

Spain's socialists beat a divided right but without a clear majority

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The Socialists won Spain's third general election in less than four years, but without a governing majority, while an upstart far-right party (VOX) stormed into parliament for the first time since the Franco dictatorship, producing the worst-ever result for the conservative Popular Party (PP) and splitting the right along with Ciudadanos (Cs).

Voter turnout in the most aggressively fought and contentious election for years was 75.7%, well up from 69.8% in 2016 and underscoring the sense among the electorate that the contest between five parties in a highly fragmented panorama represented a defining moment for the country.

The Socialists under Pedro Sánchez won 123 of the total 350 seats, 38 more than in 2016, and with the radical left Unidas Podemos (UP) would command 165 seats, 11 short of the magic number of 176 in order to rule with an absolute majority (see Figure 1). The three parties on the right have 147 seats between them and will not be able to repeat at the national level what they have in [Andalucía](#) since last December, when they won a majority of seats in the region's parliament.

Figure 1. Results of general elections, 2019 and June 2016 (seats, millions of votes and % of total votes)

	2019			2016		
	Seats	Votes	%	Seats	Votes	%
Socialists	123	7.48	28.7	85	5.42	22.6
Popular Party	66	4.35	16.7	137	7.90	33.0
Ciudadanos	57	4.13	15.9	32	3.12	13.1
Unidas Podemos	42	3.73	14.3	71	5.04	21.1
VOX	24	2.67	10.3	–	–	–
Catalan Republican Left	15	1.01	3.4	9	0.62	2.6
JxCat (1)	7	0.49	1.9	8	0.48	2.0
Basque Nationalist Party	6	0.39	1.5	5	0.28	1.2
EH Bildu	4	0.25	1.0	2	0.18	0.8
Canarian Coalition	2	0.13	0.5	1	0.07	0.3
Others	4	0.33	1.2	–	–	–
Voter turnout	75.75			69.84		

(1) CDC in 2016.

Source: Interior Ministry.

Sánchez came to power in June 2018 in a minority government after dislodging the PP in a censure motion over a corruption case, but had to rely on parliamentary support from UP, Catalans in favour of independence and Basque nationalists. He was forced to call a snap election after Catalan MPs refused to support the government's 2019 budget because he did not advance the cause of Catalan independence.

“Resolving the Catalan issue is one of the main challenges facing the next government”.

The Socialists' victory is a personal triumph for Sánchez. He wooed voters with a raft of measures in the last weeks of his government including a big rise in the minimum wage, and his campaign discourse was the most moderate and inclusive of all the political leaders. Yet he faces a difficult task in finding the extra support he needs without having to resort again to the pro-independence Catalan MPs, which he desperately wants to avoid. That support infuriated the right, and was a catalyst behind the success of VOX, which incessantly banged a drum that Sánchez wanted to break up Spain. VOX also militantly opposes multiculturalism, unrestricted migration and what it calls 'radical feminism'.

The backing of the Basque Nationalist Party, with six seats and the Canarian Coalition with two would still leave the Socialists three short of an absolute majority. An alliance with just Cs would produce a government with 180 seats, but Albert Rivera, the party's leader, ruled out a coalition with the Socialists even before campaigning began. An alliance with Cs, however, would upset many Socialist voters and would make UP the left-wing opposition in parliament. The other alternative would be for the Socialists to carry on as a minority government, albeit in a stronger position than before. Spain, together with Malta, is the only EU country that has not had a coalition government at the national level in the last 40 years.

Many analysts believe a coalition between the socially-progressive Socialists and the pro-market Cs would produce the kind of stable government that Spain badly needs, but Rivera's strategy is to become the main party on the right, and it is paying off. Cs almost doubled the number of its seats to 57, only nine fewer than the PP, whose result was its worst ever. Its share of the vote was halved to 17%.

The Socialists and the PP, the two parties that have alternated in government since 1982, obtained 45.4% of the vote, down from 55.6% in 2016 and a peak of 83.8% in 2008, when between them they had 89% of the seats in parliament (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The rise and fall of the Socialists and Popular Party in general elections between 1982 and 2019 (% of total votes cast)

	Socialists	Popular Party	Combined votes
1982	48.1	26.4	74.5
1986	44.1	26.0	70.1
1989	39.6	25.8	65.4
1993	38.8	34.8	73.6
1996	37.6	38.8	76.4
2000	34.2	44.5	78.7
2004	42.6	37.7	80.3
2008	43.9	39.9	83.8
2011	28.8	44.6	73.4
2015	22.0	28.7	50.7
2016	22.6	33.0	55.6
2019	28.7	16.7	45.4

(1) Popular Alliance until 1989.

Source: Interior Ministry.

While the PP suffered a debacle, the two pro-independence parties in Catalonia increased their seats in the national parliament from 15 to 22 and the number of their voters rose from 1.1 million to 1.5 million.

Resolving the Catalan issue is one of the main challenges facing the next government. Twelve Catalan separatist leaders have been on trial since February on charges including rebellion, which carries a sentence of up to 25 years. Nine of them have been in prison for 17 months. Whatever the sentence, this is an issue that is far from going away.

The new government also needs to approve the budget for this year. The fiscal deficit dropped below the EU's threshold of 3% of GDP last year (to 2.5%), making Spain the last country to be released from the excessive deficit procedure after 10 years. But there is little leeway for a return to the days of carefree spending. The economy hardly figured in the campaign, even though unemployment is 14% and public debt is close to 100% of GDP.

According to a study by the *Club de Exportadores* fewer than 1% of the parties' proposals referred to foreign trade and more broadly to the economy's internationalisation. Exports of goods and services have played a key role in the economic recovery over the last decade (rising from 22% of GDP to 34% in 2018). Spain was the improbable locomotive of the eurozone in 2018 as it was the largest single contributor to the area's growth.

Education is another critical area. Spain's early school-leaving rate last year at 18% of those aged between 18 and 24 was still close to the double the EU average.

How long it takes to form a new government is anyone's guess. With regional, municipal and European elections on 26 May, Sánchez might wait for the outcome of these results before making a move.