

Spain goes to the polls on 23 July to renew its parliament

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ANALYSIS

On 29 May, the outgoing President of the Spanish Government (Prime Minister) Pedro Sanchez (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE) announced the dissolution of the *Cortes Generales*, the name given to the parliament comprising the Congress of Deputies and the Senate, and called snap elections for 23 July (the vote had been scheduled for the end of the year).

This decision follows the victory of the People's Party (PP) led by Alberto Nunez Feijoo in the regional, provincial and municipal elections held on 28 May across most of Spain. *"As President of the Government and Secretary of the PSOE, I accept the results. I believe that a clarification of the will of the Spanish people is necessary and I believe that we have to submit our democratic mandate to the will of the people. The best thing is for the Spanish people to make up their minds without delay"*, declared the Prime Minister when the results were announced.

Will the Spanish people confirm their 28 May vote on 23 July? Nothing is certain, and Pedro Sanchez is taking a gamble by calling snap elections. One thing is certain however: his fellow citizens, focused on the forthcoming elections, are probably talking a little less about the Socialists' defeat in the local elections - and the People's Party, forced to project itself immediately into a new electoral battle, has not been able to savour its victory.

The election campaign ran from 7 to 21 July. The *Cortes Generales*, elected on 23 July, met on 17 August.

Pedro Sanchez has dominated Spanish politics since June 2018, when he succeeded Mariano Rajoy (PP), in office since December 2011, as head of government. Joining forces with the radical left of Unidos Podemos, he formed Spain's first coalition government since the country's return to democracy in 1976.

According to the opinion poll conducted by the EletoPanel/Electomania institute at the end of

June, the PP is expected to come out ahead in the parliamentary elections with 32.1% of the vote, followed by the PSOE with 29%. Vox, a right-wing populist party, is expected to garner 13.9% and Sumar (S) Unite), a coalition of radical left-wing parties, 13.6%. The rest of the votes are due to go to the regional parties, of which there are many in Spain. The latter could deprive the PP or the PSOE of a majority. In the last two parliamentary elections (2015 and 2019), the Spanish people had to return to the polls a few months after the first elections, which failed to produce a majority. Will the scenario be the same in 2023?

THE 28 M ELECTIONS

On 28 May, 35.5 million Spaniards went to the polls, with a turnout of 63.83%, for the regional, provincial and local elections known as 28 M. Only 12 of the 17 regions voted: Catalonia, the Basque Country, Andalusia, Galicia and Castilla y León had a different electoral calendar. These ballots were therefore not complicated by the nationalist question.

4 conclusions can be drawn from this:

- Ciudadanos (C's), the centrist party for which Patricia Guasp is spokesperson, was absorbed by the PP, which won the elections (it won 9 of the 12 regions);
- The PSOE lost regions and is therefore now being outpaced by the PP, but while Pedro Sanchez's party is holding its own, its radical left-wing allies (Unidos Podemos, a coalition founded in May 2016 that comprises Podemos, of which Ione Belarra is General Secretary, the United Left (IU), a coalition of

parties formed around the Communist Party and led by Alberto Garçon, and the Equo environmentalists) have been wiped out (in the regions in which it governed,

- Podemos saw its number of votes more than halve, with the exception of the Valencia region

- lastly, Vox (Vox), a right-wing populist party led by Santiago Abascal, profited from its campaign against Pedro Sánchez, linking him with the separatists of Euzkadi ta Askatasuna (ETA, a Basque pro-independence, Marxist-Leninist and terrorist organisation - it caused the death of around 830 people between 1959 and 2018, the year it was disbanded) and Bildu, a left-wing Basque pro-independence coalition, which enabled the approval of the budget presented by the government. Bildu fielded 7 candidates involved in terrorist activities in the 28 May elections before replacing them.

The right-wing opposition succeeded in turning the local elections into a referendum against Pedro Sánchez. The Prime Minister helped them by becoming personally involved in the election campaign. *"The defeat of the left can be explained by the collapse of certain coalition partners such as Unidos Podemos. Spanish nationalism, which has been on the rise since 2017, has fuelled criticism of Pedro Sánchez, who has been accused of forming an alliance with the radical left and the Basque and Catalan independence parties,"* said Guillermo Fernández, lecturer in political science at Carlos III University in Madrid. *"Above all, the executive is being punished because of the alliances that Pedro Sánchez has forged with other elected members of Unidos Podemos, Bildu (Unite) and the Catalan pro-independence parties,"* said Pablo Simón, professor of political science at the same university. *"These elections are the clearest assertion of the wish for change that exists in Spain,"* said Alberto Núñez Feijóo, leader of the PP. *"There is a choice to be made between Pedro Sánchez and Spain, and I have no doubt that the majority of Spaniards will choose Spain",* he added, before concluding: *"We have taken the first step, now we have to take the final one".*

CAN PEDRO SANCHEZ PULL IT OFF?

It would undoubtedly have been difficult for Pedro Sánchez to continue governing the country for another 6 months under attack from the opposition, his allies and the separatists.

Fernando Vallespín, professor of political science at the Autonomous University of Madrid, agrees: *"Pedro Sánchez would no longer have been in a position to govern. His allies in Parliament, severely punished in the ballot box, were no longer prepared to negotiate with him".* The decision to call snap elections means that Pedro Sánchez will not see his authority as leader of the PSOE and leader of the outgoing majority challenged. The left went into the 28 May elections divided. In the run-up to the parliamentary vote, each party is defending its own interests: Unidos Podemos and Sumar, the left-wing party created in 2023 by the Minister for Labour and the Social Economy, Yolanda Díaz, are seeking to distinguish themselves from the PSOE, while the PSOE wants to show that it is really governing the country.

"The alternative position was a 6-month bleed out for the government", said Oriol Bartomeus, associate professor of political science at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. *"The PSOE can hold its own in July, but its result would have been worse 6 months later"* said Paloma Roman Marugán, professor of political science at Madrid's Complutense University.

Pedro Sánchez is counting on the mobilisation of left-wing supporters who stayed at home on 28 May, while those on the right and radical right voted in large numbers. He is also brandishing the threat of the radical right joining the government if the PP wins. Pedro Sánchez is trying to embarrass the PP by forcing it to campaign for the parliamentary ballot, while at the same time having to negotiate possible alliances with Vox in certain regions.

Pedro Sánchez is also promoting his European profile, given that Spain took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 1 July, allowing him to make Alberto Núñez Feijóo *"merely"* President of the Galician Junta, a position he actually

held between 2009 and 2022. Pedro Sanchez has invited the PP leader to take part in 6 televised debates (and only with him), a proposal that the opposition leader has refused. Pedro Sanchez wants to focus the electoral campaign on his battle with Alberto Nunez Feijoo and eliminate - as far as possible - his partners on the radical left, who are not very popular with the public.

If his strategy is not enough for the PSOE to win the parliamentary elections, it could at least mitigate a possible defeat. Alberto Nunez Feijoo does not have a strong public image, and although voters rejected Pedro Sanchez in the local elections on 28 May, it is not clear that they are convinced that the right-wing opposition would do better than the outgoing government.

The outgoing Prime Minister did not reap the benefits of his government's socio-economic performance in the local elections. Yet Spain is a country with solid growth (5.4% in 2022 and 5.50% forecast for 2023) and a dynamic employment market: the unemployment rate is 12.8%, a high figure of course, but the lowest since 2008. One million jobs have been created in the country since 2020. The minimum wage has been increased from €736 in 2019 to €1,080 (over 14 months, or €1,260 over 12 months). Retirement pensions have been realigned with inflation, and the rights of precarious workers have been extended. Inflation is low: 1.9% in June, the lowest rate in the European Union, and exports grew by 23% in 2022. Pedro Sanchez's government has introduced a living wage and increased grants and allowances for families. However, the deficit and debt remain high, at 4.8% and 113.2% respectively in 2022.

"Pedro Sanchez has failed to read the situation. He didn't realise that the country's economic fortunes had taken a back seat (...) he found himself caught up at the tail end of a campaign that was focused on the patriotic question set by the PP and Vox, and reviled as a traitor ready to sell off Spain's unity", said political analyst Pablo Simon. According to many political analysts, Spaniards did not appreciate the fact that Pedro Sanchez had entered into alliances with pro-independence parties when

he had promised in 2019 never to do so. *"The 28 May elections were a punishment for the executive because of Pedro Sanchez's alliances with Unidos Podemos, Bildu and the Catalan pro-independence parties,"* said Pablo Simon.

On several occasions, the PSOE has relied on the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC-Sobiranistes), an alliance of two Catalan pro-independence parties, but in order to do so, it had to pardon in June 2021 the 9 Catalan pro-independence activists sentenced in 2019 to between 9 and 13 years in prison for "sedition" and "embezzlement" following the unconstitutional referendum of 1 October 2017 and the subsequent secession attempt. The government relied on the abstention of part of the Catalan and Basque pro-independence left to form its government in 2020 and on Bildu to vote on the budget. Many Spaniards have not forgiven him for this.

On the left of the left, the popular Yolanda Diaz, a lawyer and Employment Minister in Pedro Sanchez's outgoing government, has rallied 16 political parties into the Sumar movement. She made her candidacy for prime minister official without obtaining the support of Unidos Podemos. Before the local elections, Unidos Podemos sought to distance itself from Yolanda Diaz thereby weakening her. Unidos Podemos is in disarray. Crippled by internal divisions, it has undoubtedly focused too much on societal issues to the detriment of social ones.

HAS THE RIGHT'S HOUR COME?

By deciding to bring forward the parliamentary elections by 5 months, Pedro Sanchez has taken the wind out of the sails of the PP, which has barely been able to celebrate its victory in the local elections. For the parliamentary campaign, Alberto Nunez Feijoo intends to continue his successful refocusing of the PP by absorbing Ciudadanos. He is also trying to keep Vox at bay, but it is not certain that he will succeed. For the time being, the two parties have concluded an alliance in around 140 municipalities, twenty of which have more than 20,000 inhabitants

(Burgos, Toledo, Valladolid, Gijon and Guadalajara). Together they will govern the region of Valencia, Spain's 4th most populous region (the PP will lead the government and Vox the parliament).

Alberto Nunez Feijoo has postponed any debate within the PP on a possible alliance with Vox so as not to jeopardise his chances of victory on 23 July. This might deter centrist voters or those tempted to vote against Pedro Sanchez's outgoing government from voting in support of the PP. Alberto Nunez Feijoo remains very vague about the alliances he could forge in the event of victory without an absolute majority. He is a moderate, particularly in view of his predecessors in the PP: José Maria Aznar (1990-2004), Mariano Rajoy (2004-2018) and Pablo Casado (2018-2022). Of all the things he wants, perhaps the least is to become the first Spanish head of government to serve with the radical right. He promises a "quiet change": "*In 2019, Pedro Sanchez swore never to ally himself with the independentists or the radical left, but he has done so. The PP is another way of doing politics: centrality versus radicalism*", he declared.

He wants to lower income tax for the poorest and the middle classes (income below €40,000 a year) and to abolish bank and energy taxes. He has pledged to abolish the Ministry of Equality, the law allowing people to change gender freely from the age of 16 simply by making an administrative declaration, the law on democratic memory, to reform the law on education, the labour code and the law on euthanasia, and to reintroduce the offence of sedition. This offence, for which, among others, the Catalan separatists behind the banned referendum on the region's independence were convicted in 2019, has been replaced by that of aggravated public disorder, punishable by up to 5 years in prison. Anyone convicted of sedition was liable to up to 15 years' imprisonment, and the period of ineligibility has been halved.

To the right of the PP, Vox has established itself as the 3rd political force in under ten years. Following the local elections on 28 May, Vox is now represented

in all the country's regional parliaments with the exception of Galicia.

The party's identity is based on its opposition to the decentralised system and, consequently, to Basque and Catalan separatists and independentists. Vox calls Pedro Sanchez a "traitor" and accuses him of wanting to "trade off Spain's unity". Vox's nationalism prevents it from imagining any alliance with a regionalist party, even one on the right of the political spectrum such as the Canarian Coalition (CC) or the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV).

Vox rejects all immigration and wants to reverse the legalisation of abortion. It is against all environmental constraints and is campaigning to protect the agri-food industry. "*Spain must disassociate itself from any international agreement or legislation that blames our producers for environmental problems*", reads its programme.

Economically liberal, Vox promises to lower taxes, a measure it plans to finance by abolishing regional administrations and agencies. Vox wants to reduce the powers granted to the regions, particularly in the areas of education, health, justice and security. "*40 years of regionalism have left us with a political community divided into 17 kingdoms of taifas*", it says in its programme. Finally, the party is Atlanticist, condemning Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

THE SPANISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Spanish Parliament (*Cortes Generales*) is bicameral. It comprises an upper house, the Senate, and a lower house, the Congress of Deputies. The Congress of Deputies has 348 members, elected at least every 4 years by multi-mandate proportional representation (using the d'Hondt system on closed, blocked lists) in 48 of the 50 provincial constituencies (Ceuta and Melilla vote by simple majority), each of which appoints at least 2 deputies (1 for Ceuta and Melilla). The rest of the seats are distributed among the provinces according to their population. The largest constituencies are Madrid (37 seats), Barcelona (32), Valencia (16), Seville and Alicante (12), Malaga (11) and Murcia (10). A list must

obtain at least 3% of the vote to be represented in the Congress of Deputies.

The Senate has 208 members elected from open lists (provincial senators) and 56 representatives appointed by the country's 17 autonomous communities (community senators). Each of the 50 provinces, regardless of population size, elects 4 provincial senators by majority vote, with the exception of Ceuta and Melilla, which elect 2, and the Balearic and Canary Islands, where each of the larger islands (Gran Canaria, Mallorca and Tenerife) elects 3 and each of the smaller islands (Ibiza-Formentera, Menorca, Fuerteventura, Gomero, Hierro, Lanzarote and Palma) elects 1. Furthermore, each autonomous community appoints (by proportional representation) 1 community senator and one additional senator per million inhabitants. This system favours the least populated regions of the Kingdom. The Senate elections are held on the same day as those for the Congress of Deputies.

16 political parties won seats in the Congress of Deputies in the last elections on 10 November 2019:

- The Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), founded in 1879 and led by Pedro Sanchez, has 120 MPs;
- The People's Party (PP), founded in 1977 and led by Alberto Nunez Feijoo since 2 April 2022, has 89 seats;
- Vox (Voice in Latin), a right-wing populist party founded in 2013 as a result of a split with the PP, led by Santiago Abascal, has 52 seats;
- Unidos Podemos, an alliance of 12 parties including Podemos, United Left (IU) and Equo, led by Ione Belarra, has 35 seats;
- Ciudadanos (C's), a centrist party founded in 2006 and led by Alberto Rivera, has 10 seats;

- the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC-Sobiranistes), an alliance of 2 pro-independence parties led by Oriol Junqueras, has 13 seats;

- Together for Catalonia (Junts per Catalunya, JxCat), a pro-independence party formed by the Democratic Party (PDeCAT) and independents, has 8 seats;

- The Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ/PNV), a Christian Democrat party founded in 1984 and led by Andoni Ortuzar, has 6 seats;

- Euskal Herria Bildu (Uniting the Basque Country), a 4-party alliance whose spokesman is Arnaldo Otegi, has 5 seats;

- Mas (Plus), a left-wing party founded in 2019 and led by Inigo Errejón, has 3 seats;

- "Candidatura d'Unitat Popular – Constituent per la Ruptura" (CUP-PR), a left-wing Catalan pro-independence party led by Carles Riera, has 2 seats;

- The Canarian Coalition-Canary Nationalist Party (CC-PNC), an alliance of a right-wing regionalist party led by Claudina Morales and a regionalist party led by Juan Manuel Gracia Ramos, has 2 seats;

- Navarra Suma (NA+), a coalition formed by the Union of Navarrese People (UPN), the People's Party and led by José Javier Esparza, has 2 seats;

- Bloc Galicia, a left-wing regionalist party founded in 1982 and led by Ana Pontón, has 1 MP;

- The Regionalist Party of Cantabria (PRC), a regionalist party led by Miguel Ángel Revilla, has 1 MP;

- Teruel existe, which represents the interests of the province of Teruel (Aragon) led by José Guitarte Gimeno, has 1 MP.

The PSOE also has a majority in the Senate.

Parliamentary elections in Spain

23rd July 2023

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Results of the parliamentary elections in Spain on 10 November 2019

Turnout: 66.23%

Congreso de los diputados

Political Parties	Number of votes cast	% of votes won	Number of seats
Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	6 792 199	28	120
People's Party (PP)	5 047 040	20.81	89
Vox	3 656 979	15.08	52
Unidas Podemos	3 119 364	12.86	35
Ciudadanos (Cs)	1 650 318	6.80	10
Republican Left	880 734	3.63	13
Más País	584 306	2.41	3
Junts per Catalunya-Junts	530 225	2.19	8
Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ/PNV)	379 002	1.56	6
Euskal Herria Bildu (EH Bildu)	277 621	1.14	5
Popular Unity Candidacy-For a Break (CUP-PR)	246 971	1.02	2
Canary Islands Coalition-New Canaries (CCa-NC)	124 289	0.51	2
Galician Nationalist Bloc-Nós (BNG-Nós)	120 456	0.50	1
Navarra Suma (NA+)	99 078	0.41	2
Regionalist Party of Cantabria (PRC)	68 830	0.28	1
Teruel Existe	19 761	0.08	1

Source : <https://infoelectoral.interior.gob.es/opencms/es/elecciones-celebradas/resultados-electorales/>

Senado

Political Parties	Number of seats
Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	113
People's Party (PP)	97
ERC Bildu	15
Ciudadanos	9
Left	6
Independent	6
Others	9

Source : <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2019/12/02/pdfs/BOE-A-2019-17344.pdf>

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