

Spain's influence in the European Parliament: an historical survey and predictions for the new political cycle

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Theme

The European parliamentary elections in May 2019 represent a major opportunity for Spain to increase its influence in the EU.

Summary

The EU's *modus operandi* over the last decade has seen it going through a series of existential crises. Given the threat represented by Brexit to the future of integration, the role of predominantly pro-European countries is even more important for moving the project forward. The European Parliament, as the only institution whose members are directly elected, provides a stage on which Spain can try to increase its influence in the decision-making process. This analysis reviews the role of the country in the European Parliament since it joined the Union on 1 January 1986 up to the present day and compares the positions of its political parties and their members with large EU countries. It concludes with some predictions for the May 2019 elections and sets out a roadmap for increasing Spain's influence. Finally, it should be noted that this paper is part of a wider project by the Elcano Royal Institute focusing on Spain's presence in the EU and by the working group set up by its office in Brussels to analyse how to improve the country's influence in the in the 2019-24 cycle.¹ This is the fifth paper in a series of publications based on the group's presentations and debates.²

¹ The working group comprises Spanish players with a permanent or habitual presence in Brussels, including MEPs, Spanish civil servants at European institutions, business managers, members of other civil society entities, press correspondents and representatives of the Spanish government and administration, particularly staff at Spain's Permanent Representation at the EU (REPER). The identity of members is confidential in order to encourage a greater atmosphere of trust and understanding.

² The currently available publications are: (1) L. Simón, I. Molina, E. Lledó & N. Martín (2019), 'Hacia un ecosistema de influencia española en Bruselas', ARI nr 30/2019, Elcano Royal Institute, 11/III/2019, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari30-2019-simon-molina-lledo-martin-hacia-un-ecosistema-de-influencia-espanola-en-bruselas; (2) E. Lledó & M. Otero Iglesias (2019), 'Los intereses españoles en la agenda digital y la política industrial de la UE', ARI nr 39/2019, Elcano Royal Institute, 5/IV/2019, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari39-2019-lledo-oteroiglesias-intereses-espanoles-en-agenda-digital-y-politica-industrial-ue; (3) I. Molina & N. Martín (2019), 'La crisis catalana y la influencia de España en Bruselas', ARI nº 42/2019, Elcano Royal Institute, 25/IV/2019, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari42-2019-molina-martin-la-crisis-catalana-y-la-influencia-de-espana-en-bruselas; and (cont.)

Analysis

Introduction

Since the first European elections held in 1979, the European Parliament has been consolidating its essential role in the EU's decision-making process. Its powers increased significantly with the Lisbon Treaty. It now shares legislative powers with the Council of the EU, fulfils other major functions and is important player in the EU's power map. Moreover, as the only institution whose members are directly elected by European citizens, it is an essential source of legitimacy for the Union.

European elections have traditionally been viewed as secondary by many voters and turnouts have been lower than in national elections. Electorates often punish their national governments in European elections and there is more tactical voting for small parties.³ In the elections scheduled for 23-26 May, a higher turnout is expected after years of politicisation and crisis on the continent. The repeated shocks that the EU has endured in the last decade (crises involving economics, migration and cohesion – the prime example being Brexit) will be evident in greater public interest during the campaign, the ballot and the new parliament. In Spain these elections come at a time when the country wishes and is striving to improve its influence in the EU. Clearly, the internal situation will play a very important role in the form such ambition takes, but it is an opportunity that must undoubtedly be seized.

A European scenario characterised by Brexit on the one hand and the eurosceptic Italian government on the other could enable Spain to present itself as an indispensable partner to the Franco-German axis in advancing towards integration. The Spanish presence in the European Parliament will be a key element in taking advantage of this favourable context for a Spanish push in Europe. The question of how Spanish MEPs are chosen, which committees they sit on and which posts they occupy in the European Parliament is thus of the utmost importance.

It should not however be forgotten that MEPs owe their allegiance to different political groups within the European Parliament. They have two loyalties: one is to the voters in the country that elected them and the other is to the European political family to which they belong. On many issues they act in a coordinated fashion within the political group and not in accordance with national criteria. However, in cases where something important is at stake for the interests of Spain, they act along national lines, as has been seen in recent years in relation to the crisis in Catalonia and the coordinated response of Spanish MEPs from the main parties.

(4) F. Steinberg (2019), 'La influencia de España en la política económica de la UE', ARI nr 43/2019, Elcano Royal Institute, 29/IV/2019, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari43-2019-steinberg-influencia-de-espana-en-politica-economica-de-ue.

³ For an analysis of the 2014 elections see 'European Parliament Elections of May 2014: Driven by National Politics or EU Policy Making?', <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/viewFile/464/464>.

Bearing all this in mind, the main task of the Spanish political parties is to play a significant role within their political groups. It is thus very important to have MEPs who are well prepared and knowledgeable about European affairs, with clear ideas and ideals about the future of Europe. For these reasons, the selection of appropriate candidates by the parties (likewise their choice of relevant committees and well-prepared advisors), the campaign for the European election and the subsequent work undertaken by the representatives present an opportunity to improve Spain's influence in the EU.

This analysis reviews the role Spain has played in the European Parliament since it joined the EU and compares the important posts that its representatives have held with those of similar countries. Next, the profile of Spanish political parties in the European Parliament over recent decades is reviewed and some predictions are made for the elections in May 2019. It concludes with suggestions for enhancing Spanish influence in the EU.

Spain in the European Parliament: an historical survey

Spain's entry to the EU in 1986 and the arrival of its first directly-elected MEPs in 1987 coincided with a period when the European Parliament was extending its powers. The first direct elections had taken place just seven years earlier (until 1979, members of the European Parliament were drawn from national assemblies). Secondly, the Single European Act (1986) awarded new powers to the institution, establishing the procedure of legislative cooperation in a large number of areas and giving the European Parliament the power of veto over accession and association treaties.

In 1986 the number of seats in the European Parliament rose from 434 to 518 with the arrival of 60 Spanish and 24 Portuguese MEPs, initially appointed from among their national MPs and subsequently, in 1987, elected in the first European elections in these two countries. Over the last three decades Spanish MEPs have played an important role in the European Parliament, although before reviewing the leadership positions they have occupied it is worth pointing out that Spain has been underrepresented in this institution.

As Carlos Carnero, Victoriano Ramírez González and Ignacio Molina have explained,⁴ Spain elected 64 MEPs in the 1999 election, but the following year, when the Nice Treaty was being drawn up, prime minister José María Aznar chose to sacrifice seats in exchange for greater influence in the Council of the EU (an ill-judged gambit given that the Council's voting system changed shortly thereafter and the number of Spanish MEPs has never been restored).

Spain currently has 54 representatives, fewer than it should have in relation to its 46 million inhabitants. The 82 million inhabitants of Germany elect 96 representatives while 66 million French nationals return 74. The seat/population ratio works out worse for Spain, above all when compared to Germany, the most populous country in the EU. With

⁴ 'El número de eurodiputados españoles, entre la Política y las matemáticas', <http://agendapublica.elpais.com/numero-eurodiputados-espanoles-la-politica-las-matematicas/>.

Brexit and the departure of the British MEPs, Spain's underrepresentation was corrected to some extent when it was allotted an additional five representatives (taking it from 54 to 59 MEPs). The problem is that with Brexit having stalled, the most likely scenario involves retaining the current distribution of seats and Spain remaining underrepresented with 54 MEPs.

In any event, its political parties can play an important role in their respective groups. In the wake of the results of the national election held on 28 April, an attempt may be made to estimate the breakdown of MEPs and thereby maximise influence in the European Parliament. Before turning to this, it is worth comparing Spain to other countries of similar size in terms of the European Parliament's key posts. This exercise will help to shed light on how Spain should position itself in the next legislative term.

Comparison of country profiles: what position does Spain occupy?⁵

A comparative look at the role played by Spanish representatives in relation to their German, French, Italian and British counterparts⁶ places them in mid-ranking position, notable in certain key roles and playing a more low-profile part in others. The presidency is obviously the most influential job and most symbolic in the European Parliament. The power of the president has grown as the institution itself has acquired more areas of responsibility. Particularly notable are the role of the president in arranging the debates in the chamber, presiding over the key decision-making body (the Conference of Presidents) and representing the European Parliament, especially at European Council meetings, where the president addresses the participants at the start of each meeting.

As Figure 1 shows, over the last three decades Spanish representatives have presided over the European Parliament on three occasions: the socialist Enrique Barón from 1989 to 1992; José María Gil Robles, of the People's Party, from 1997 to 1999; and the socialist Josep Borrell from 2004 to 2007. Spaniards have only been outnumbered in this post by Germans (who have presided over the institution on five occasions). Representatives from France, Italy and the UK have held the presidency on one occasion.

⁵ For the present purposes a series of key posts at the European Parliament have been chosen (the president of the institution, the vice-presidents, the chairs of the committees, subcommittees, temporary committees, committees of joint delegations, delegations and parliamentary assemblies) to measure the influence of the Spanish representatives. The authors would like to thank the Office of the European Parliament in Madrid for its help in compiling these data.

⁶ German, French, Italian and British MEPs were used for the purposes of comparison because these, together with Spain, represent the five largest countries in the EU. The data only encompass the period starting in 1986, when Spain joined the EU. All the figures are drawn from this period.

Figure 1. Distribution of key posts in the European Parliament

	Spain	Germany	France	UK	Italy
Presidents	3	5	1	1	1
Vice-presidents	28	27	25	19	27
Committee Chairs	32	51	39	40	50
Subcommittee Chairs	1	10	7	1	1
Temporary Committees	3	5	4	2	2
Committee Chairs of Joint Delegations	5	14	9	15	16
Delegation Chairs	49	88	49	67	66
Parliamentary Assembly Chairs	4	4	-	6	4
Total	125	204	134	151	167

Note: for purposes of comparison all the posts for all the countries are counted starting from 1986, the year in which Spain joined the EU.

Source: database provided by the Directorate General of the Presidency of the European Parliament.

In terms of the vice-presidents of the European Parliament, Spain is ranked first. Its representatives have held this post on 28 occasions, compared to 27 German, 25 French, 19 British and 27 Italian vice-presidents. By contrast, if one looks at the chairs of committees – another key role, given that chairs wield considerable influence over the agenda and the procedures surrounding the issuing of reports – Spaniards are ranked last (holding 32 chairs, compared with 51 German, 39 French, 40 British and 50 Italian chairs).

Turning to other, less influential posts, such as the chairs of subcommittees, temporary committees, joint delegations, delegations and parliamentary assemblies, Spanish representatives occupy a low to mid-ranking position compared to their counterparts.

In terms of the presidencies of the political groups – another fundamental role in the European Parliament's power games, given that they operate as spokespeople in the key debates and take part in the Conference of Presidents, the main internal political body – the only Spaniard to have held this post is the socialist Enrique Barón, from 1999 to 2004. It is a post that Spaniards should undoubtedly run for more frequently. In the legislative term now ending, German representatives, once again at the forefront, have led four of the eight political blocs: EPP, S&D, GUE/NGL and the Greens (co-chair). As far as the role of Spanish parties in the next legislative term is concerned, one of the chief ambitions ought to be to secure the leadership of one of these blocs.

Spanish political parties in the European Parliament

Of all the European institutions it is undoubtedly the Parliament where Spain can play a more important role. Thanks to the size of its population and the possibility of Brexit,⁷ it could have the fourth-largest national delegation in the forthcoming legislative term (or fifth-largest in the event that the UK decides to remain longer in the institution, although its cohort will in any event be weaker owing to the situation of political limbo).

As is well known, the seats are allotted proportionately in accordance with population size. Spain is fifth on the list, which is headed by Germany with 96 seats, followed by France, with 74, and the UK and Italy, both with 73. Spanish MEPs –the majority belonging to pro-European parties– are well placed to play an important and constructive role in the new political cycle.

It is important to emphasise that Spain has been a pro-European country since its return to democracy in the 1970s. Accession to the EU was fundamental in the process of consolidating democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. There has been a cross-party consensus on the attitude towards the EU stretching back decades. Up until now, and enduring such upheavals as economic crises, Brexit and the inflows of immigrants that have created a profound identity debate within Europe, the consensus Spanish response has consistently been 'more integration'. The fact that a far-right party has entered the Spanish Congress for the first time, with VOX winning 24 seats in the general election held on 28 April, suggests that it will secure representation in the European Parliament, thereby challenging this cross-party, pro-European consensus. For the first time, Spanish MEPs may belong to the same group as the French National Rally and the Italian Northern League, although this will only apply to a limited number of the Spanish intake.

Historically, Spanish MEPs have formed part of the European Parliament in the last seven legislative terms, starting with that of 1984-1989.⁸ The first direct election to the European Parliament in Spain was that of 1987 –when an individual election was held together with Portugal, after Spain joined the year before– and since then it has taken part in the rest of the elections alongside the other member states.

As can be seen in Figure 2, during these seven legislative terms the majority of Spanish seats have had an allegiance to the European People's Party (EPP) or the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). Given that an imperfect two-party regime has predominated over recent decades, the vast majority of MEPs have been drawn from the People's Party (PP) or the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE).

⁷ The UK has announced that it is going to hold elections to the European Parliament and therefore Spain will once again have 54 seats. In the event of the UK's departure, Spain will send five more MEPs (in accordance with the results of the election on 26 May 2019).

⁸ Spain joined the EU in 1986 and held elections to the European Parliament in 1987. Simultaneous municipal and regional elections were held with the aim of improving the turnout (electing the 60 MEPs that were allotted to Spain at this time).

Figure 2. Spanish seats classified by political groups in the European Parliament, 1984-2019

Group	Abbreviation	84-89	89-94	94-99	99-04	04-09	09-14	14-19
European People's Party	EPP	18	17	29	28	24	25	17
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	S&D	29	27	21	24	24	23	14
European United Left/Nordic Green Left	GUE/NGL	1	3	9	4	1	1	10
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	ALDE	2	7	2	2	2	2	8
The Greens/European Free Alliance	Greens/EFA	–	1	3	5	3	2	5
Communists and allies	COM	3	–	–	–	–	–	–
Not registered	NR	7	5	–	1	–	1	–
Total		60	60	64	64	54	54	54

Note: the groups have changed names over time and are classified here along political lines, distributing the seats accordingly.

Source: authors' compilation from European Parliament data.

The 2008 economic and financial crisis brought changes to the political parties in Spain. With the advent of Podemos and Ciudadanos, Spanish MEPs have also diversified. This accounts for the fact that Figure 2 shows a current national profile that differs from previous legislative terms. Whereas the number of MEPs affiliated to the EPP and S&D have fallen, members of GUE/NGL (likewise the Greens/EFA) and ALDE have risen – precisely because of the success of Podemos and Ciudadanos. The election in May will act as a barometer for measuring the extent to which the multi-party system and the current positions of the parties in the European Parliament has been consolidated.

Predictions for the new political cycle: 2019-2024

For the second time in the history of its direct elections the European Parliament has published detailed opinion polls⁹ with forecasts of results. The report is based on polls carried out in all the member states, including Spain. According to the new report, published on 18 April, and in line with what has happened in national elections in recent years, an increase in parliamentary fragmentation can be expected, with falls in support for the centre-right and centre-left.

⁹ For the most recent report see <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/beheard/eurobarometer/2019/political-landscape-developments/en-ee19-national-report-18-april-2019.pdf>.

In the new parliament the groups will need to redouble their efforts to secure a majority. The socialist-Christian democrat consensus of recent decades will no longer be decisive when it comes to shaping the European Parliament. For the first time in the history of the elections the two central blocs will not command a majority in the European Parliament. Moreover, the VoteWatch Europe organisation¹⁰ estimates that 55%-60% of MEPs will be new. Put another way, more than half of MEPs will require time to adapt to the institution and a significant part of the collective institutional experience will be lost in this parliament.

Turning to Spain in particular, as Figure 3 shows, the predictions suggest that PSOE will be the largest political party, with 18 seats, followed by PP, with 13. The third largest group will be the coalition of Podemos and Izquierda Unida (United Left), which is running in the election as the Unidas Podemos coalition (UP). Ciudadanos and VOX will follow hard on their heels but, given the time that still remains before the election, this order could change. Lastly, the Ahora Repúblicas (Republics Now) coalition is forecast to win two seats.

Figure 3. Predictions for the new legislative term, 2019-2024

National party	Abbreviation	Group in the European Parliament	Number of MEPs (prediction for May 2019)
PSOE	PSOE	S&D	18
PP	PP	EPP	13
Unidas Podemos Coalition	UP coalition	GUE/NGL & Greens/EFA	8
Ciudadanos	Cs	ALDE	7
VOX	VOX	–	6
Ahora Repúblicas Coalition	Ahora Repúblicas coalition	Greens/EFA	2

Source: Report of the European Parliament, April 2019.

If all the member states are taken together, according to the European Parliament report PSOE could become the largest component (or the second-largest, in competition with the British Labour Party) in the S&D group in the European Parliament. Similarly, Spain could have the greatest number of MEPs in the federal European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) group with its representatives from the Unidas Podemos coalition.

¹⁰ 'EU elections countdown: state of candidates, manifestos, projections', <https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/eu-elections-countdown-state-of-candidates-manifestos-projections/>.

Ciudadanos will be among the three largest parties that make up the Alliance of Democrats and Liberals for Europe (ALDE). PP will be able to claim a place as one of the three main political forces in the European People's Party, vying for this role with Fidesz of Hungary and the Republicans of France. Bearing this in mind, Spanish political parties stand a good chance of playing more important roles in their future political groupings. This could represent a major opportunity for enhancing Spain's impact on the European Parliament and, by extension, joining forces to ensure a greater degree of influence for Spain in Europe.

The day after 26 May: what does Spain need?

If Spain is to secure greater room for manoeuvre it needs an EU strategy that takes advantage of its strengths and minimises its weaknesses. Such a strategy, which needs to be state-driven rather than party-driven, does not currently exist. A joint strategy has never been hammered out between all the political parties, although it is true that they are capable of close cooperation when some 'flare-up' breaks out threatening Spanish interests. Elaborating a strategy would help the country increase its impact in Brussels and the other centres of EU power.

It is worth pondering which areas a grand agreement should cover. Clearly the creation of a strategy, including foreign policy, requires a consensus between political parties. This links to the internal situation in the country. It is important to emphasise that national stability will also determine the role that Spain can play at a European level. If it continues to be hostage to the separatist tensions in Catalonia, its efforts on the European political stage will be affected. It should not be forgotten that just as the separatist movement strives to internationalise the Catalan *procés*, Spain exerts energy in rebutting it; energy that could very well be expended on other issues. Settling this crisis would therefore pave the way to greater Spanish influence abroad.

The parties should study which areas need to be prioritised to determine their European strategy. As far as foreign policy is concerned, is it the fight against climate change, renewable energy policy or controlling borders? It will be very important to set out the areas where Spain enjoys comparative advantages. The lack of an internal debate about the future of integration and the role of Spain in the project –European politics as an issue was completely absent from the parties' campaigns in the general election– restricts the likelihood of having an impact. Without a major debate about Spain's influence abroad, setting out clear and feasible aspirations, it will not be possible to have an effective strategy capable of being put into practice.

Another possible approach would be to create synergy between the countries of southern Europe. There are examples of influence exerted by regional groups of countries, such as the Visegrád Group and the New Hanseatic League. These groups defend their positions on key issues and try to exert the greatest influence possible by taking advantage of their geographical position. Spain could start to construct its regional role, turning first towards Portugal. The creation of an Iberian strategy could be beneficial for both countries.

Lastly it is important to underline that Spanish MEPs will need to secure key posts in the European Parliament, starting with the group presidencies and followed by the *rapporteur* posts on major issues, thereby strengthening their influence in parliament. This is why it will be necessary to lay the groundwork and make preparations before and after the election, choosing the battles between the political parties and preparing to fight within the political groups. Spain should not miss the boat when it comes to securing greater influence.

Conclusion

This analysis summarises the situation of Spain in the European Parliament over recent decades. It refers not only to the key posts that Spaniards have occupied but also the role of its political parties. An overview of the past may serve as the basis for strategy in the forthcoming parliament. There are three key suggestions for the future:

- (1) The European election campaign will need to ensure that the Spanish parties set out their European aspirations and that the candidates explain the role that the European Parliament plays and how this institution can provide leverage leading to greater influence abroad. In the absence of this it is impossible for the electorate to appreciate the importance of their votes.
- (2) There will need to be a period of reflection among the parties after the European election to design a joint strategy aimed at enhancing Spain's influence. We all know the oft-repeated refrain: the country punches below its weight, but very rarely does it engage in dialogue and joint endeavour in a strategic and concerted manner to meet this challenge.
- (3) Of utmost importance for the first two suggestions, it will be necessary to overcome fragmentation and tap into the relative strength of PSOE, UP, PP and Cs in their respective political groups in the European Parliament. Despite the highly polarised nature of national politics at this juncture, the parties will need to try to overcome this abroad. By agreeing a joint national strategy, each party will be able to play an important role in shaping committees, reports and certain key posts.