzing gender dimensions of populism, researchers have examined leaders, followers, and discourse. Emphasizing the exclusionary and masculine style of far-right politics, gender scholars have depicted populist actors as enemies of pluralism who lack any substantive interest in gender equality. Few studies focus on left populism or how distinctive elements of left populist actors facilitate a productive dialogue with feminist politics, such as the discursive construction of an inclusionary and diverse ‘people’ and a decentralized and plural ‘homeland,’ and the commitment to limited leadership and participatory democracy (Kantola and Lombardo, 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013).

This paper explores the interplay of populist and feminist politics through a case study of Podemos (‘we can’), a Spanish left populist party that reproduces a dominant gendered logic of politics despite its feminist interpretation of democratic renewal. Through discourse analysis of leaders’ official rhetoric, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with grassroots members, I trace populist and feminist elements in the discourses and practices of Podemos. My analysis reveals fundamental contradictions between feminist and populist projects of political transformation, even if the attempt to construct inclusionary political subjectivities and the pro-egalitarian principles of leadership, participation, and organization promoted by left populism offer a more productive terrain for gender equality than right populism. These frictions include the simplification of the political field and a limited diagnosis based on a reductionist antagonism with the elite, the exclusionary implications in the appeals to the homeland and to a collectivity of the people, the dominant masculine and personalistic logics of charismatic leadership, and a tendency to reproduce a gendered political culture based on the prioritization of organizational efficiency and electoral competition.

The analysis of a left populist party with feminist commitments provides a unique opportunity to understand the specific tensions between two projects of political transformation that are on the rise and often in opposition—as feminist protests mobilize against conservative populist actors worldwide. The study of Podemos’ party culture not only substantiates the importance of examining the ideological diversity of populism, but also illuminates the gendered dynamics of a populist framework in political organizations. The article is structured as follows: the first section discusses populism and feminism as two projects of political transformation and provides a conceptual framework to analyze their relation. The second situates Podemos in the Spanish political context. The third addresses the methodology of the study. The fourth traces the tensions between the populist and feminist elements in Podemos. The fifth discusses implications of this analysis.

Populist and feminist politics

I define populist and feminist politics as two projects of political transformation. In particular, I focus on the transformation of political institutions and the problems that populism and feminism identify in mechanisms of political representation. I explore different dimensions in which right populism, left populism, and feminist politics overlap and contradict, setting the conceptual bases for a comparative analysis of Podemos’ discourses and practices. These dimensions include diagnoses of the political problem; proposed solutions concerning type of leadership, assessment of representative democracy, and role of the state and the nation; and the conceptualization of political change. Table 1 summarizes

Table 1. Comparison between right populism, left populism, and feminist politics.

	Right populism	Left populism	Feminist politics
Diagnosis	Antagonism of the elite versus the people Misbehavior of elite, powerless people		Reproduction of gendered norms and mechanisms in institutional politics
Proposed solutions	Charismatic leaders to <i>represent</i> the ‘common people’ (dominant masculine imagery)		Increase descriptive and substantive representation of women and marginalized groups
	Reduced political representation and participation	Limited leadership Participatory democracy	Alternative practices to transform gender patterns in parties and institutions
	Homeland	Decentralized and plural homeland	Beyond the centrality of the state, local governance
Political change	Electoral success as a transformational event (centrality of political communication).		Radical transformation and pragmatic intervention

characteristics of right and left populisms and feminist politics extensively recognized in the academic literature across these dimensions, which I develop in greater detail below.

Populism and left populism

My analysis follows Mudde’s (2004) minimal definition of populism as an ideology that is based on an antagonism between the people and the elite, characterized by the claim of populist leaders to grasp a general will.¹ The literature on populism identifies other elements frequently associated with populist actors, such as charismatic leadership, appeals to the homeland, and highly emotional rhetoric (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Kampwirth, 2010; Kriesi, 2014). The emphasis on defining common features of populism often results in minimizing the distinction between right and left populist actors. Political ideology matters, however, producing very different phenomena during the last two decades, such as the rise of radical right actors in Europe (with the exceptions of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain) and progressive populist forces in Latin America (De la Torre, 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013).

Both right and left populisms diagnose an antagonism between the people and the elite, provoked by misbehavior of the elite, which renders the people powerless. What distinguishes right and left populisms is the construction of the *people*. Right populism appeals to ethnic and nation-based identities as a basis for excluding the corrupt elite as well as ‘others,’ most notably ethnic minorities and immigrants (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Left populism attempts to build an inclusionary and anti-essentialist conception of the people, often appealing to socioeconomically subordinated classes who momentarily embody the popular subject (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Laclau, 2007).

In response to the misbehavior of the elite, populism relies on charismatic leaders, political figures with extraordinary qualities who create a specific bond, an imaginary identification, with their followers and voters (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Symbolically,

charismatic leaders embody the people, whether based on their class or ethnic origin, individual virtues, or status as outsiders (Kriesi, 2014). This type of personalized *representation* erodes democratizing and participatory principles of left politics, portraying citizens as subjects who need charismatic guidance. By contrast, left populist actors formulate a conception of limited leadership; as *primus inter pares*, the leader momentarily represents the popular subject (Laclau, 2007; Mouffe, 2018).

The homeland and the nostalgia for the 'heartland' are fundamental devices of populist rhetoric to articulate a political subject against the elite (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016). Left populist actors differentiate themselves by constructing a vision of the homeland that replaces exclusionary land-based and nativist identities, characteristic of right populism, with forms of constitutional patriotism and idealized versions of social-democratic societies (March, 2007). Advancing notions like 'plurinationality,' some of these constructions of the nation celebrate internal diversity and disrupt centralization, recognizing communities largely neglected by state powers such as indigenous peoples (Schavelzon, 2015).

Populism is generally depicted as a challenge to liberal democracies, which reduces political representation to claims about the will of a homogenous collectivity (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Canovan, 2002). By contrast, some left populist actors commit to enlarge political participation by reaching out to those groups who have been marginalized by mechanisms of representative democracy (De la Torre, 2017). Yet both right and left populist actors prioritize electoral victories as transformational events to produce political change and identify parties and parliaments as the representation of national sovereignty. The communication style of populist actors plays a critical role in this electoral logic, relying on leaders' capacity to simplify complex problems against technocratic language (Canovan, 2002).

Feminist politics

Although feminist politics has manifold dimensions and manifestations, in this paper, I focus on the feminist projects that diagnose the reproduction of gendered norms in political parties and institutions; and propose solutions to transcend the existing unequal order. I define feminist politics as an emancipatory project aimed at challenging gendered mechanisms responsible for hierarchies that preclude equal access to political representation. Efforts to improve the descriptive and substantive representation of women and marginalized groups and to disrupt dominant gender patterns in the daily practices of institutions, parties, and other political organizations are prime examples of these goals.

Inclusiveness in the definition of the political subject and the aspirations to *represent* collectivities are at the core of feminist debates, as the construction of the *people* is in populist projects. When feminist actors search for an ideal unitary political subject, often materialized in a homogenous form of womanhood, they reproduce inequalities and exclusionary logics, obscuring other layers of oppression that are perceived as divisive rather than conducive to that ideal (Young, 2000). Feminist intersectional and anti-essentialist perspectives propose, instead, to focus on the interaction of gender, race, class, and other systems of discrimination in the formation of political subjectivities. This way, feminist voices do not renounce majoritarian aspirations, advocating for the emancipatory potential of a 'feminism for the 99%,' based on intersectional networks of feminist solidarity instead of a unitary political subject (Davis et al., 2017).

Rooted in an ‘egalitarian ethos’ and the promotion of individual and collective empowerment, autonomy, and participation (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2018; Kantola and Lombardo, 2019), feminist politics promotes political change in different ways, including the radical transformation of, and pragmatic intervention in, political institutions. Often, feminist advocates face a dilemma between promoting alternative forms of political power—collective, shared, horizontal, and non-personalist rather than adversarial, dogmatic, hierarchical, and exclusionary—and the strategic goal of influencing decision-making processes by using power as ‘a resource’ to intervene in existing political processes (Celis and Lovenduski, 2018).

Some feminist activists advance critiques of the state as a unique center of political power, governed by exclusionary logics permeated by nationalism, and advocate decentralization of decision-making processes and citizen participation through local governance (Roth and Baird, 2017a). Alternatives to representative democracy, a priori aligned with the egalitarian ethos of feminist politics such as deliberative and participatory models, however, do not always alter the power dynamics they seek to eliminate. These alternative logics not only are imbued with the same gendered organizational culture of parties and institutions that reproduce structures of social domination (Young, 2000), but also comprise other dangers, such as the homogenizing logics of consensus politics (Schmidt-Gleim and Verloo, 2003).

Populism, feminism, and gender equality

Studies of the intersection of gender and populism have focused on how right and left populist leaders and discourses mobilize dominant masculine imagery and attributes (Köttig et al., 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015; Norocel, 2010) through paternalism, vulgar language, exalted virility, and hegemonic masculinity as ‘a weapon for popular redemption against the oligarchy and/or ruling elites’ (Andrade, 2001: 307). The structure of populist parties reinforces charismatic masculine leaderships, typically embodied by cis-gender men (Kampwirth, 2010). Populist appeals to a ‘unique people’ obscure the diversity and asymmetries within populations, denying the gender and racial dimensions of political subjectivities² (Roth and Baird, 2017a). This literature interprets populist actors as enemies of feminist politics who lack any substantial interest in gender equality, beyond strategically accusing political ‘others’ of cultural backwardness (Sauer et al., 2017).

Although populist discourse necessarily favors the interests of some women, who are featured as exemplars of the nation or members of the neglected people, left populist actors appeal to a larger cohort of women by committing to the inclusion of politically excluded and silenced voices. Some left populist leaders embrace a feminist rhetoric—e.g., Chávez’s connection of feminism and socialism and Morales’ praise of indigenous cultures’ gender complementarity—and orient their legislative action towards favoring women’s interests. Feminist have been critical of these efforts, however, considering them strategic frames that reinforce essentializing views of women and indigenous cultures, often enclosing women in reproductive and traditionally maternal roles, which seldom result in major policy changes (Lind, 2005).

With the emergence and consolidation of populist actors, and the expansion of feminist demands and movements, activist and scholarly attention is increasingly investigating the relationship between populism and feminist politics (Kantola and Lombardo, 2019; Roth and Baird, 2017a). An incipient feminist critique traces political and ontological

implications in academic debates on ‘populism’ and cautions against the problematic use of an encompassing notion that reproduces restrictive and depoliticized conceptions of power, collective agency, and leadership (Maignashca, 2019). While recognizing the limiting effects of the academic overuse of ‘populism,’ this paper seeks to address the debate from a different angle: exploring the political implications of mobilizing populism for egalitarian projects such as those of feminist politics. In this regard, critical aspects of the relation of populist and feminist politics remain unexplored: are feminist and populist projects compatible? Does a left ideological orientation facilitate the dialogue between populism and feminism? What are the main challenges that populism poses to gender equality? How do populism and feminist politics interact within political parties? An examination of the gender politics within Podemos sheds some light on these important questions.

Podemos

Podemos is a rare example of a left populist party in a European scene dominated by the expansion of right populist forces (Kriesi, 2014). Capitalizing on the momentum initiated by the mass mobilizations of the Indignados, the party stormed onto the Spanish political scene in 2014. The country was immersed in a climate of discontent over the corruption and self-indulgent dynamics of the political class, after a series of economic crises that severely affected the living conditions of the population. Austerity policies accelerated unemployment, which reached 55.5% among young people and 26.2% of adult workers in 2013 (Eurostat, 2015). The banking crisis also contributed to increasing indebtedness among the middle class. Multiple corruption scandals rocked mainstream parties as well as members of the royal family, and secessionist movements were revitalized, fueled by identity aspirations and perceptions of economic discrimination.

In this politically volatile and economically precarious context, a small group of academics and leftist activists created Podemos to participate in the elections for the European Parliament of May 2014, unexpectedly winning 7.98% of the national vote. Within two years of existence, the party disrupted the Spanish political landscape, becoming the third largest national party and forcing new political alignments. Podemos framed the political context as a ‘window of opportunity’ to foster a deep transformation in Spanish society by breaking up a self-perpetuating two-party system. The party embraced a populist reading of the Indignados as a reaction of the ‘common people’ against the political elite (‘the caste’) and committed to *represent* the people in the Spanish institutions.

Feminism increasingly became central to discourses of political transformation in Podemos. Through formulas such as the ‘feminization’ or ‘depatriarchalization’ of politics, party leaders committed to increase the number of female politicians and to attend to issues that disproportionately affect women. Podemos also pledged to change the ‘masculinized’ culture that governs party politics by cultivating alternative political practices. The centrality of feminism in Podemos’ agenda aligned with a *feminist momentum* in Spanish politics, which peaked with a widely supported Women’s Strike on 8 March 2018, situating feminism at the core of the mainstream political debate.

Methods

In this study, I adopt a qualitative research method based on a comparative analysis of discourses and practices. Through 34 in-depth interviews, secondary sources from

mainstream and social media, and more than 400 hours of participant observation, I document the complex coexistence of populist and feminist politics in the official discourse and day-to-day operations of Podemos. I focus particularly on the party's organizational and political culture, based on its prefigurative orientation; that is, an organization's commitment to implement practices that reflect its political goals (Day, 2005). Podemos aims to build a different type of party, and its intra-party politics have proven to be the ideal laboratory to study the implications of the interplay between populist and feminist commitments.

I collected data from both party leaders and grassroots members. The leaders' discourses included official party declarations, electoral material, interviews, and other statements in social networks and mainstream media between the foundation of the party in January 2014 and July 2018. I implemented discourse analysis to identify Podemos leaders' diagnosis of ills afflicting Spanish politics, the strategies and organizational decisions about how to remedy those ills, and the feminist concepts of transformation.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with grassroots members in Madrid between July 2016 and July 2017. I contacted respondents during the meetings of the *círculos* (circles), Podemos' horizontally organized groups built around local communities, neighborhoods, and shared political interests that meet periodically. Respondents were required to be grassroots members—regular collaborators with at least one circle and without a remunerated position in the party structure—in the city of Madrid, the epicenter of Spanish institutional political activity and a central location for Podemos' everyday functioning. The sample included 17 cisgender men and 17 cisgender women, ranging from 20 years old to 80, with retirees as well as administrative officers, teachers, public servants, researchers, economists, and students. To preserve the confidentiality of my interview subjects, the parenthetical references that appear throughout the paper reflect numbers randomly assigned to interview respondents (e.g., R10, R11, R12).

I used a semi-structured interview guide to ask open-ended questions related to party dynamics and political culture, the relationship between the leaders and grassroots members, the role of the circles in the organization of Podemos, the leadership's production of feminist discourses, the reception of these discourses in the circles, and the implementation of feminist principles in the party's daily activity. I coded the interviews in broad themes such as 'party leadership,' 'role of the circles,' 'organizational–political balance,' 'gender dynamics,' 'feminist party,' and 'feminization of politics.' Then, I conducted a focused analysis of these themes, identifying the subcategories that partially structure the results below.

Populist and feminist politics in Podemos

Building upon the conceptual model summarized in Table 1 and my analysis of left populist and feminist politics in Podemos' discourses and practices, I suggest that the party combines an antagonistic rhetoric (inclusionary people vs elite) with a feminist diagnosis of the gendered style of institutional politics. The party proposes a charismatic masculine leadership that coexists with the promise to depatriarchalize politics through alternative political practices, including collaborative and women's leadership. Participatory democracy is central to both left populist and feminist discourses in Podemos; however, the party's hierarchical organization and excessive bureaucratization hinder these participatory commitments. Emotional appeals promise construction of a plural and feminist homeland that will

recognize women's political roles and the plurality of national sentiments in Spain. Electoral success is the key to political change in Podemos' populist strategy and a topic of feminist debates. Some party feminists question the transformative potential of electoral competition and advocate for a radical change of gendered institutional logics. I explore these tensions in greater detail below.

People versus elite and gendered politics

Podemos leaders frame the sociopolitical crises in Spain as a confrontation of *new* versus *old* politics, establishing a vertical antagonism between a powerless people and a political 'caste' (elite) that had long ignored citizens' demands. Podemos leaders' claim to *represent* the people is based on their status as outsiders and the innovative political identity of the party (Sola and Rendueles, 2017). Podemos' leaders also censure the gendered dimension of old 'politics of machos' (Cuatro, 2016). Party feminists denounce the insufficient presence of women in representational roles and decision-making positions; the lack of political attention to issues that disproportionately affect women; and the reproduction of a gendered style of politics characterized by hierarchical structures, adversarial and competitive dynamics, and dogmatic styles of leadership that enforce homogenization and logics of exclusion.³

The party replicates left populist rhetoric in its inclusionary and socioeconomic construction of the 'people' in contrast to nativist formulations associated with right populist rhetoric. For Podemos leaders, *la gente* (the people) are an aggregation of subordinated and marginalized collectivities: unemployed and retired people with minimal income, families that suffer poverty and evictions, women and young people working in precarious conditions, etc. (Podemos, 2015). Women increasingly appear in Podemos discourse as the paradigmatic example of the 'common people' who took on the burden of 'moving the country forward' during the economic crisis (Montero, 2017).

Although Podemos grassroots members rarely invoke 'populism' in their narratives, they also diagnose Spanish society as divided between self-interested politicians and ordinary people like themselves. They depict Podemos leaders as politicians who not only do not benefit from political corruption, but also endure extraordinary pressure because of their ethical position (R10, R11, R12, R15, R19) and their commitment to address the real concerns of Spanish citizens (R2, R9, R21, R31). In the words of a respondent, 'No party worries about the real problems of the citizenship, but they accuse Podemos of being populist? It's like saying populism is being close to the citizen' (R31).

Charismatic leaders, feminization of politics, and participatory democracy

To solve the misrepresentation of the people, Podemos promotes an improvement in descriptive representation (i.e., replacing the political class with non-professional politicians who represent ordinary people), substantive representation (i.e., attention to the interests and concerns of common citizens), and a transformation of the self-serving, corrupt, and inefficient practices of mainstream parties (Sola and Rendueles, 2017). Podemos leaders also promise to increase women's descriptive and substantive representation and to transform dominant gender patterns in Spanish political institutions.

A charismatic style of leadership is central to the party's populist strategy. Podemos leaders legitimize their capacity to truthfully *represent* the people by presenting themselves as non-professional politicians, outsiders to a discredited party system who 'make what

happens in the street visible in the institutions' (Manetto, 2016). The unprecedented diversity—in terms of age, gender, race, class, and professional background—of Podemos elected officials differs from the usual profile of Spanish MPs and approximates the country's demographic reality (López and Delgado, 2016). Podemos leaders also convey plurality and 'commonality' through their performances and aesthetics, adopting informal clothing and non-normative gender hairstyles, and calling attention to the difficulties of combining parental responsibilities with professional development (Manetto, 2016).

The academic profile that characterizes Podemos leadership⁴ distinguishes it from the anti-intellectualism and vulgar language of other populist leaders (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 64). However, this intellectual profile and an explicitly strategic orientation reinforce the leaders' distinguished status, distancing them from the laypeople they claim to represent (R5, R11, R17, R27). Party grassroots members express difficulties connecting with the leadership, aggravated by age differences and gaps in theoretical knowledge. Some depict the relationship to party leaders as 'a moral relationship of influence rather than a political one' (R9), and are particularly critical of the self-proclaimed status of the party's secretary-general: 'He is too personalist, believes himself our savior and leader' (R13). The prominence of a small leadership favors confrontational logics among party factions (R13, R17, R21). Factional dynamics are often displayed in terms of 'loyalty and betrayal' to certain leaders, who defend 'their projects for the party' (R25; original emphasis), favoring personal differences over political content (R7, R13, R21). Party leaders resolve factional confrontations by invoking party unity (R13, R17, R25, R31) and appealing to a logic of 'consensus' that erases internal disagreements in detriment of minority positions (R12).

Grassroots members also warn against gendered dimensions of a type of leadership that accumulates an extraordinary power (R9, R17), drawing attention to 'antifeminist' and 'exclusionary hyperleaderships' (R5). Despite the leaders' awareness of a dominant masculine imagery and their efforts to avoid it—including the secretary-general explicitly stating that he is a simple militant rather than an 'alpha male' (Ríos, 2014)—the party replicates practices that emphasize the centrality of male and masculine leaders. The presentation of a pact among three male leaders with a feminist motto in the background asserting women's political roles and the announcement of the return of the secretary-general after his paternity leave with a heroic message that conveyed his prominence in the party are two examples of these practices (Díaz, 2018; EFE, 2019).

Although Podemos leaders apologized in both instances, these symbolic episodes have been particularly damaging for the party's image and contradict Podemos' 'feminist alternative' to old gendered patterns of 'masculinized' and 'patriarchal' institutional politics (Montero, 2017). Podemos leaders advocate the feminization and depatriarchalization of politics: alternative practices that include building horizontal structures and promoting grassroots participation, delegating and sharing power through collaborative and limited leaderships, embracing internal diversity, and encouraging networking and dialogue with a plurality of political actors and the *politics of care*.⁵

Grassroots members embrace this feminist agenda as a sign of the party's identity: 'feminism is part of Podemos's essence' (R30). They often interpret the feminization as an increase of women's presence in representative roles (R6, R19, R28, R32). Many grassroots members also stress the need to practice politics in different ways, alluding to a 'feminine' style of politics or 'culture of women' (R1, R5, R6, R7, R9, R14, R20, R28, R29), which represents a 'more equitable and egalitarian perspective' (R14), instead of the 'masculine' logic of competition oriented towards the accumulation of power (R6, R7, R9, R20, R28).

They also question the leaders' instrumental use of feminist discourses and emphasize that the party's day-to-day operations contradict the principles of feminization (R5, R20, R29). In addition to the tensions regarding charismatic leaders, members identify a 'dominant style' of politics throughout the organization that hinders women's participation in party operations (R9, R28) and reproduces a warlike political culture—defined by an 'all or nothing logic,' 'cockfights,' and 'internal wars' among leaders—in contradiction to the politics of care (R2, R5, R14, R17, R30).

The left populist and feminist interpretations of democratic renewal that coexist in Podemos' discourses coincide in their commitment to implement mechanisms of participatory democracy. The party promotes initiatives such as popular veto to repeal laws, recall referenda, and participatory budgeting; and implements participatory mechanisms in its own organization. These mechanisms include primaries to elect the party's electoral candidates and governing bodies as well as consultations to approve general strategies and to endorse leaders' personal and political decisions.

The party organizes its grassroots activity in a structure of self-organized and autonomous groups, the circles. Inspired by the horizontally organized assemblies of the Indignados, the circles are the quintessential representation of Podemos' participatory imaginary, especially for grassroots members, who describe them as the source of 'renewed democracy' and 'civic empowerment' (R5, R9, R10, R14, R15, R20, R24, R26, R27 R30, R31). Excessive bureaucratization, lack of communication with the leadership, and the increasing erosion of their decision-making capacity, however, reduced the circles to the party's 'electoral workforce' (R14) and their members to 'followers' rather than active participants (R7, R9, R14, R19, R20, R28). Grassroots members perceive that the 'circles have been neglected' (R14) because Podemos often operates as a self-absorbed organization, 'a structure that is merely vertical and follows the electoral frenzy' (R17), focused on electing the party's candidates and governing bodies (R7, R9, R14, R19, R20, R28). For grassroots feminists, the top-down imposition of candidates and the logics of factionalism hinder the participatory commitments of Podemos and reflect the same patriarchal logics as those that the party promises to eliminate (*República*, 2018).

The homeland, the feminist country, and local governance

Podemos' populist discourse invokes the homeland as an identity marker that binds the 'people' together, appealing to a sort of civic nationalism. Closer to Habermas' 'constitutional patriotism' than to nativist configurations of right populism, Podemos defines the homeland as an entity that ensures public services, such as universal health and education and the right to housing (Sola and Rendueles, 2017). Podemos leaders explicitly dispute that any defense of the homeland must be associated with right-wing conservative actors, disrupting the alignment of Spanish nationalism with fascism and the Franco regime. Yet in a state that comprises a plurality of national sentiments like Spain, claiming the centrality of the homeland also evokes homogenizing and exclusionary logics that contradict the inclusionary orientation of left and feminist discourses. In an attempt to address that contradiction, Podemos leaders navigated the polarized climate following Catalan independence claims invoking a 'plurinational' Spain, inspired by the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador (Schavelzon, 2015).

Podemos leaders mobilized an emotional narrative of the homeland using the motto 'The smile of a country' and a multicolored heart as the campaign emblem for the 2016 general

elections (Europa Press, 2016). This emotional construction, however, is almost nonexistent in the narratives of grassroots members, some of whom even expressed a sense of ‘humiliation’ and ‘disappointment’ over the 2016 electoral campaign (R17, R25): ‘We looked like we were disguised as Maya the Bee’⁶ (R25). A campaign based on positive feelings appears politically empty, concealing the depth of the party’s agenda and prioritizing voter attraction over critique of the government and political opponents on substantial issues.

Podemos leaders also emphasize the idea of a ‘feminist country’ rather than a ‘machista country’ that is defined by the corruption of previous governments and the implementation of austerity politics (Montero, 2017). Borrowing terminology from feminist economics, party leaders define a feminist country as a change in political priorities, placing the *common good* at the center of the political agenda while incorporating women into decision-making and leading positions. This twofold focus involves recognition of women’s reproductive labor and the expansion of democracy through women’s full political incorporation (Montero, 2017).

The centrality of the state as a locus of political activity coexists with an increasing relevance of local politics as a symbol of ‘new’ feminized politics in Podemos discourse. Party feminists and other political allies reclaim local governments as sites of democratic regeneration, public institutions of ‘proximity’ that enable citizen participation to decide on matters that affect people’s daily lives (Roth and Baird, 2017b). Grassroots members are particularly invested in this grounded understanding of politics and perceive Podemos circles as ideal platforms to foster local initiatives (R3, R7, R13, R14, R15, R17, R18, R20, R31). According to them, ‘the circles understand very well the needs of the neighborhoods’ (R9) and should be used to ‘improve people’s lives in the neighborhood’ (R15). At the time of my interviews, however, the participants perceived that the excessive bureaucratization and other dynamics in Podemos disincentivized these ‘real’ politics (R3, R7, R19, R20, R21) because the circles ‘had such amount of work’—mostly due to electoral campaigns—that ‘they had to abandon the collaboration with local associations’ (R14).

Electoral competition, winning feminism, and radical transformation

In the words of the Podemos secretary-general, ‘(t)he duty of a revolutionary is to win’ (Constante, 2014). The party presents its own electoral success as an immediate transformational event to ‘get to rule and change the country’ (R21). The party leaders embrace a populist discourse inspired by Latin American political figures who refused the radical left’s criticism of representative democracy and prioritized electoral contests to show that the ‘left can win’ (Iglesias, 2014). Charismatic leadership and a populist use of political communication have been central to the party’s electoral strategy. Originally, their presence on television allowed Podemos spokespeople to develop their charismatic personas and influence the Spanish political debate. Grassroots members praise the leaders’ innovative strategies and electoral aspirations that overcame the left’s lack of ambition (R19, R30).

Winning elections is presented as an ‘altruistic’ goal, a form of *servicing* the ‘people’ by ‘talking in their language’ and prioritizing their interests over politicians’ agendas (R33). This approach assumes a univocal political subject with interpretable interests while maintaining a clear-cut distinction between the people—the represented who have a different language—and the politicians—the representatives who guide the revolutionary process through electoral victories. The resulting vertical logic is one of the bones of contention in the party. Grassroots members regret the hierarchical organization established in the

name of electoral efficiency as a lost opportunity to build a different type of party (R14, R20, R32). They also regret the win–lose framework that characterizes electoral competition and partisan politics: ‘winning is the only possibility’ (R17). Some grassroots members interpret this framework as the result of masculine competitiveness (R5, R17, R32), a direct impediment to feminism, and an ‘exclusionary force for women and gender non-conforming political actors who feel out of place’ (R32).⁷

The possibilities and challenges of developing feminist politics within a framework of electoral competition has been debated among Podemos leaders, particularly with reference to the emancipatory potential of mainstream feminism in institutional politics. Some leaders promote a ‘winning feminism,’ a notion that presents populism and feminism as politically compatible and potential allies. Proponents of a winning feminism advocate for strategically taking advantage of discursive opportunities available in mainstream conversations, repurposing frames and logics of power widely accepted in society to achieve political hegemony (Ema et al., 2015). This approach leverages a *winning narrative* that is particularly effective in Podemos because it presents the party as capable of bringing about extraordinary change, a driving force that justifies contradictions in core commitments by appealing to the belief that electoral victories translate into political transformation. Other party feminists are critical of the notion of winning feminism because it collapses ‘winning’ electorally into being culturally ‘hegemonic,’ reproducing dominant gender frameworks that are complicit with the same logics that feminist politics seeks to dismantle (Serra, 2018). Instead, these feminists advocate for a more radical transformation of gendered politics, a collective emancipation based on the elimination of established power relationships rather than profiting from them within the boundaries of institutional politics.

Discussion: tensions between populist and feminist politics

My analysis shows that a series of frictions lie at the core of Podemos’ politics. Rather than a simple product of a mismatch between ‘good’ intentions and ‘realistic’ daily practices, I argue that these frictions are the result of distinctive tensions between populist and feminist interpretations of political transformation. Given the prefigurative orientation of Podemos—the party not only commits to an abstraction of alternative and feminist politics, but also to practice them in its day-to-day operations—the internal logics of its organization offer an ideal terrain to explore frictions between populist and feminist projects of political transformation.

As reflected in Table 1, these frictions can be traced across three dimensions, including the diagnosis of the political problem; the proposed solutions in forms of leadership, organization, and the role of the state; and the conceptualization of political change. Regarding the diagnosis, the populist discourse that conflates the misbehavior of a particular group (elite) with a clear-cut vertical antagonism oversimplifies the multidimensional and diffused set of power structures that feminist intersectional and anti-essentialist perspectives expose. The unavoidable homogenization of the ‘people’ and the populist utopian notion of an interpretable ‘general will’ (people’s interests) obscure the diversity within the population and simplify political subjectivities in the search for an ideal unitary subject. Similar to other proponents of left populism, Podemos leaders address these limitations by conceptualizing a pluralistic ‘people’ as an ensemble of subordinated collectivities. Podemos leaders increasingly emphasize a feminist political subject and a diagnosis of the gendered mechanisms responsible for hierarchies in the political field. The party’s efforts to make visible the

distinctive concerns of marginalized and silenced groups bring left populist and feminist discourses closer together, exemplifying the importance of distinguishing theoretically between left and right populisms.

One could argue that the antagonistic logic of populism clashes with feminist paradigms of dialogue and consensus among a plurality of actors. However, feminist scholarship also questions the paradigm of consensus as a source of depoliticization that denies the conflictual dimension of politics (Schmidt-Gleim and Verloo, 2003). The logic of consensus is typically presented as a mechanism to avoid majority tyranny in representative democracies, but the demand for consensus can also reinforce hierarchies by presenting disagreement as a betrayal of popular processes as seen in the case of Podemos. Yet left populist and feminist discourses mobilize different types of antagonistic logics. Populist antagonism relies on a confrontational struggle to gain power, whereas feminist politics often mobilizes an agonistic understanding of political conflict based on recognition of diversity and challenge to existing power structures (Schmidt-Gleim and Verloo, 2003).

Regarding the solutions, the use of charismatic leadership also reveals a discrepancy between feminist and populist projects. Whereas feminist organizations do not escape from this type of leadership—for example, the stardom signaled by Freeman (1972)—the centrality that charismatic personas have in populist strategies, including those of Podemos, disrupts feminist commitments to shared, collective, horizontal, and non-personalistic leaderships. Podemos representatives have indeed brought new messages, presences, and performances to the institutional sphere, closing symbolically the gap between elected officials and the country's demographic reality. However, the accumulation of power within a small circle and the personalistic dynamics of a few leaders jeopardize their relationship with grassroots members and distance Podemos from the left populist commitment to limited leadership. The dominant masculine imagery and language that legitimize this power contributes to tensions between the feminist and populist orientations in Podemos.

This type of charismatic *representation* and the prioritization of electoral competition have generated a hierarchical and self-absorbed organization that is eroding the democratizing and participatory principles shared by both feminist and left populist orientations in Podemos. Grassroots members denounce an excessive bureaucratization and the tendency of party factions to co-opt mechanisms of participation, using them to endorse particular leaders and to legitimize their personal and political decisions. The instrumental use of Podemos' base for internal processes and electoral campaigns reveals tensions within feminist horizontal deliberative structures that seek to enhance participants' autonomy.

Despite Podemos' efforts to build an inclusionary homeland, even a 'feminist country,' detached from conservative and nativist connotations, the party's emotional patriotic rhetoric recalls the exclusionary legacies that permeate the nation and appears to be a deceptive instrument deployed for electoral purposes. By privileging electoral competition and failing to implement effective mechanisms of grassroots participation, Podemos' populist politics and its defense of the homeland clash with feminist commitments to politics of 'proximity' and local governance, which grassroots members consider real politics (R3, R7, R19).

Regarding the conceptualization of political change, populist leaders focus on the electoral competition, framing their own victories as the unmediated *representation* of the people and, as such, an intrinsically transformational event. Podemos leaders leverage a winning narrative to invoke the party's capacity to compete electorally after previous leftist organizations failed, substantiating their self-representation as a new class of politicians. By focusing on the limitations of various types of elites rather than on the structural limitations

of political institutions, populist projects lack the political imagination of feminist politics to envision other forms of transformation. The lexicon of domination and competition used by Podemos leaders to defeat the elite and surpass the marginal left reinscribes a gendered understanding of political power and masculine competition.

The short-term electoral agenda conflicts with Podemos' feminist critique of competition. The commitment of feminist advocates to gradual change, based on everyday actions against multiple power structures that intersect in public and private spheres, makes it difficult for them to embrace the transformational narrative of electoral success. Yet feminist actors do not necessarily renounce pragmatic interventions, as evidenced by advocacy of measures to disrupt gender and racial orders in institutional politics. The tension between these two orientations of feminist politics (transforming the structures vs operating through them to have a transformative effect) is reflected in Podemos' internal debates between the proponents of a 'winning feminism' and those advocating a more radical transformation.

The present study is limited by various components. The focus on Madrid reinforces the overrepresentation of capital politics as representative of Spanish national politics; while the focus on Podemos' intra-party processes, during its third year of existence, limits the analysis to the political and organizational culture of a party in formation, overlooking subsequent institutional processes and Podemos' entrance into the Spanish government. This research also contributes to the academic overuse of the concept of populism. Nonetheless, the findings of this study indicate future lines of research. They suggest the need to explore the complex relationship between feminist and populist projects, often oversimplified as a clear-cut opposition. Further, more research is needed to better understand the increasing influence of feminist language and praxis in left-wing parties and movements. Specifically, this study suggests the importance of exploring the political culture to investigate the implementation of feminist principles in political organizations.

My case study of Podemos makes clear that there are fundamental contradictions between feminist and populist projects of political transformation. These contradictions cannot be reconciled by means of careful conceptual balancing or pragmatic political praxis. Ideologically, left populism offers a more productive terrain for gender equality than right populism does, but, even within left populist organizations, central tenets of populism irremediably disrupt feminist ideological commitments and political goals. Chief among these are the oversimplification of the political field through a limited diagnosis; the exclusionary appeals to a homogenizing collectivity and a homeland; the dominant masculine and personalistic logics of charismatic leaders; the prioritization of electoral success over other forms of political transformation; and the resulting party culture that marginalizes empowerment, inclusion, and participatory democratic practices.

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Notes

1. Other contrasting perspectives question the ideological understanding of populism and its implicit normative dimension, proposing instead a formal discursive approach to analyze populism as a political logic (De Cleen et al., 2018) or as a discursive frame (Aslanidis, 2016).
2. The term cisgender refers to people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.
3. This definition is the summary of Podemos leaders' statements collected during campaign events for the 2016 general elections and the 2016 party primaries of Madrid, as well as written debates between the party leaders and feminist activists (see, for example, Medina, 2016; Serra et al., 2016).
4. The party was created by a small group of academics, doctors, and lecturers in political science, sociology, and philosophy at Complutense University of Madrid in collaboration with leftist activists.
5. See sources referred in note 3.
6. Maya the Bee is a character in a German animated television series, broadcast in Spain during the 1980s and the 1990s, that connotes great happiness and naivety.
7. The grassroots members I interviewed were hopeful for the future and considered that the party had matured after the unusual concentration of national and regional elections was over and the internal disputes among factions had decreased (R13, R14, R17, R25, R31, R32).

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