

Spain: Podemos's Green New Deal

Tuesday 30 April 2019, by [GILMARTIN Eoghan](#), [GREENE Tommy](#), [GUIJARRO Txema](#) (Date first published: 28 April 2019).

Disputes over Spain's national borders have dominated the campaign for today's election. But Podemos's radical environmental program against the billionaire class can save the entire planet.

In the final leaders' debate before today's knife-edge election, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias was widely seen as the winner. Yet he secured this victory by doing something rather unusual. While other leaders traded insults about Catalonia and the national question, he instead focused on laying out his party's ambitious social platform.

With a record 40 percent of Spaniards still undecided how to vote, Iglesias is seeking to position his party as the only guarantee of a progressive government. In the debate, he reminded voters that centre-left (PSOE) premier Pedro Sánchez had not made good on his promises to impose a bank tax, overturn neoliberal labor reforms, or release the names of those involved in a controversial tax amnesty.

Iglesias moreover emphasized that his party's real adversaries were not other political leaders but the oligarchic elites determined to exclude Podemos from government. Focusing on the material needs of the social majority, and not the threat of Catalan separatists or extreme-right bogeymen, Iglesias directed his anger against the real "enemies of Spain": the billionaire class.

Painting Podemos as a party of government and of struggle, Iglesias concluded with a social message also focused on environmental themes:

[It is true](#) that the media bosses have more power than MPs, that the banks twist the arm of the Supreme Court, that energy giants buy off politicians... but it is also true that when we mobilize, we change things — as with the feminists on March 8... and the young people who have come out onto the street telling us we do not have two planets. History has not already been decided — next Sunday, it will be written by you.

Iglesias's strong showing in the debate, and generally effective campaign for the April 28 vote, have boosted Podemos after a tough time last year saw it drop from 21 percent in the polls to 14. Until last week, most media framed today's ballot as confirmation of Podemos's decline. Yet now even [hostile media](#) are talking about a possible "surprise" which if not comparable to the famous *remontada* in 2015, could see it secure a stronger than expected showing.

Eoghan Gilmartin and Tommy Greene sat down with Podemos MP Txema Guijarro to talk about the progress of the campaign, the party's electoral strategy, and its transformative program focused on the Green New Deal.

EG: In his speech marking his return from parental leave at the end of March, Iglesias concentrated

once again on highlighting the contradiction between democracy and the power and privileges of the elites. He also underlined how with the Socialists deeply embedded in the Spanish establishment, only Podemos can defend the material interests of the social majority. This was the beginning of a strategy which aimed to challenge the dominant framing of these elections as a straight choice between a radicalized Right or a loosely progressive bloc led by the PSOE.

Is it fair to say this is a return to Podemos's left populist roots?

TG: I think we have always maintained a radical discourse, but it is true that in an electoral campaign such dramatization is crucial as a means to communicate your political project. The opposition between democracy and oligarchy is a crucial framing to help understand the various crises this country has undergone: the crisis of the Spanish nation-state, systemic corruption, brutal austerity and the loss of social rights. We need to explain to people the hold which this oligarchic bloc has over institutions and the wider society.

In this respect, one thing we have learned over the last few years is that there are moments of truth in which it becomes obvious which side the different parties are on and what interests they are really defending. For example, when we were negotiating the budget last year with the PSOE government, which ultimately never got parliamentary approval, one of the most difficult issues was the question of taxation and the need to increase revenue so as to protect public services.

In particular with the proposed tax on the profits of banks and financial institutions, it became clear who was defending who. In other areas of the agreement there was scope for some negotiation, even if it took many hours to secure small advances. But on the question of a bank tax, the government just flatly rejected the idea. It was as if there was an iron curtain being placed around the banks and it was obvious a commitment had been made not to go after their profits.

This is one of those examples which shows there are political parties whose actions are marked and limited by a series of interests. All parties in Spain except Podemos finance their campaigns via loans from banks, while most of their media allies are also partially owned by financial institutions. But we are not constrained in this way. We only respond to the people who support us — either with their vote or money.

This is what we are trying to make evident in this campaign: the idea that you have to decide between the lesser evil of the PSOE and greater one of the Right is a false dichotomy. There is an alternative to this. We in Podemos have a project to advance Spain in a progressive direction.

TG: The Villajero police spying scandal has played an important role in the campaign, with the revelations of data theft, fabricated documents aimed at discrediting Podemos, and the hacking of the CCTV cameras at the home of Pablo Iglesias and Irene Montero. How have you tried to incorporate this into your electoral strategy?

TG: These revelations came into the public domain via the ongoing trial of corrupt police commissioner José Manuel Villarejo. So this was not something which we had prepared for. But it chimes with what we have been denouncing in this campaign: that Spain is a "low-cost" democracy controlled and supervised by powerful interests. These interests are determined to stop Podemos having access to state power and, indeed, have been willing to use extreme measures to halt our progress.

We have always known that these accusations focused on our supposed illegal financing were false. But now the whole machinery used to construct these smears is out in the open. You are talking about a criminal conspiracy that includes important figures in the media and the former Partido

Popular government as well as corrupt senior police officers.

The difficulty, though, has been that this major scandal with grave consequences for Spanish democracy is not getting the attention it deserves. There are many people in the media and politics who have an interest in not talking about it. We have been able to push it into the spotlight to a degree, but it has been difficult.

EG: For a left-wing force, its electoral program is an opportunity to offer the people a clear vision of its alternative via a number of key central measures. Can you give us an overview of Podemos' program and where its focus lies?

TG: The two touchstones of our program are our Green New Deal package and the series of measures we are proposing as a response to the demands of the feminist movement.

If I had to highlight two clear transformative proposals in particular, I would first point to our commitment to establish a number of strategic public companies. This will include a state investment bank so as to secure Spain's energy transition to 100 percent renewables over the next 20 years.

We are also proposing to create a public energy company, building on the great work at a municipal level in places like Barcelona where we have been governing with our allies in Barcelona en Comú. The creation of a public distribution company will be key in a context in which we have to undertake a profound transformation of all energy production.

This will obviously come into conflict, however, with the interests of the existing energy giants. The energy market in Spain is really a cartel, with some of the highest prices in Europe. And so we are also aiming to challenge this capture of the market by establishing such a national company.

The second set of proposals I want to highlight has to do with reproductive labor, which returns us to the question of feminism and the need to tackle the unequal distribution in care work. In this sense, we are committed to the extension and equalization of paid parental leave from sixteen to twenty-four weeks (or half a year) for both mothers and fathers. Such leave would also be non-transferable between parents so as to ensure parity of care.

Other proposals include free and universal infant education up to three years (which would involve creating one hundred thousand new jobs), a thirty-four hour work week and a guaranteed grant for up to six months — equivalent to the monthly minimum wage — for women who have suffered gender violence. These measures aim to put the welfare and rights of women and families above that of capital.

EG: You also view your Green New Deal package as a way of transforming the Spanish economy.

TG: Yes, the necessity of confronting climate change is also an opportunity to create quality employment in a country where there is still a 14 percent unemployment rate. Both sets of measures we were talking about before imply a program of mass public employment, the likes of which have never really been seen in Spain before. We are talking about the creation of hundreds of thousands of new jobs.

And when it comes to climate change, we have no choice but to act now, particularly given where Spain is situated geographically. We are undergoing an accelerated process of desertification which the rest of Europe has not had to deal with.

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the Sahara now starts on the Castilian plain rather than in

Africa. But we also have a series of geographical elements in our favor. The sun and the extensive coastline so beloved by tourists can also be harnessed to generate renewable energy. But the major difficulty here is the interests we have to confront to achieve this.

My colleague Jaume Asens said the other day that if the planet was a bank, it would have been bailed out by now. It's important to underline this anti-neoliberal aspect of these measures. We have always said that environmentalism and feminism are the two most emancipatory fronts available to us, in the sense that they make very clear what the fight is. Those in power not going to want to budge on these demands, precisely because doing so would reveal all of the privileges that have sustained them down the years. And that's why we think these two themes have so much revolutionary and emancipatory potential.

TG: Podemos obviously traces its origins back to the 2011 Indignados demonstrations. Yet the measures in this electoral program appear to have taken their cue from more recent social mobilizations such as the pensioners' strikes last year, the feminist movement, and the recent climate change protests. And, interestingly, Podemos has placed the Spanish Constitution at the center of its campaign, after having initially positioned itself in direct opposition to the "regime of '78."

How would you pull together all of these threads into one unifying message able to explain Podemos's project?

TG: Yes, the discourse has of course adapted to a certain degree according to the new contexts that have emerged. But I don't think the line or constituent inspiration has fundamentally changed. Perhaps we're not being explicit in exactly the same way as we were three or four years ago. But what we are saying now is essentially the same thing, although with a certain shift in focus.

When we speak about the Constitution and the regime of '78 — something I think we need to keep talking about — what we're highlighting is how this great constitutional agreement was impaired. And this wasn't done by the ordinary people of Spain, but by its elites who made the commitments of 1978 almost worthless in certain respects.

This is why we say it's a broken settlement — but broken by those who have ensured its terms haven't been fulfilled. Article 35 and Article 50, for instance, guaranteeing a dignified job and secure pensions. All this is now under attack because these figures have decided to hijack the Constitution, peddle a partial reading of it, fetishize it.

What we try to do is counter this campaign, partially by pointing to how those who now beat their chest over any mention of the Constitution are the same ones who undermined and devalued its contents and commitments in the first place! In this sense, we can never abandon this constituent dimension because the transformative program that we're proposing fundamentally requires a new de facto constitutional settlement.

We probably can't open discussions over concrete or specific articles of the Constitution. But the debates and political battles we need to be waging are constituent ones. And these debates will need to propose transformations at a constitutional level.

TG: The PSOE appears to have opted for a relatively low-key campaign, while the Right appear to have taken a lot from Trump's playbook by concentrating on social media campaigns and large-scale rallies, with both limiting scrutiny or open debate as much as possible. How can Podemos disrupt these carefully calculated and conditioned campaigns, forcing these parties out of their comfort zones?

TG: Yes, each formation has pursued its own strategy. I'd say that the two historic formations — the PP and the PSOE — have opted for a lower-profile strategy. We'll see how the others turn out. Perhaps I'm not the best placed to offer a nuanced analysis of how other parties have acted. What I can say is that in our own strategy is not so much about ruffling the feathers of these other groups as it is about jolting Spanish society into a certain degree of reflection on what's going on.

We are trying to reach out and make an appeal to Spaniards to get across our reading of what is happening in the country right now and to highlight the gravity of this historic moment we're in. The other parties of course try to dress all this up with a certain sense of "normality." We have to go out there and join the fight in our own bold way, without these kinds of tactical maneuvers that the other parties are playing with.

The fundamental thing that differentiates us from the other forces, though, is a participatory politics where we appeal to a certain kind of people power. That doesn't just mean canvassing, debating, and putting up posters. It's also a matter of basing ourselves on mass mobilization and small donations. Before, political parties relied on funding from banks to finance their campaigns. If we're doing a people's campaign, we need to show how we're different. The others get checks from banks — we appeal to our own base.

EG: Over the last year, Podemos has struggled in the polls. The PSOE has used its position in government to reinforce itself as the largest party on the Left. Given some form of governing arrangement between the PSOE and Podemos is the most likely outcome of these elections, how can you avoid being relegated to the role of the "little brother" or simply the left-within-the-left, the left wing of the PSOE? It is clear that part of Sánchez's strategy has been to marginalize Podemos.

TG: Political relationships are never ones of friendship or of complete hostility. Rather, you sit down at the table with a certain balance of forces in place and negotiate with the other actors. You know perfectly well what the other is going to insist on and what you are going to defend yourself.

I don't think we're going to have too many problems if we remain clear about what we want to achieve and, on that basis, strive to materialize a progressive agenda and push it as far as possible. In this sense, we'll adapt to what the Spanish electorate tells us on April 28. This is why we insist so much on the importance of this election and the need to have clout when we sit down to negotiate future governments.

As we keep saying, the next governments in Spain will be the result of negotiations between various parties, rather than there being a sole governing force. So it is key to sit down at the negotiating table with as much weight as possible precisely to push this agenda as far as possible.

So what we are saying to people is the last three years have been frustrating in many senses. We have not secured all of the advances which we had hoped for; change has been slower coming than we would have liked. At the same time, though, we have shown we can make our parliamentary weight count. We have shown it is possible to bring down a corrupt government, like that of former PP premier Mariano Rajoy. We have shown you can secure social advances such as the historic 20 percent rise in the minimum wage.

The PSOE has been cunning in dealing with us, but it has also shown itself to be subject to pressure. One example is the Sánchez government's approval of rent controls by royal decree. We abstained on the first presentation of this bill and so it fell. For the first time in the history of Spanish democracy, a government was unable to pass a law via royal decree because it lacked parliamentary backing.

This happened because the series of commitments we had agreed with the PSOE were missing from the decree. So they had to come back with a new bill including the most important measure we had demanded — one allowing us to change rent prices and limit their rise in under-pressure urban areas. This just goes to show that when the balance of forces is in your favor, you can impose your own agenda.

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