In Spain, the government’s economic austerity policies have contributed to an unemployment rate of 23 percent, mass home foreclosures and evictions, and a deep distrust of an entrenched political class. This has also inspired the rise of a new generation of leftist politicians who are shaking up Spain’s political landscape.

Their message, focusing on ending austerity and creating a culture of participatory democracy, has struck a deep chord. On May 24, a cohort of activist-turned-politicians won sweeping victories in Spain’s largest cities, including Madrid and Barcelona. In the words of Ada Colau, the anti-eviction activist who on June 13 took office as Barcelona’s new mayor, “This was the victory of David over Goliath.”

The success of Colau and others like her is driven by their deep ties to grassroots movements that have emerged since the 2008 financial crash and subsequent bank bailouts. In Spain’s general elections in November, David may once again triumph. Podemos, the upstart anti-austerity party backing many of the municipal victors, is running strong in the polls, presenting a serious challenge not only to the two-party system dominant in Spain, but also to the economic policies of the European Union.

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Photography by Robert Pluma

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