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Saturday 22 December 2018, by [GILMARTIN Eoghan](#), [GREENE Tommy](#) (Date first published: 17 December 2018).

The December 2 regional elections in Andalusia unleashed a political earthquake in Spain. After thirty-six years of continuous rule by the center-left Socialists (PSOE), a bloc of right-wing parties won a majority of votes in the southern region. This reactionary surge included an unexpected breakthrough for the extreme-right Vox; if [most opinion polls](#) had placed it between 2 and 5 percent of the vote, it ultimately obtained 11 percent and twelve seats in the regional parliament. This, in a country that had long prided itself on being the only major European state that had no extreme-right party represented in its parliaments. As results came in, the likes of Marine Le Pen and [David Duke](#) posted messages on social media congratulating Vox's leader, Santiago Abascal.

Much of the analysis of Andalusia's swing to the right has focused on increased nationalist sentiment in the wake of last year's Catalan independence crisis. During the Andalusian campaign the two major right-wing forces, the Popular Party (PP) and Ciudadanos (C's, Citizens), not only stressed the ongoing threat to Spanish territorial unity but also sought to equate a vote for the PSOE with backing for regional "separatists." Indeed, it kicked off with the PP's new hard-right leader Pablo Casado accusing PSOE prime minister Pedro Sánchez of being a "golpista" or coup-plotter because of his dependence on Catalan parties for his parliamentary majority.

Such rhetoric played well among conservative voters, and was indicative of an increasingly radicalized Spanish right. Yet probably decisive in securing their electoral majority was a historic abstention among left-wing voters. If the combined support of the right-wing bloc increased by 275,000 votes in comparison with the 2015 elections, this cannot fully account for the 700,000 lost votes between the PSOE and the Podemos–United Left coalition, Adelante Andalucía. As the United Left (IU) leader [Alberto Garzón](#) stressed, the reactionary bloc's electoral weight "would not have been so great except for demobilization in working-class neighborhoods."

The Left's inability to mobilize its vote, and in particular Podemos and IU's failure to take advantage of the PSOE's losses, points to the flip side of Spain's reactionary turn: the sharp ebb in the wave of left-wing activism and political engagement that had marked the years following 2011's Indignados movement.

What Went Right?

In an [interview](#) with *Jacobin* earlier this year, Spanish journalist Antonio Maestre talked of an impending "struggle within the Right over who can be more aggressive and virulent" following the formation of a minority PSOE government in June. The curious dynamic generated by this rivalry between the traditional party of the Right and a rising young competitor — as the new Ciudadanos formation competed for space with the historic PP — has laid fertile ground for Vox to finally make its breakthrough. A logic of internal competition appears to be energizing these formations and

driving them rightwards, leading each party to assume ever more reactionary positions.

The results in the Andalusian contest also show how this intense competition is reshaping the balance of forces on the Spanish right. Aside from Vox's historic twelve-seat breakthrough in the regional parliament, Ciudadanos won twenty-one seats — more than doubling its previous total of nine — while the PP lost seven seats even as it finished second overall, behind the PSOE. The viable governing options on the table will either be an unholy trinity of the PP, Ciudadanos, and Vox or a center-right coalition of the PP, PSOE, and Ciudadanos.

[Pablo Casado's win](#) in the PP primaries this summer has to be viewed in the context of this fragmentation of Spain's traditionally dominant right-wing forces. He appears to be taking on his former boss (and former prime minister) José María Aznar's demand to regenerate the party by building a unifying conservative project for middle-class Spain that begins at the liberal center and stretches all the way to the far right.

Casado even said as much during the campaign, underlining the need for the party to win back voters who had abandoned the PP for Ciudadanos or Vox after a cascade of corruption scandals took out many high-ranking party stalwarts. He has attempted to do this through a neoconservative turn — for example, through calling for the repeal of current abortion laws to turn back the clock to the considerably reduced freedoms offered in a 1985 bill — and an attempt to place Catalonia and the Basque Country at the forefront of the party's agenda.

The main obstacle he faces in winning back control of the Right is Albert Rivera's Ciudadanos. Beginning in 2005 as a notionally social-democratic Catalan party opposed to the region's growing independence movement, Ciudadanos has jostled with the PSOE for Spain's center ground in recent years, even as it has taken an increasingly rightwards trajectory. The party has now removed the term "social-democratic" from its statutes, yet for the time being it remains part of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe list, along with forces like the UK Liberal Democrats and former Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt — [unlike](#) exiled Catalan premier Carles Puigdemont's own formation, which was recently expelled from this bloc.

Rivera's discourse has shifted over the past year in particular from offering a Third-Way-style alternative ("neither red nor blue") to advancing a demagogic vision of "Spain without complexes." This latest iteration of the Ciudadanos project has seen its voting record increasingly mirror the PP's, at the same time as it doubles down on an uncompromisingly anti-independentist rhetoric. It has strongly focused its messaging on combating the supposed independentist threat to Spanish unity — for instance, through PR stunts like [removing yellow ribbons](#) for imprisoned independence leaders in Catalan towns and launching an "anti-political prisoner" bus tour around Spain.

This, combined with Ciudadanos's relatively untainted image, has allowed it to secure considerable electoral benefits from the Catalan crisis. After making bigger gains than any other party in Andalusia and emerging as the single biggest force in the Catalan regional elections last December, it will feel energized going into the new year.

This is where Vox comes in. Through some clever marketing — like staging its party conference at [Vistalegre](#), where Podemos held its own famously heated [congresses](#) — Vox has effectively worked itself into the space of the "new right" and the "anti-left." They are the most explicitly anti-independentist, anti-Podemos, anti-left party in Spain, with discourse steeped in openly anti-feminist and anti-LGBT rhetoric. The party did not have any specific program or initiatives for Andalusia as part of its electoral campaign, but it still managed to make the dramatic breakthrough it did.

Such success has to be seen in terms of not only Catalonia but also [Vox's ability to capitalize](#) on another highly charged issue: the PSOE's plan to [remove the remains](#) of fascist dictator Francisco Franco from the basilica at [the Valle de los Caídos](#). Vox is the only party to unapologetically come out against it, with Abascal accusing the government of attempting to "desecrate the Basilica" after recently attending mass at the site.

Yet such Francoist nostalgia also points to the limits of Vox's reach. The party's electorate is less socially and politically diverse than its counterparts on the wider European extreme right. Its [base](#) is [solidly middle-class](#), concentrated in [higher-income areas](#) (though also in those with higher immigration) and in [the main among former PP voters](#). Its breakthrough in Andalusia was little based on making inroads among forgotten working-class voters, in the manner that Marine Le Pen has achieved in northern France. As Belen Barreiro notes, "Vox did not surge from social vulnerability," but rather from the disillusionment of far-right voters who may have felt politically homeless under Rajoy's PP and alienated by Rivera's liberal-tinged alternative.

Strangely, the two right-wing forces flanking the PP from each side are also reinforcing its newfound sense of direction under Casado (after a relatively muddled period under its former leader, the prime minister Mariano Rajoy) and its opening up to a new logic of forming parliamentary blocs, which has characterized Spanish politics since 2015. Behind all this, a familiar face has been identified to steer the new ship into the Moncloa Palace. Political commentator Enric Julianna called this new balance of forces "three rights: one tsar [ex-prime-minister Aznar]."

A Demobilized Left

The contrast with the dynamic on the Left could not be starker. For Podemos's spokesperson Noelia Vera, the [one-third drop](#) in the combined votes of her party and its allies in IU could be explained in simple terms: "[Our voters](#) stayed at home." This was echoed by IU's [Alberto Garzón](#), who stated, "[The Left] failed. . . . We were unable to maintain the votes our organizations captured four years ago." Such abstention also hit the incumbent PSOE hard and accounted for the majority of its four hundred thousand lost votes, though defections to Ciudadanos were also important.

The extent of this failure to get out the vote points to a series of causes. For the PSOE, the obvious culprit was its candidate, party right-winger Susana Díaz, who had led an [attempted palace coup](#) against Pedro Sánchez two years ago, only to lose the subsequent leadership contest. Her core promises around investing in public services, such as building [fifteen new hospitals](#) and twenty-four medical centers in the region, did not seem credible to an electorate that has had to endure a decade of cuts under the PSOE. Beyond that, she ran a campaign centered on her own public persona despite her obvious lack of charisma and reputation as an establishment insider.

Yet key to this air of voter apathy has been the failure of the Sánchez government to turn its position in office into real social advances over the past six months. May's motion of no confidence, which brought down Mariano Rajoy's PP administration, had offered an opportunity for the Left to reorient the political agenda. After a year dominated by the rise of nationalist movements, both PSOE and Podemos saw the chance to regain momentum. The two parties betted that an eighteen-month provisional government could show that there was an alternative to austerity and flag-waving.

In particular, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias believed his party could assert real leverage over the new minority Socialist government. This seemed to be confirmed in the PSOE/Podemos [budget agreement](#) reached in October. The agreement's standout measures — which included a 23 percent

hike in the minimum wage, rent controls, and a 3 percent tax on big tech companies — represented substantive concessions to Podemos's agenda.

Yet if the fragility of Sánchez's majority gave Podemos greater weight in these negotiations, it also created an opening for conservative forces. Any further provocation on the national issue was always likely to destabilize this diverse, so-called "Frankenstein coalition." And such a breakpoint came only weeks after the euphoria of the budget deal, with the announcement that detained Catalan leaders would be tried on harsher than expected charges over their failed bid for independence.

As the Catalan parties retaliated by withdrawing their support for the budget, Sánchez was left floundering; his own party went into the Andalusian campaign unsure of its leader's plans. Seeming to have largely given up on passing the budget deal, his team sent out contradictory messages signaling the possibility of early national elections next May before then suggesting that Sánchez would continue in office until the end of 2019 with the aim of passing progressive measures via a series of decrees and discrete one-off votes in the parliament.

As Andalusia went to the polls, neither the PSOE nor Podemos could point to a clear victory during their six months of parliamentary cooperation. The left coalition Adelante Andalucía mounted an energetic campaign, with candidate Teresa Rodríguez performing strongly in the televised debates. But this could only go so far in countering voter disinterest and frustration.

Spain is now heading into an intense electoral cycle with local, European, and further regional elections coming next May; a general election will likely be called either before or just after the summer. Four years ago the Left was ascendant, but the results in Andalusia demonstrate what great difficulties it now faces. Beyond the more immediate causes of voter apathy is a broader factor — a sense that the "window of opportunity" for radical progressive change, opened up by the financial crisis and the Indignados movement — has largely closed. As Antonio Maestre put it: "In Spain people have become accustomed to living with the crisis. It has been ten years. The indignation that was palpable a few years ago and reflected in the mobilizations and protests is gone."

Now it is the rage of right-wing voters that is gaining traction as Vox surges nationally. One poll has them up 10 percent since the Andalusian vote. However, since the results Sánchez has changed tack once more, saying that he will bring the budget deal to a vote in the parliament in January. This is the Left's last chance to gain some momentum going into election season; both the PSOE and Unidos Podemos are putting pressure on the Catalan parties to shift their position.

If pro-independence forces have maintained the moral high ground in defending a peaceful democratic process in the face of a judicial crackdown, they have been essentially unable to articulate an effective political strategy to advance their cause. Now they are left with a choice: continue in their protest and refuse to back the budget, thus strengthening the hand of the Spanish right, or tactically back the deal, which will begin to reverse austerity with 2.2 billion euros earmarked for investment in Catalonia.

For the Left, time is running out to halt the Right's path back to power. [According to](#) the intellectual and Podemos MP Manolo Monereo, resignation "has always been the most powerful tool for subjugating the social majority"; that is, "the belief that nothing can be achieved through the public sphere to improve the lives and working conditions of people." The Left's immediate task in the coming months has to be to combat such generalized resignation by scoring legislative victories, whether on the [budget](#), the [Valle de Los Caídos](#), or repealing the [gag law](#). Without this, the horizon in Spain looks dark.

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