

# Perspectives

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## SPAIN – Politics

### An election in which everything is possible

- Within ten months of the first successful vote of no confidence in the history of Spanish democracy, the rejection of the budget by parliament in January 2019 brought down the socialist government. The experiment proved to be short-lived for the so-called "Frankenstein" coalition led by Pedro Sanchez, whose party, the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party), held a minority in parliament with only 84 deputies out of 350. The mass of amendments from the opposition and Catalan pro-independence parties that vetoed the budget forced the head of government to call early

parliamentary elections. Yet it was with the support of these same separatist parties that Pedro Sanchez overthrew Mariano Rajoy's government in June 2018 after the Gurtel trial confirmed the involvement of several senior People's Party (PP) officials in a corruption scandal. Pedro Sanchez pulled off a number of firsts: the first President of the Spanish government to reach La Moncloa after winning a vote of no confidence, the first leader of the opposition with no seat in Congress and the first candidate to run for nomination without winning an election. He will also have been at the head of the shortest term of office in Spanish democracy.

#### Born out of a no-confidence motion

##### *The rise to power of Pedro Sanchez*

In Spain, political crises follow one another but each one is different. The relative stability of Mariano Rajoy's government, which followed the political paralysis of 2016 when two legislative elections were held in the space of a year, was swiftly replaced by a resurgence of the Catalan problem. Nevertheless, it was not the independence referendum in October 2017 that brought down the former President of the Spanish Government, but the outcome of the Gurtel trial that put senior members of the People's Party in the spotlight for corruption.

Supported by fifteen parties and five parliamentary groups, the socialist leader gathered the 180 votes necessary to dismiss the previous government even though his party only held 84 seats. With no established political programme, he announced the appointment of a coalition government made up mainly of socialist figures and experts. The new government's room for manoeuvre, however, was

limited. Pedro Sanchez had indeed promised the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), whose vote was decisive during the no-confidence vote, that he would not amend the 2018 budget. The government had nevertheless negotiated a budget increase of 0.6% of GDP with the European Commission to finance the regions. Pedro Sanchez's objective was clear. Given the fragile nature of his coalition, he intended to seize the opportunity to initiate social change while thawing relations with Catalonia ahead of new elections by showing growing signs of appeasement, in particular by suspending the government's financial control of the region.

#### Catalunya still, Catalunya again

Despite these signs of openness, on 2 October, Catalonia's President Quim Torra issued an ultimatum to the head of government calling for an independence referendum in exchange for support for the coalition. Disavowed by his own side, he was later forced to abandon the ultimatum, but the socialist government had lost the support of independence deputies in parliament, which had enabled it to pass several decrees, including the

reform of the minimum wage in December. The announcement of a trial of Catalan dignitaries in February 2019 revived Catalan anxieties. MPs used the budget debate to pressure Pedro Sanchez into re-qualifying the charges against the officials who took part in the independence process in October 2017. Despite mediation attempts, Pedro Sanchez failed to stop the tabling of amendments against the budget and found himself forced to call early elections for 28 April.

### How the Catalan crisis put an end to the socialist government

*To understand the reversal of Catalan support for a Socialist government open to dialogue, we have to look closely at what is at stake in the antechamber of regional power. The holding of the independence referendum in October 2017 and the resulting declaration of independence led the former head of government, Mariano Rajoy, to resort to Article 155 of the 1978 Constitution, which allows the suspension of a region's autonomous status and the dissolution of its parliament. The vote on Article 155, which was approved thanks to the support of the PSOE, led to new parliamentary elections in Catalonia in December 2018. Far from calling into question the previous regional government, the elections of 21 December were won by the outgoing independence coalition composed of the PDeCAT and the ERC. Former President Carles Puigdemont from the PDecat and Vice-President Oriol Junquera of the ERC, both of whom were prosecuted by the Spanish Constitutional Court for rebellion and sedition, have not returned to their positions. Carles Puigdemont was forced into exile in Belgium to avoid detention, and Oriol Junquera was placed in pre-trial detention, but this did not prevent them from continuing to have an influence within the movement. Carles Puigdemont, who failed in his attempts to be invested as President in exile, was forced to relinquish the presidency in favour of Quim Torra. It is in this context of the loss of influence of the former president to another figure of the PDeCAT, in favour of Marta Pascal, that the agreement between the independence coalition and Pedro Sanchez was sealed, thus giving rise to the confidence motion. Carles Puigdemont's return to grace and Marta Pascal's loss of influence ended the short honeymoon between the PSOE and the separatists.*

### Nationalism, sovereignism: the new divide?

The announcement of the snap election marks the beginning of a pre-campaign in which economic issues have been relegated to the background. The tensions and confrontations between the party leaders, with the Catalan question ever present, has meant that the debates have been more intense than usual. On the one hand, Ciudadanos, the

People's Party and Vox continued to advocate a return to a harder form of nationalism with the questioning of certain prerogatives granted to the regions; on the other hand, the parties on the left defended the federalist model.

However, these common fronts mask differences. Pablo Casado's clear victory at the PP congress in July 2018 moved the party lines to the right. As a staunch sovereignist, in favour of repealing the 1985 law on abortion, the new secretary of the PP intends to embody a strong right-wing in the tradition of his mentor, former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar. The ideological reversal of what has been the leading party in Spain for more than ten years puts it in direct competition with the latest newcomer on the political scene, namely Vox. Emanating from the right wing of the PP, Vox was founded by Santiago Abascal in 2014. The far-right Spanish party, which did not exist a few years ago, is expected to enter Parliament after a remarkable performance in regional elections in Andalusia in December 2018. In favour of radical sovereignism with a review of the autonomous system of the regions, Vox also stands out for a tougher discourse on immigration and Europe. On the other hand, Ciudadanos, formed in Barcelona in 2006 to oppose Catalan nationalism, presents itself as the centrist alternative of the right and hopes to recover the space left vacant by Pablo Casado.

Faced by this bloc, the Socialist Party, which advocates more federalism, is playing the appeasement card with the regions and is emphasising its social policy. The Socialist Party's strategy is also reflected in the date chosen for the elections, which allows it to capitalise on its presence in the government without being tainted by the consequences of the trial of the Catalan pro-independence protagonists. Nevertheless, after repeated attacks by the opposition, Pedro Sanchez was forced to clarify his position, stating in particular that he ruled out any possibility of a referendum and that he remained opposed to the region's independence. As for Unidos Podemos, it is still missing from this debate. Driven by its Catalan branch, the party advocates the right to self-determination and supports the organisation of a referendum in Catalonia. This position remains difficult to maintain for the purple party, since it creates dissension within the party itself.

The lines are also moving within the regional parties. The PDeCAT is increasingly isolated in its posture as the rebel party. Considering the political context too tense, the Basque PNV has set aside its demands linked to self-determination to focus on improving the autonomy regime.

## Will the ‘empty centre’ of Spain put an end to the two-party system?

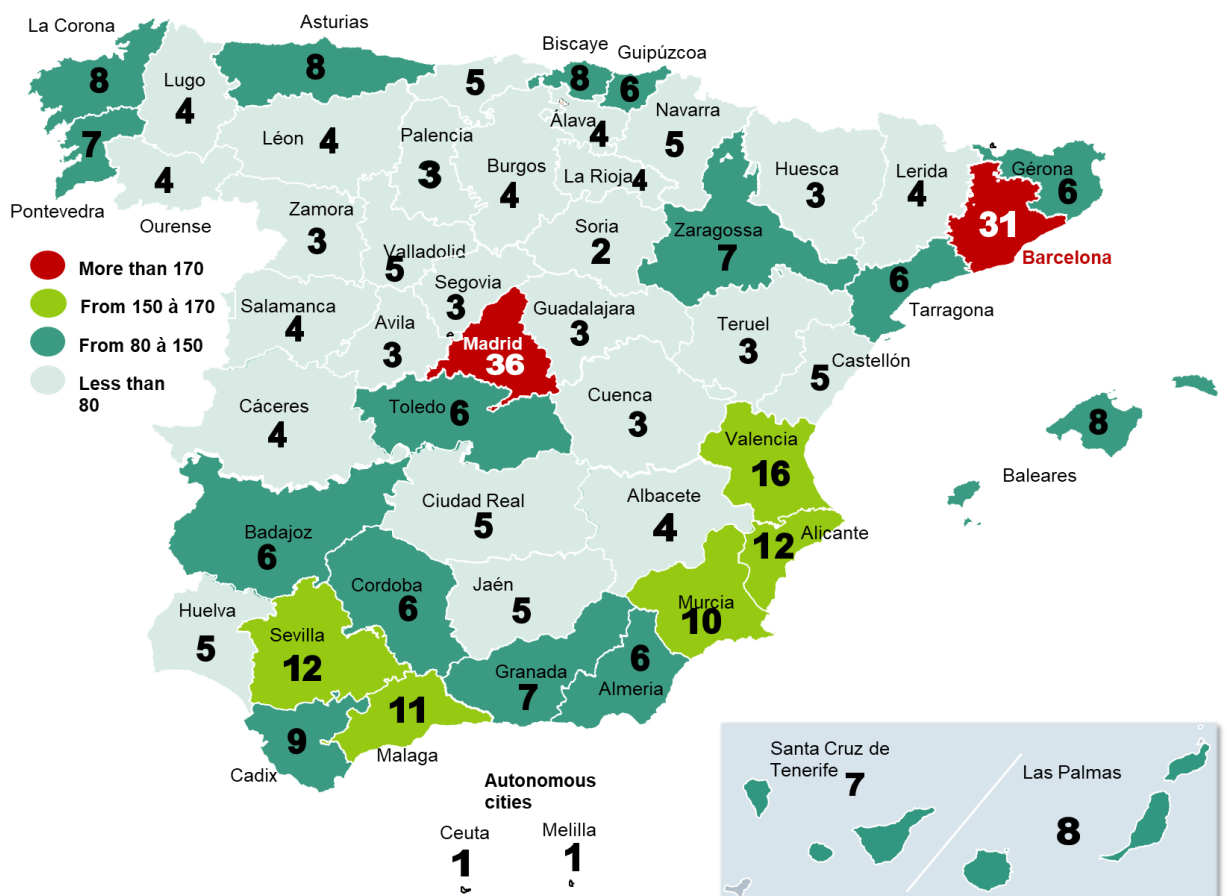
### *New parties are challenging traditional strongholds*

Two battles are being fought in this campaign: a battle of ideas, and a battle for rural votes. The Spanish electoral system is based on proportional representation, which overwhelmingly favours the two leading parties. The 350 seats in the Cortes legislative chamber are allocated by constituency. Each of the 52 constituencies is initially allocated two seats, plus an additional number of seats in proportion to their population. The cities of Madrid and Barcelona therefore have the most seats (37 and 32 deputies), but they also have the highest number of votes per seat (180,000). In contrast, the constituency of Soria has the fewest seats and the lowest number of votes per seat (46,000). Proportional representation rules are applied alongside this regional allocation. Spain uses the

Hondt method of proportional representation, which favours larger parties, meaning it is often criticised by new parties. The smaller the number of seats per constituency, the harder it is for smaller parties to be elected. The number of voters not represented is also higher (40% in Soria, 3% in Madrid).

Out of the 350 seats in the Cortes, 99 are held by small constituencies in mostly rural areas (with fewer than 5 seats). These constituencies are over-represented in parliament and have long been the PP's stronghold, to the detriment of the PSOE, which has a more urban following. The 2015 election, which saw a purple wave of support for Unidos Podemos, changed things slightly. The emergence of Vox in areas that traditionally voted PP could reshuffle the cards at the national level. A survey by the Centre for Sociological Studies in March – the last major survey before the elections – shows a sharp increase in support for Vox in PP areas (Zaragoza, Valladolid, Ciudad Real, Cuenca, Guadalajara and Toledo). ■

Map 1 – Regional breakdown of seats



Map 2 – Comparison between 2016 results and 28 April 2019 result<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> The constituency colour is the colour of the party received more than 50% of seats.



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Date	Title	Theme
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16/10/2019	<u>The central bank trap</u>	Europe, USA
09/10/2019	<u>World – Macroeconomic Scenario for 2019-2020: keeping heads above water, just about</u>	World
08/10/2019	<u>France – Finance Bill for 2020: The public deficit is reduced to 2.2% of GDP</u>	France
03/10/2019	<u>Italy – Monthly News Digest</u>	Italy
25/09/2019	<u>Oil: panic in the House of Saud</u>	Sectorial
18/09/2019	<u>The laborious transformation of the Spanish political system</u>	Spain
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