HOW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS TRANSFORM PUBLIC TOLERANCE OF CORRUPTION: AN AUTOPSY OF THE SPANISH INDIGNADOS MOVEMENT

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**Abstract**

In May 2018, the conservative People’s Party was ousted from government through a no-confidence vote after the National High Court of Spain determined that it had benefitted from illegal payoffs from government contracts and that Mariano Rajoy, the Spanish Prime Minister and party Secretary General at the time, had not testified truthfully as a witness during the trial. This no-confidence vote was the fourth to take place since the instauration of democracy in Spain (1978) and the only one to actually prosper.

Public uprising and indignation towards corrupt politicians and practices shocked Spanish current affairs to the point of encouraging the abdication of a long-standing monarch in 2014 and the removal from power of a party convicted of crimes related to corruption in 2018. The Indignados movement, borne out of social media in 2011, demanded profound changes to the economic, political and social systems in place at the climax of the worst economic recession to hit Spain in modern times. Since then, multiple trials related to party corruption, cronyism and influence peddling has provoked outspoken criticism and a clear break with the national bi-partisan tradition.
This paper aims to explore, on the basis of the Spanish case study, the political changes that have occurred in Spain as a response to corruption, the changes in social tolerance towards perceived corruption and the legislative and political measures that have been put into place, in order to answer the question of how a particular social movement challenged social tolerance of corruption and incited political activism in a country traditionally marred by corrupt practices. This paper also intends to explore how technology, namely social media and platforms, allowed this movement to grow, expand, develop and integrate part of local and national transparency reform in the form of many open government and eGovernment initiatives.
The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the OECD or of its member countries.

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1. Introduction

There is often a systematic prejudice held about Mediterranean democratic systems as those where corruption is prevalent and rampant and disaffection levels high. Despite the historical and cultural differences which underlie the perception and tolerance of corruption, much can be learned through the study of the experiences lived by this set of countries, where the global economic crisis of 2008 hit especially hard and caused a profound questioning of the quality of governance, accountability and transparency that existed at the time.

Battles for transparency and good governance in Spain have been fought and increasingly won in the past ten years. The 15M (May 15th) or Indignados movement was the spark that lit a flame of tumultuous political change, as well as a reclaiming of citizen involvement in political affairs. The disaffected population, distrustful of its institutions, became convinced of its power to raise its standards and demand increased political accountability in a system which has traditionally favoured political corruption.

This paper aims to explore the correlation between the impact of the movement that took place during the late Spring and Summer 2011, the context in which it was born and the changes that took place afterwards with regards to the perception of corruption as well as tolerance towards parties and/or politicians considered to be “corrupt”. The impact of technology and social media within the movement, and afterwards with the growing tendency of promoting open government and eGovernment policies online and how these have helped to enfranchise and affect citizens, will also be studied in this paper.

The wider aim of this research is to provide some clues about the Spanish experience that may serve a wider purpose in the worldwide fight for integrity and good governance, specifically insofar as social movements may help to encourage a more critical and vigilant citizenry that is less tolerant of corruption.

2. The 2008 economic crisis and the birth of the Indignados movement: what, where and how

On May 15th, 2011, tens of thousands of citizens from all around Spain came out to the streets of cities around the country to demand profound changes in the established economic, social and political system which had become stagnant due to the consequences of one of the worst economic recessions to hit Spain in modern history.

The economic miracle that translated into dynamic growth and record employment rates in Spain throughout the beginning and middle of the 2000s came to an abrupt end in 2008 when the economic crisis jolted Spain out of the bonanza it had been enjoying. Unemployment increased by almost ten points, from 8% to over 17%, just during that year, and continued increasing until it peaked at a record

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1 Tolerance is used in the paper in the sense of citizens believing or not that corruption can be avoided and/or reduced through a panoply of measures and actively demanding changes in this regard, not in the sense of a subjective acceptance or not of corruption within a political system. Therefore, tolerance is used as a measure of the sense of empowerment of a certain population with regards to fighting corruption.
high of 26.94 % at the beginning of 2013. Unemployment affected young people especially (over 40 %), resulting in a tragic brain drain of bright young professionals to other more competitive European countries which, in turn, depleted national human resources, exacerbated the unemployment crisis and generated a generalized lack of motivation and opportunities for those who remained in Spain.

Figure 1: Total general unemployment rates in Spain by trimesters between 2002 and 2018

![Unemployment Rates in Spain](image)

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (Spanish Statistical Office)

The growth of the Spanish economy from the last decades of the Franco dictatorship to the beginning of the 21st century as well as its successful integration into the European Union after conquering democracy in an transition characterized by its relative peacefulness, provided social cohesion and gave Spanish society the feeling that it finally deserved a top place in the exclusive club of wealthy nations (Salvador Martí i Puig, 2011).

The rude awakening that was the economic crisis which hit Spain especially hard caused many Spanish families to endure extreme financial and economic hardship which sent shockwaves through the social tissue and generated profound malaise. Tens of thousands of people lost their jobs, and therefore their livelihoods, as well as their homes, as many were unable to pay their mortgages. During 2012, the General Council of the Judiciary confirmed that more than 90,000 eviction and foreclosure procedures were initiated and 46,408 confirmed evictions by public services took place, which translated into an average of 127 evictions per day for defaulting on rent or mortgage payments. Spain became one of the most inegalitarian countries in Western Europe. The stark image of thousands of people being evicted from their homes contrasted sharply in people’s minds with the fact that there were thousands of homes that belonged to banks and public administrations, built during the housing market boom, which were now unused and empty.
The protest organized on May 15th, 2011 was originally aimed at marking the discontent and dissatisfaction of a large part of the population with the political class, the economic situation and the sluggish workings of a stagnating democratic system. Given the proximity of local and regional elections (May 22nd, 2011), protestors decided that it was the ideal moment to express long-held grievances, namely, a rejection of the parties of the establishment and a denouncement of the financial markets and institutions dictating the government’s policies and precarious employment conditions (Taibo, 2011).

However, the eventual magnitude of the protest was largely unexpected as a group of 250 protestors decided to camp in and permanently occupy the Puerta del Sol, at the heart of the capital city of Madrid, until after the elections. The Indignados or 15M movement defined itself as grassroots, non-partisan, non-violent citizens’ movement which eschewed the traditional characteristics of previous social movements such as hierarchy, bureaucracy and double militancy (Hughes, 2011). In short, the movement rejected any institutional affiliation to political parties and trade unions and, thus, the protest adopted a form that was largely inexistent and unknown up until that point in Spanish society.

Though widely considered a youth movement, the social depth reached by 15M penetrated far beyond middle-class youth and represented a wide variety of sociological and class backgrounds.

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Figure 2: GINI Index\(^2\) in Spain (2003-2015) as compared to other European countries

![GINI Index Chart]

Source: The World Bank

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\(^{2}\) The GINI index or coefficient is a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent the income or wealth distribution of a nation’s residents and is the measurement of inequality most commonly used. It measures the extent to which the distribution of income (or, in some cases, consumption expenditure) among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution.
Indeed, one lasting aspect of the 15M movement was the involvement of senior citizens, a very large sector of an aging country, who played a central role in some of the demands, including those that called for improved pensions and a stop to the budget cuts in healthcare.

The movement fizzled out in the months after the first explosion of protest with little to no substantial immediate effect on political or economic policy, except adding to the general atmosphere of public discontent. The mounting gravity of the economic crisis that forced the socialist Prime Minister at the time to call for early general elections. The elections that were originally to take place in April 2012 were moved to November 2011 and the results largely favoured the opposing conservative People’s Party, whose campaign promises revolved around improving the economy and further implementing the deepening austerity measures that were being demanded by the European Union authorities. Though a large part of the population was dissatisfied with the political class in general, other factors, such as the belief that the opposing party would do a better job of improving the dire state of the economy, took centre stage.

Figures 3 and 4: election results in 2009 (left) and 2011 (right)

As can be seen in the images, the conservative PP (in blue) overwhelmingly won the 2011 elections in almost all electoral conscriptions, seriously damaging the presence of the previously-governing Socialist party (in red).

However, despite the continuing austerity measures which forced Spanish society to buckle down and endure, and the perceived normalcy that the conservative PP had seemingly installed after their election to government, the surface started to show some ripples of underlying change, especially concerning corruption. It would take several years for the full effects of the crisis and the movement it sparked to completely appear in the form of the clear shifting of Spanish public opinion towards increased levels of perception and worry about corruption.
3. A portrait of the perception of corruption in Spain and how it has changed

One of the two main pillars of contention on which the movement rested was the incapacity of the Spanish political class to manage the economic recession and its pernicious effects. The constant unfolding of corruption scandals affecting many local and regional governments was generating outspoken criticism and distress among the population. Among the many demands of the 15M movement was the establishment of effective mechanisms to ensure internal democracy in political parties as well as the banning of the privileges enjoyed by the political elite with measures such as the non-applicability of statutes of limitations on crimes related to corruption, the compulsory publication of all the assets owned by elected officials and the implementation of a legal obligation for political parties to present candidates with a clean background regarding corruption.

The cyclical nature of Spanish successes and consecutive failures dating from the end of the 19th century, which marked the definitive end of the sprawling Spanish empire, has generated a negative complex in Spanish culture which constantly arises in times of trouble. One of those times of trouble was the economic crisis which brought about increasing concerns and exasperation at the state of governance and transparency. Millions of taxpayers who saw their wages reduced or their jobs discarded altogether, people being evicted from their homes and increased poverty on the streets, no longer tolerated the political class getting away with stealing or abusively wasting taxpayer money: the political culture surrounding corruption transformed and became highly critical and vigilant.
At the time of the crisis and well before that time, Spain suffered from endemic political corruption resulting from the interpenetration of economic and social power (Hughes, 2011). The levels of political corruption seen in Spain resulted from many years of consolidation of a professionalized political elite which was able to knowledgeably establish clientelistic networks and capture institutions and taxpayer funds as well as a legal system poorly designed for establishing checks and balances in decision-making processes. Corruption thrived in areas characterized by the existence of monopolies in the use of discretion such as zoning, public procurement procedures and party financing (Villoria, 2016), (Pradera, 2014), (Koumpias, Martínez-Vázquez and Sanz-Arcega, 2015). The reality became apparent to many disenchanted voters that Spain lacked an efficient and effective government control system, which resulted in much corruption within local, regional and national institutions (Villoria, 2016). One of the real changes that the 15M movement brought about was making people aware of the problem and causing them to actively reject it. This signified a change in paradigm in levels of the perception and tolerance of corruption in Spain: though worries about corruption had spiked during certain periods of time, especially during the first half of the 1990s due to a slew of scandals that came to light, citizens’ perception levels have traditionally remained stable and relatively low (Jiménez and Villoria, 2008). This was no longer the case. Citizens were no longer willing to turn a blind eye to what happened behind closed doors in town halls all around the country or casually

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3 The percentage of null ballots increased during the November 2011 general elections due to protest votes. More than 2 % of the votes during these elections were considered null or were left blank. Abstention rates also increased significantly (up 5 % from the previous general elections). A protest vote which has become more prominent in the last several elections since 2011 is the insertion of a slice of chorizo along with a ballot. A “chorizo” is also a colloquial term in Spanish for a thief. The ballot portrayed in the picture was ultimately deemed valid and counted as a vote for the PP party, despite it being a clear message by a concerned and somewhat brazen voter against party corruption.

4 It is worth noting that while political corruption has been widespread, corruption in public administrations is low and in line with European standards. According to victimisation surveys, Spaniards have very little experience in personally bribing or being asked to bribe civil servants (Villoria, 2016).
accept corruption as a lesser evil and became viciously critical of any corrupt practices or scandals that arose during this time. The legitimacy of the political class in the wake of its deficient managing of the economic crisis had already been decimated, and the surfacing of corruption scandals reaching ten or even twenty years back gave the last blow. Corruption became a massive concern.

Figure 7: the evolution of the main concerns of the Spanish population between 1985 and 2018

As can be seen from the table, the issue of corruption as one of Spain’s main problems as perceived by the general population soared in conjunction with the negative perception of politicians and parties and the concern regarding the state of the economy but worries about corruption have continued to be high even when concern about the economy dissipated.

The citizen mobilization with regards to its perception of corruption can be explained in part by the increased attention from the media of the corruption scandals that started to surface during this time which fed the general perception – or complex – of a country of scoundrels led by a corrupt political elite (Villoria, 2016) instead of a mature nation deserving of leading global affairs. The term “corruption” started to include a wider range of frowned-upon behaviors. Previously limited to a certain set of specific actions like bribery of public officials, it started to include any behavior carried out by a person invested with power who uses it for private gain, whether directly or indirectly, both in the private and public sectors such as the unequal distribution of public services, insider trading, nepotism, cronyism, influence peddling and improper use and waste of taxpayer money (such as elected officials using public money to buy expensive gifts) which had been considered until recently as “white” corruption using Heidenheimer’s shade system. Successive reforms of the Criminal Code between 2010 and 2015 began to criminalize behaviors that were before considered administrative infractions or not sanctioned at all (Chazarra Quinto, 2016), (Fernández Castejón, 2016).
Figure 8: media coverage of corruption scandals in major Spanish newspapers between September 2008 and June 2010 (number of news on the front cover and percentage of the total)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The state of the economy</th>
<th>El País</th>
<th>El Mundo</th>
<th>La Vanguardia</th>
<th>El Periódico</th>
<th>El Correo</th>
<th>ABC (Seville)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The economy</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5 %</td>
<td>9.3 %</td>
<td>8.5 %</td>
<td>6.7 %</td>
<td>10.6 %</td>
<td>12.6 %</td>
<td>10.2 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The economic crisis</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.8 %</td>
<td>10.6 %</td>
<td>15.0 %</td>
<td>12.8 %</td>
<td>11.5 %</td>
<td>11.2 %</td>
<td>11.4 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.2 %</td>
<td>14.6 %</td>
<td>7.6 %</td>
<td>10.5 %</td>
<td>3.1 %</td>
<td>7.6 %</td>
<td>11.9 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>1.189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.4 %</td>
<td>15.5 %</td>
<td>19.1 %</td>
<td>17.1 %</td>
<td>16.5 %</td>
<td>16.6 %</td>
<td>15.8 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Villoria and Jiménez (2012), and compiled by the author

As can be seen in the table, front-page news concerning corruption was almost 12 % of the total headline news published by the main Spanish newspapers in the period stretching between September 2008 and June 2010, even before the 15M movement came to be. This set the stage for a general ambiance of disappointment in, and disaffection from, the ruling class.

However, these increases in perception did not stem directly from an increase in corruption, but rather the pressures on the political system from citizenship, media, business, etc., caused corruption cases to become more well-known and provoked acute social alarm in Spain, which has proved to be long-lasting and perseverant. One indicator that the movement succeeded in its denouncement of the political elite is that out of all the EU countries, Spain has been the country to experience the highest increase in perception of corruption as one of the most important problems that the country faces (Villoria and Jiménez, 2012), (Jiménez, 2017), even compared to other countries with similar levels of perceived corruption and disaffection and that had equally suffered from the economic crisis.

During the economic crisis, two especially serious corruption scandals gravely harmed the legitimacy of two important institutions. The 2009 “Gürtel” and 2013 “Bárcenas” Affairs directly implicated some of the most important and leading members of the PP government and party, including Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. The 2010 “Nóos” Affair directly implicated the Royal Family, whereby the son-in-law of the King at that time, Juan Carlos I, was accused of using non-profit organizations to embezzle and launder more than 6 million euros of tax-payer funds and his wife, the King’s daughter,

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5 The judges who were investigating these linked cases suggested that the PP party maintained a parallel bookkeeping system in order to record undeclared and illegal cash donations and used them to pay bonuses to senior members and for daily party expenses.
was charged with tax fraud in connection to her husband’s crime. Though she was later acquitted, her husband was sentenced in 2017 to almost 6 years in prison.

The breakout of these two scandals eventually provoked two very major events in Spanish affairs. Firstly, the King, a well-liked public persona due to his positive influence in the democratic transition, faced furious push-back from citizens due to his perceived relationship to his son-in-law’s actions as well as other scandals that tarnished his reputation⁶. His unexpected abdication in 2014 in favour of his more well-liked son led to perceived renewal in an institution under increased public scrutiny. Secondly, in late Spring 2018, the Prime Minister was forced out of government when a motion of no-confidence was passed successfully in the aftermath of a judicial ruling declaring that the PP party had been a beneficiary of illegal bribery schemes and that the Prime Minister had not been truthful in his testimony. Out of four motions of no-confidence that have been proposed in democratic Spain, this was the first one to actually succeed. The consequences of corrupt activities were finally starting to remove important people from power: public scrutiny became a real and powerful game-changer in Spanish public affairs, aligning it with northern European and Anglo-Saxon political tendencies and distancing it from the “typical” Mediterranean political culture.

Concerning elections and the distribution of seats in Congress, though the 2015 elections were also won by the PP party, the situation had changed from 2011. New political forces appeared which radically changed the state of public affairs and the way of governing, especially regarding corruption (López Álvarez, 2016). After more than thirty years of bi-partisan leadership between the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the PP (among other very minoritarian regionalist parties), two “new” parties appeared and changed the dynamics of power. *Podemos*, a new left-wing political formation born in 2014 out of some of the remnants of the 15M movement, erupted into the political stage first in the European elections and then became the third largest party in Congress after general elections and repeat elections were held. *Ciudadanos*, a Catalan centre-right party launched itself into the national limelight and became the fourth largest party with 40 seats in 2015 and 32 seats in 2016.

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⁶ Though these scandals were not related to corruption, they contributed to the image of the monarchy as an opaque and secretive institution.
Figures 9 and 10: Results after the December 2015 general elections (above) as compared to the 2011 election and the June 2016 repeat general elections as compared to the 2015 elections (below). *Podemos* (purple) and *Ciudadanos* (orange) start to creep up on PP (blue) and PSOE (red), which faced historically low results. Both parties, though ideologically differing, have a strong anti-corruption message.

This marked another significant change in politics and corruption in Spain: the fact that the Spanish electorate did not “punish” corrupt parties at the polls (Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro, 2014), (Jiménez, García-Quesada and Villoria, 2014). In previous studies of the effect of political and corruption scandals on general elections, it has been shown that many different circumstances go into the Spanish electorate’s decision to react to corruption in the polls (Caínzos and Jiménez, 2000), (Caínzos and Jiménez, 2004) which explained the lack of direct effect between previous waves of corruption scandals (notably in the 1990’s) and punishment at the polls. The 2015 and 2016 repeat general elections marked the start of a new era in Spanish politics where the conditions for corruption scandals to directly harm parties at the polls were present and became crucial.
In terms of legislation, Act 13/2013 on Transparency, Access to Public Information and Good Governance was passed as a way to respond to the crisis situation. Its preamble specifically mentions the existence of a more demanding and critical society to whose needs the Public Administration must be more accommodating. Though described as a timid and anchored law (Larach, 2015), it aimed to change the structure of the Administration in order to include new institutions and policies designed to shorten the distance between citizens and the Administration as well as increase the accountability of the latter to the former. The Council for Transparency and Good Governance was created in order to provide independent surveillance of transparency regulations by public Administrations, safeguard the citizens’ rights to access public information and make sure that institutions comply with good governance legislation.

In summary, major changes were brought about as a result of changes in perception and tolerance regarding corruption. This initial spike in concern about corruption was remarkably linked to the circumstances of the economic crisis and a rising dissatisfaction with politicians in a country whose citizens already showed signs of serious institutional and political disaffection and a certain collective moral that somewhat “accepted” corruption as an inevitable part of politics. However, and unlike other periods where corruption scandals sparked high levels of concern, the period stemming from 2011 to the present day has proven that the Spanish citizenry’s image and concept of corruption has changed: corruption as the moral degeneration of the political system and not merely an inevitable behavior whose most serious manifestations had to be legally persecuted. This new mindset regarding corruption is obtaining a real response from government officials and political parties, though its effectiveness will not be able to be effectively evaluated until more time has passed.

4. Changes: technological impact on public governance

The Indignados movement was a 2.0 mobilization (Martí Puig, 2011) in which collective action and mobilization spread through the use of websites and social media. The startling speed at which the movement spread throughout most of Spain and even to other parts of the world was a primitive testament to the power of social media in the sphere of larger public debate. The fact that this social movement was extensively documented by participants, opposition, bystanders, political commentators, politicians, students, journalists etc., and that any act of police aggression was immediately filmed and uploaded meant that political repression was met with increased support and solidarity towards the protestors. Over 60 % of the population supported the protests and over 70 % considered that the demands were important to society (Oñate, 2016).

Social media became the foundation for the movement to form, organize and expand and provided a platform for citizens to speak out against the political class and express their grievances. Afterwards, it also became the foundation for increased transparency and accountability from government officials as well as a wider platform for increased communication between citizens and their Administration. Open government and online administration became concepts enshrined in new administrative laws that were passed between 2013-2015 as a right held by the citizens in their relationship with the public Administration and a duty by the former to its citizens.
The fact that the economic crisis and its consequences coincided with the boom in the development and use of social media meant that they became a tool in the hands of citizens to demand increased accountability and transparency from governments. They also became a tool for elected officials and governments to better communicate with their constituents on a much larger scale, provide higher-quality services and more easily implement measures that allowed citizens to feel included in governance. Technology provided the platform through which traditional hierarchical and one-way power structures in which policy was directed from the upper echelons of government to the citizenry below transformed into two-way reciprocal flows of information.

Local and regional elections in 2015 brought new faces and mindsets into government in several major cities, including Madrid and Barcelona. This revamp of many local governments brought new initiatives revolving around the possibilities of open government as allowed by the spread of social media and computer and Internet use.

One notable way that technology has helped heighten the public’s involvement in local government in Spain has been through the expansion of annual participatory budgeting initiatives in many large and small cities in Spain. These initiatives are considered a way to spark and mold citizenship (Pineda Nebot, 2009), (Llamas Sánchez, 2004) and constitute a great initiative to increase citizen affection if carried out responsibly and efficiently.

Another impact that even more advanced technology such as artificial intelligence and big data analytics may have on increasing transparency and, thus, decreasing the environment that favours and encourages the propagation of corrupt activities arises through improvements in measuring and diagnosing the state of corruption in any given jurisdiction. One of the problems that plagues the issue of corruption in Spain is that it is extremely difficult to measure over time how detected7 corrupt activities have increased or decreased because there is not an official database measuring how many cases and what kind of corruption have been investigated and tried as well as their outcome (Ortega Giménez, 2016), (Villoria, 2016).

Artificial intelligence and its application to legal databases may permit government officials and the general citizenry to be more aware of the state of corruption, how many cases are tried by the courts, their outcomes, percentages of the incidence of each type of crime or administrative offense and can even provide analytical understanding about how different types of courts, in different jurisdictions and territories within the same country, are sentencing different types of corrupt actions. This can provide enormous insight for officials and lawmakers into the state of the problem and how to tackle it and is also another way that society can access data, independently from media sources, and therefore partake in a more transparent and honest environment with regards to corruption.

5. Conclusion

The Indignados movement, despite its initial explosiveness, did not last exceedingly long. However, it was the founding event of a new period and the first signal of a new phase (Antentas, 2015). This

7 Understood as any undergoing/tried police and/or judicial investigation. It is virtually impossible to know how much corruption is taking place in absolute terms because of its illegal and hidden nature.
expansive effect, though subtle and perhaps unnoticed in the first several years after the movement started, had a deep and profound impact on Spanish society's awareness of many issues, among them, corruption, and heralded a new era where corrupt practices where no longer tolerated and transparency and open government became a demanded service from public officials with systemic impact on political affairs in Spain (Llera Ramo, 2016).

Though the movement did not achieve the explicit change it initially targeted, the public expression of outrage, the peaceful exchange of ideas and the indignant youthful rebellion signaled a new politically active generation particularly sensitive to corruption. In this sense, it can be said that the movement was more of a citizen movement rather than a social movement (Gerbaudo, 2017) in that, despite it being a movement associated with the left, it appealed to a wide sector of the Spanish citizenry.

The economic crisis was a stress test of the Spanish political system that has clearly revealed its weaknesses and the best way for reform (Torcal, 2016). The cause and effect of the 15M movement on perception and tolerance of corruption levels is not easy to delineate, however, though Spanish voters have traditionally shown a high tendency towards political disaffection which has increased with the events surrounding the economic crisis, apathy towards politics has massively decreased. In other words, during the 15M movement, Spanish society woke up and rediscovered its political power. This mobilization has translated into much higher political participation and consumption by the average Spanish citizen, putting it in line with northern European countries, and at the head of Europe in regard to rates of protesting (Torcal, 2016).

Specifically, with regards to corruption, the reaction of Spanish society, in the context of the economic crisis was especially severe, compared with other Southern European countries that also struggled with the 2008 economic crisis and had similar corruption levels (Villoria, 2016). The Spanish case study shows that collective moral development in awareness and tolerance of corruption can take place without resulting in increased disaffection (Bowler and Karp, 2004) and distrust in political parties and institutions (Solé-Ollé and Sorribas Navarro, 2014), or, at least, independently from these two latter phenomena (Torcal, 2016).

However, the change of political culture regarding corruption is not the only lesson to be extracted from the Spanish case study:

1. Social movements can spark much needed democratic reform through the development of a more critical, active, demanding and vigilant citizenry, which, in turn, heightens pressure for institutional reform, that, if successful, can generate higher trust in the quality of governance and invert tendencies of spiraling disaffection. The higher perceived impartiality of differing institutions including the judiciary, the monarchy and the executive, where politicians and representatives are held accountable for their actions, help to affect citizens to the system and commit them to uphold anti-corruption and integrity measures to a much greater extent than within a disaffected, condescending and apathetic society. In order to create real accountability, an active and enlightened citizenry must exist (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013).

2. Underlying change in perceptions and tolerance towards corruption may take time to surface and consolidate itself. The full impact of the 15M movement could not be measured at the moment of its impact (Martí i Puig, 2011). Of course, in the interim, many other political,
economic and social factors have come into play, but the 15M movement definitively took the momentum of widespread discontent caused by social and economic circumstances and sparked an awakening in Spanish society. There had already been many analyses dating from before the start of the economic crisis regarding the extension of corruption and the reactiveness – or lack thereof - of the political elite in addressing these issues. The economic crisis provided the circumstances for the 15M movement, but the movement put those citizen demands into words and actions and organized the citizen’s discontent into a cohesive message. This message is still developing today, so much so that the improvement of the economic situation will not be enough to appease global demands for increased transparency (Torcal, 2016).

3. Crises present critical opportunities that help end the path dependence that endemic political corruption entails but are not enough to promote real and effective change: political agents conscious of the need to use the moment to break with dishonest, partial and unequal practices are also needed to produce permanent change (Jiménez, 2016). The constant restoration and reinvigoration of institutions with people capable of staying above low habits and establish regulation and policy to remove corruption as much as possible from the normal course of affairs is the missing element to the link. This element is still to be confirmed in the Spanish case study: though new faces and political structures have appeared, their interest in effecting real change and encouraging integrity has yet to be proven.

4. Technology has the potential of placing ordinary citizens at the centre of public affairs, aiding in their direct participation in governance issues as well as placing another layer of pressure for transparency. This could be the fuel which keeps the spark initiated by the discontent with the economic crisis going. If citizens, the media and other organizations can more easily access information then political parties then the Administration will have a vested interest in bringing about real, conscious change. Some measures have already started to have an effect although their real impact has yet to be confirmed.

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