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In Greece, Spain and Portugal, a new generation of left-wing academics has now entered politics. They claim to reinvent the way policy is shaped by relying both on evidence and on meeting the need of citizens. However, the way in which the results of academic research are actually taken into account in policy making is not straightforward. So are they likely to rely more than their predecessors on evidence-based policy?

Can academics entering politics bring more evidence into policy?



New wave of left-wing politicians are not spared the harsh realities of political life in policy making

The political, economic, social and environmental challenges Europe faces today are getting ever more complex. In principle, decision makers in Brussels support relying on science and innovation for tackling these challenges and shaping our future society. Taking academic research findings into account in policy making is not straightforward. Indeed, there is considerable debate on the state of [policy advice](#) and [evidence-based policy](#) in Europe.

Enters a new generation of left-wing politicians who claim to reinvent the way policy is shaped, by relying both on evidence and on meeting the need of citizens. They prone bottom-up approaches, like Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. Due to the nature of their approach, they are sometimes accused of populism. So what can we expect from this new wave of leftist politicians? Are they likely to rely more than their predecessors on evidence-based policy?

A new academic political class

Recently, academics have entered the political arena, particularly in Southern Europe. Leaders of the new left in Europe, such as [Pablo Iglesias Turrión](#) of [Podemos](#) in Spain and the former Greek finance minister [Yanis Varoufakis](#) are cases in point. In Portugal, where the left has gained power in November 2015, there are now academics serving as ministers in the government, such as [Mário Centeno](#) and [Manuel Heitor](#).

Prior to his current job as finance minister, Centeno was special advisor of the board at the Banco de Portugal and also professor of at the [Lisbon School of Economics and Management](#). He earned a PhD in economics from Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA. Heitor was until recently director of the [Center for Innovation, Technology and Policy Research](#) in Lisbon. He now heads the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education.

In Spain, Iglesias, now secretary general of Podemos in Spain, has been a member of the European Parliament since 2014. He was previously a lecturer at the department of political theory and human geography at [Complutense University of Madrid](#). Similarly, in Greece, Varoufakis has an academic background in mathematics and economy. He spent his early career mainly in the UK and Australia, before being appointed by the [University of Athens](#), where he holds a position as professor of economic theory.

But do academics involved in politics automatically put greater academic rigour in drafting policies than other politicians? And how can academic knowledge actually contribute to shaping alternative economic policies in real life?

In fact, the attention that the political elite has recently paid to what is called evidence-based policy has not necessarily led to convincing results, according to [Shaun Hargreaves Heap](#), professor of political economy at King's College London, UK. "There's been lots of commissioned research that informs policy," he says, "But I don't think that it means in a deep sense that conventional political wisdoms have been troubled by reality any more."

In the Portuguese government, for example, ministers with no partisan background stemming from academia have been a constant at least since the 1980s, according to Marco Lisi, assistant professor in political science at the [Universidade Nova De Lisboa](#), Portugal. "It is a common practice especially in the [socialist party] PS and [social democrat party] PSD, two main moderate parties, governments," he adds. In his view, the academic background is indeed important in the way ministers decide and implement public policies.

Policy shift

In Spain, some scientists hope that left-wing Podemos will lead to fundamental changes in the country's policies. As Podemos' main leaders, such as [Pablo Echenique](#), have a strong academic background, "R&D and higher education must be very present in their discussions because it's part of their own nature," says [Amaya Moro-Martin](#), a Spanish astronomer at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

She shared her views on current R&D policies with Podemos, after they approached her as founder of the Spanish science advocacy group [Investigación Digna](#). What she now expects from left-wing parties is "to take measures to allow the shift to a knowledge-based economy throughout Europe." This would help all countries "achieve more robust, sustainable economies that minimise the growing research and innovation gap between Member States, which feeds the very large gap in social welfare," she says.

Fresh ideas

Previous attempts at getting European countries back on their feet has not proven very effective. Indeed, squeezing budgets for science and innovation in the name of austerity "cannot be helpful," Hargreaves Heap says. "It blights your long-term future."

In his view, the current political and economic crisis also has a positive side effect. "New ideas have now a much better chance of influencing policy," he says. "You may indeed find that academics like Yanis Varoufakis get through into politics. That's one conduit through which new ideas surface." He doubts, however, that there is a significant trend for more academics getting involved. "I don't think that there are Yanises popping up all over Europe," he says.

In reality, when confronted with real political life, academics face various challenges: "People get persuaded by ideas for all sorts of reasons. It's not simply whether there is a body of evidence to support them," Hargreaves Heap says. And of course, academic knowledge is not always clear-cut, says [Cristina Flesher Fominaya](#), a policy adviser, expert in European social movements, and an associate professor at the department of sociology of the University of Aberdeen, UK.

Still, social scientists are often frustrated by the gap between academic research and knowledge and the way that policies are developed, Flesher Fominaya adds. "The problem is that the debates in policy are not framed in a way to enable these kind of arguments to be put forward," she says. "When you have alternative economic ideas you are going to be met with a wall of resistance from vested interests," she notes. In her view, one thus has to change the debate at the societal level.

Citizen's input

This is why it is not only about academics getting involved in politics, Flesher Fominaya points out. The major difference between a party like Podemos and other parties is its grassroots-connection, she says. "Many of the party's leaders are not only academics but have a background in student activism," she explains. "The party is coming out of that experience of activism. That is the commitment to having policies that reflect the needs of the citizens—with their participation," she notes.

The participatory nature of a party like Podemos could potentially come into tension with the need of expertise to direct policies, Flesher Fominaya holds. However, “the more policies are trying to actually respond to real needs that also increases the value of academic work that is engaged in evidence-based solutions and is engaged in actually working with communities,” she adds.

It is exactly these links to the grass-root movements that “can help policy become more evidence-based”, Moro-Martin agrees. “These leaders are naturally more sensitive to what these movements have to say,” she adds. “Evidence-based policy is just a method, but the key is also to apply it to address the right questions.”

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