



Spain's Elections: What They Are About and What to Expect?

By Paul Costello

A heightened election season is starting with a jolt this weekend in Spain. Spanish voters will be called to vote three times before June, with parliamentary elections on April 28, local and European Parliament elections on May 26, and elections in 13 out of 17 of the country's regions in that same period. Happening amid turbulence over the Catalan independence movement, these elections—and the upstart parties in the mix—are worth paying close attention to. The leftist Podemos, which emerged on the scene in 2015, and the economically liberal Ciudadanos are now joined by the far-right Vox in further fragmenting what was once a two-party system, with several consequences.

What Are the Elections About?

Nationalism and competing visions of Spanish national identity is the main theme of the parliamentary elections campaign, and we can expect this to also be a core part of the subsequent local, regional, or European elections—albeit to a slightly lesser degree. Podemos and the social democratic Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) are campaigning on an ambiguous “pluri-national” Spain that can accommodate the strong national identities of Catalans and Basques by reaching agreements and building consensus. For their part, the conservative Partido Popular (PP), Ciudadanos, and Vox **vehemently criticize** this position, calling “traitors” those who “humiliate” Spain by negotiating and reaching agreements with political forces seeking more regional autonomy or to be allowed to vote in an independence referendum. Since 2011 this issue has

never really been dormant, but the recent start of the televised trial of Catalan politicians and civil society leaders for the attempted independence referendum in 2017 has ensured it remains firmly center stage.

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Vox, in essence a splinter group of former hardline PP members, will be the first far-right party to obtain national representation since Spain became



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democratic in the early 1980s. In their duel to see who was going to lead the right by being the most intransigent against the Catalan independence movement and through [their initial flirtation with anti-immigrant discourse](#), new PP leader Pablo Casado and Ciudadanos leader Albert Rivera inadvertently paved the way for the new party to gain visibility and popularity. Although this will most likely be the headline outcome of the elections, it would be a mistake to ignore the other deep and consequential changes in Spanish politics that will also be crystallized.

The other important issues that are being brought up, albeit less emphatically and generating fewer headlines, include protection against gender violence and sexual aggressions, migration and border policies, affordable housing, job creation and labor-market reform, pensions sustainability, abortion, and euthanasia. The relative strength of Vox is also adding weight and controversy to issues related to gender and feminism, migration, and the previously inexistent debate around gun laws, which was introduced by the far-right wing party recently for the first time and has gained some traction especially in hunting communities and certain rural areas.

European and foreign policy issues have been markedly absent from the campaign, not even coming up substantively in either of the two televised debates. The EU, eurozone governance, transatlantic relations, international trade, the political situation in Libya and Algeria, Russia, China, digitalization, 5G infrastructure, artificial intelligence, climate change— none of these issues related to the European and international order or to transformational technological, economic, or environmental developments that will have major impacts on Spain's domestic and international situation has made it onto the agenda thus far in the campaign season.

What Can We Expect?

[Polls show a clear lead](#) in the parliamentary elections for the governing PSOE (29.4 percent), followed

by the PP (20.6 percent), the economically liberal Ciudadanos (15.1 percent), the leftist Podemos (13.6 percent), and Vox (10.9 percent). The two most probable outcomes are a reiteration of the current PSOE government with the support of Podemos and regional Catalan and Basque parties or a right-wing PP-Ciudadanos coalition supported by the nationalist, anti-feminist, anti-immigrant Vox, modelled on the recently elected regional government in Andalusia. A PSOE-Ciudadanos coalition is possible, but the latter party has explicitly ruled this out, and the tone between the two-party leaders in recent debates adds credibility to this option being discarded.

But polls also show that [about 40 percent of the electorate is still undecided](#), adding an important layer of uncertainty to any forecasting.

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All signs point to there being a coalition government for the first time under Spain's democratic constitution. This would be a logical development considering the recent fragmentation of a historically two-party system, in which the center-left and center-right either won absolute majorities or reached agreements and made concessions to small regional parties to be able to govern. With four parties garnering substantial support nationwide and Vox emerging as the fifth, they will be forced to reach to broader agreements and compromises to govern.

Implications for Spain's Role Abroad

Despite the absence of European or international issues in the elections, in his short time in office, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has sought to revert the anomaly that was [Spain's relative insignificance on the European and international stage](#). This has been attempted mainly by clearly positioning the country close to the ostensible pro-EU reform core of France and Germany, as well as by a series of highly symbolic and progressive international and domestic actions such as forming a majority-female government, seeking to remove the remains of fascist dictator General Francisco Franco from his mausoleum, and taking in the Aquarius ship carrying over 600 migrants rescued in the Mediterranean shortly after taking office after it had been turned away by Malta and Italy.

None of these actions thus far have led to any substantive or policy changes, but they have earned Sánchez a [comparison to Canada's \(previously\) popular Prime Minister Justin Trudeau](#). Should the parties on the right form a governing coalition led by the PP's Pablo Casado, they would most likely keep to a deeply pro-EU inclination, but with a much harder line on migration and strongly critical undertones against a few aspects of the Schengen system, following what they considered an affront to the dignity of Spain [when Belgium and Germany refused to extradite](#) members of the Catalan regional government being prosecuted in Spain. A victory and governing agreement of the two parties on the right together with the party on the far right would lead to more hawkish positions on Venezuela, where Spain has always exercised a strong role and influence. Similar hawkishness could be expected on Iran, given Vox's affinity with U.S. neoconservatives and their having had [80 percent of their 2014 European election campaign funded by the Mujahedin-e-Khalq](#), the extreme Iranian opposition group close to senior U.S. political figures such as John Bolton and Rudy Giuliani.

The outcome of the parliamentary elections on April 28 will set the tone for the other local, regional, and

European elections taking place within a month's time, and more importantly they will matter profoundly for the trajectory of Spain at this critical time in its history. For Europe and the world these elections will most probably not result in any dramatic or unexpected shift by Spain, as one might be inclined to worry about considering election outcomes of previous years in other countries. What they will do is provide another example of how increased fragmentation, polarization, and the emergence of new parties are affecting politics and institutions.

For the left in Europe, where social democratic parties are failing to connect with voters and becoming increasingly irrelevant, the strategies and tactics of the PSOE could become an inspiring model if it wins. For the right, Spain will showcase what happens when conservative and liberal parties "[lurch right](#)" and when the more extremist elements fragment into a new party as opposed to staying within the umbrella of a broad conservative party. In either case, [changing economic headwinds](#), in a country that is still recovering from a devastating financial crisis and still with fewer people employed than in 2008, will put enormous strain on whichever government emerges.

The high levels of polarization in Spanish politics and society paint a dispiriting picture. But, in the long term, the fragmentation of what was a two-party system and the relevance of new parties could also contribute to more dynamism and consensus building among political actors. In any case, the current elections campaign gives no reason not to expect the continued absence or relative irrelevance of Spain—the fourth-largest eurozone country and the fourth-largest EU member state after Brexit—on the European and international stage.

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About the Author

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