

# Far right gains and confusion on the left after Spanish election

Vox threat scares PSOE and Podemos into government deal

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**Parliamentary elections have failed to give a clear majority to the social democrats of PSOE or to the conservative bloc. An overview of the results and the implications for the left by Green Left Weekly's Europe correspondent.**

The apparent winner of the November 10 Spanish general election was Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, whose party picked up a relative majority of 120 seats in the 350-seat Congress.

The contest was the fourth general election in four years. Sánchez, who had won the previous poll on April 28 with a scare campaign about “holding off the right”, afterwards decided that the PSOE could gain still more by refusing to enter a governmental alliance with the more radical Unidas Podemos (UP).

That course would have been possible on the basis of unity between these two all-Spanish forces and the parties that represent so-called “third Spain” — the historic nations of Catalonia, Euskadi (the Basque Country), Navarra and Galicia, along with the regions like the Valencian Country, Canary Islands and Aragon.

The PSOE's approach after April 28 was to manage negotiations with UP so as to ensure their breakdown and then blame UP leader Pablo Iglesias's ambition for dragging Spain to yet another election.

The gamble was that extra votes for the PSOE would come from middle-of-the-road Citizens voters (a neoliberal party known as “the Podemos of the right”), alienated by leader Albert Rivera's crusade to overtake the People's Party (PP) as the hegemonic force on the right.

## **Stubborn Spanish reality**

However, this scheme clashed with a stubborn reality of Spanish politics—voters rarely cross the right-left divide and elections are decided more by the rise and fall in the participation rate.

This was confirmed on November 10. Within the left bloc, there was only a slight change in the balance between the PSOE and UP. The PSOE lost three seats (from 123 to 120) and UP seven (from 42 to 35). Newcomer Más País (More Country), led by former Podemos identity Iñigo Errejón, won two.

Total left bloc seats thus fell from 165 to 157, while the right bloc—the PP, the new right Citizens and far right Vox—grew by only three (from 149 to 152). The bloc of “third Spain” parties grew by five seats (from 36 to 41).

With two million fewer people voting than in April, Spain's social democracy lost 728,000 voters while UP lost 636,000. Most of UP's losses went to Más País, which won 399,000 votes (1.6%).

Most of the disillusioned Citizen's voters went into the arms of the real winner on November 10, the ultra-right Vox, led by Santiago Abascal, the Spanish equivalent of France's Marine Le Pen and Italy's Matteo Salvini. These xenophobes both rushed to salute Vox's successful climb from fifth to third largest party in the Congress, with 15.1% support.

In contrast with the stasis within the left bloc, the right bloc experienced a huge convulsion. Propelled from 24 to 52 seats by an extra 962,000 votes, Vox can now use Spain's parliamentary institutions to intensify its holy war against the Catalan movement for self-determination and to "normalise" its agenda of hatred.

As a parliamentary group with more than 50 MPs, it will bombard the Spanish Constitutional Court with demands for the illegalisation of pro-independence parties and with challenges to the legality of Catalan, Basque and Galician institutions.

On November 12, largely in reaction to the menace of a radicalised right that the PSOE's decision to go to the polls had provoked, Sánchez and Iglesias stitched up a pre-agreement for government in less than 48 hours.

### **A plebiscite about Catalonia**

Why did Vox, which until the April 28 general election had never won a seat in any Spanish parliament, gain most?

With the campaign a contest between the unionist parties as to who could best deal with the Catalan movement for sovereignty and independence, Vox's "the enemy-is-at-the-gates" alarmism projected it as most fit to face the menace.

The ongoing wave of protest against the October 14 Supreme Court verdict that condemned nine Catalan leaders to a total of 99.5 years jail, for their role in helping organise the October 2017 independence referendum, completely dominated the election campaign.

The Spanish media, political and judicial establishment reacted to it with varying degrees of alarm.

The PSOE government's panicked response was to attempt to defuse the right-wing's hysteria by adopting versions of its proposals. In one televised candidate debate, a flustered Sánchez stated that he would make sure that exiled Catalan ex-president Puigdemont was brought back from Belgium to face trial.

When reminded by a journalist that this was a job for the prosecutor-general's office, he asked: "And who appoints the prosecutor-general?"

With that remark Sánchez torpedoed his own government's pretext for not suspending the prosecution of the Catalan leaders — respect for the "separation of powers". The next day Sánchez ascribed his dangerous slip into truthfulness to the stress of campaigning.

Sánchez also promised to reinstate a law banning regional governments from holding referenda. Throughout the campaign he refused to answer the phone when told that Catalan president Quim Torra was on the line.

### **The hyenas devour Citizens**

Vox surged on November 10 because in this atmosphere of crisis it best combined unabashed anti-Catalanism and extreme (and unconstitutional) Spanish unionism with the classic messages of the European far right—all presented as issues that the political establishment wants to censure.

Vox's diatribe scapegoated illegal migrants for lengthening waiting times in the health system and worsening rape statistics; demanded unaccompanied refugee minors be sent "home"; blasted feminism as undermining the family and promoting persecution of men; celebrated bull-fighting as an integral part of Spanish culture and a heritage value; and claimed a recentralised state could simultaneously improve services and cut taxes.

Vox got a free run in the right-wing media, including a prime-time interview with Abascal on Spain's most popular TV chat show.

The result was that millions of right-wing voters discovered that Vox was "the real thing". Unlike Citizens, Vox was untainted by any suspicions of liberalism and would never get involved in the formation of a PSOE government (as Citizens had done in the past).

It was joined in the job by the PP, to whom 660,000 voters returned, lifting it to second place with 20.8% of the vote (up 22 seats to 88). These PPs punished their party in April for its failure to stop the humiliating Catalan independence referendum.

Devoured by the Vox and PP hyenas, Citizens lost 2.5 million of its 4.1 million April vote, dropping from 57 seats to 10.

Rivera, who began public life in 2006 as a rancid opponent of the Catalan education system, then abandoned his political career to return to the job that the financial giant Caixabank had kept open for him.

Growth of the 'third Spain'

The rise of hyper-Spanish Vox was mirrored by the growth of the "third Spain". As the charm of the all-Spanish right and left continues to wane in what is called "the periphery", the vote for these variegated forces increased from 9.7% to 11.6%.

In Catalonia, the overall pro-independence vote—shared between Together for Catalonia (JxCat), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and the People's Unity List (CUP) — increased from 39.4% to 42.6%, winning an extra seat and achieving 23 of Catalonia's 48 Congress seats.

It overtook the overall unionist vote—for the PP, Vox, Citizens and the PSOE's Catalan branch—which fell from 43.2% to 39.8% and lost a seat (down to 18). The vote for the pro-sovereignty Together We Can (ECP), UP's Catalan sister party, fell slightly, from 14.9% to 14.2%, while it maintained its seven seats.

Thirty of Catalonia's 48 MPs in Madrid now support the country's right to decide—the highest proportion ever.

In Euskadi, the centre-right Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) won an extra seat at the expense of UP, while in Navarra the left-independentists EH Bildu took a seat from the PSOE. In Galicia, the Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG) returned to the Congress with one seat.

The fifth gain for "third Spain" went to Teruel Exists! in rural Aragon.

**What prospects?**

What government can now emerge from an even more fragmented Congress?

The result of the PSOE-UP agreement, if a Congress majority can be found to back it, will be to give UP cabinet positions and Pablo Iglesias a deputy prime ministership.

But at what price? The 10-point agreement between the parties promises progressive policies in general terms, but makes no mention of repealing labour reforms that have destroyed wages and conditions.

On the burning issue of Catalonia, it follows the PSOE line, seeking “recipes for understanding and coexistence, but always within the framework of the Constitution”.

On November 13, ERC leader Pere Aragonés said his party, whose abstention will be necessary for a PSOE-UP government to form, would not do so until negotiations between Madrid and Barcelona are re-established.

Moreover, more serious problems will soon emerge from UP’s strategic choice to govern with the PSOE and leave all Congress opposition to the right.

What degree of austerity will UP ministers accept when the looming recession arrives? What degree of repression of the Catalan movement for self-determination? What degree of submission to the reactionary structures of the Spanish state? How will UP react to anti-government protest?

The wait for answers to these questions will most likely be very short.

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**P.S.**

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/spanish-elections-vox-threat-scares-psoe-and-government-deal>