

Spain: Political Developments and Data in 2019

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Introduction

The year 2019 was characterized by political blockage and multiple electoral events: the European elections, 13 regional elections and local elections in which the consolidation of newcomers' parties in all major government positions lead to the demise of the bipartisan dimension of the political system. Moreover, the exceptionality of the year lies in the fact that two general elections were held outside the ordinary timetable convoked by Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez. Indeed, the lack of agreement to form a government at the national level generated an institutional paralysis that resulted in the calling of new elections at the end of the year. During all this time Government was in office and the Parliament hardly had any legislative activity. In addition, issues about secessionism persisted as the main concern in Catalonia. The Supreme Court sentenced and convicted for sedition (in most cases) the politicians accused for conducting the illegal independence process of Catalonia.

Election report

The year 2019 started with the arrangements for the three types of elections -local, regional and to the European Parliament (EP)- that had to be called for the last Sunday of May every four years in the case of the local and regional elections, and every five years in the case of the EP. However

the lack of agreement between some of the parliamentary parties that supported the prime minister for the investiture in 2018 on the adoption of a new budget law led to general elections which were held a month before the municipal and regional elections. There were therefore numerous scheduled electoral contests, to which new general elections were added because of the lack of agreement among potential partners to form a government.

Parliamentary elections

At the beginning of March, the president of the government, the socialist P. Sanchez called for parliamentary elections to the Lower House (*Congreso de los Diputados*) and to the Upper House (*Senado*) for the 28 April, less than three years after the former ones. This political situation, without precedent in Spanish electoral history, had consequences for the political parties, for the administrations and for the electoral process. The electoral campaign started two days before Easter week. As a result, few electoral activities were held during the holiday period, with electoral activity being concentrated mainly in the second week. Therefore, the electoral campaign was reduced, as well as the participation of the leaders of the main competing parties.

The turnout of the parliamentary elections was 71,7 per cent, similar to the average of previous electoral processes. One of the most relevant results of this election was that the number of parliamentary parties reached fifteen. The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (*PSOE*) won the parliamentary elections in both chambers for the first time since 2008. PSOE gained the 28,7 per cent of votes and 35,1 per cent of seats in the *Congreso de los Diputados*. The People's Party (*PP*), the second electoral and parliamentary party obtained 16,6 per cent of the votes and 18,9 per cent

of seats. The third party, Citizens (*C's*), a centrist party got 15,8 per cent of the votes and only 2 per cent less than the PP in seats. Furthermore, two nationwide parties *Podemos* -an extreme left party- and *VOX* -an extreme right party- got 11,1 and 10 per cent of votes respectively. For the first time, the party system could be characterized as a multi-party system, where 5 political parties won 82,5 per cent of the total votes cast, and 302 out of 350 seats.

The electoral results of the Upper House, the *Senado*, gave the absolute majority to the *PSOE* with 59 per cent of the seats; PP obtained 26 per cent while the remaining members that belonged to different parties and coalitions together sum to 15 per cent of senators.

The most important consequence of this parliamentary election was that no one party had the majority to form a single government. The government-formation process failed due to the unsuccessful negotiations between *PSOE* and its potential coalition partner *Podemos*.

On 26 September the President in office, in application of the 99 article of the Constitution and the *seventh additional order* of the Electoral Law, called for new parliamentary elections to be held on 10 November. The turnout of the second legislative elections was 66,2 per cent, 5 per cent lower than the election held in April. The results presented some relevant changes in comparative terms.

The number of parliamentary parties in the Lower House reached twenty, the highest number in the latest Spanish history. The *PSOE* won the elections with the same percentage of votes in the previous elections (28 per cent) but in seats the socialist party lost three deputies. PP reached 20 per cent of votes, 4 per cent more than in April, and won a further 22 deputies. *C's*, the former third party, lost 9 per cent of votes and 47 seats, and came fifth. The third position was occupied by *VOX*, winning 5 per cent of votes and 52 deputies. *Podemos*, kept the same fourth

place, but this coalition lost 2 per cent of votes and 7 seats. The nationwide parties together obtained 80,0 per cent of the votes and 295 out of 350 seats.

The electoral results of the Upper House showed similar changes. The PSOE lost 14 per cent of seats and its former absolute majority, while the PP won 14 per cent of senators, and reach the 40 per cent. In this case the two main political parties together obtained the 85 per cent of the votes and 176 out 208 seats. After these elections, the year 2019 ended without a new government.

Elections to the European Parliament

The EP elections were held the same day as local elections and twelve regional elections. The concurrent nature of these contests could explain the high turnout reached, 60,7 per cent, fully 17 per cent more than in the former European elections. The winner was the PSOE, with 32,8 per cent of votes, which was 12 per cent more than the PP, with achieved 20 per cent and placed second. Two other national parties, C's and Podemos obtained respectively 12 and 10 per cent of votes, followed by VOX, which with the 6,5 per cent, had seats for the first time in the European Parliament. In terms of representation, eight lists gained seats, although the distribution of votes and seats was similar with the results in the local and regional elections that were celebrated the same day. Most of the seats were distributed between the above mentioned five national parties. Three lists integrated by nationalists and independent parties obtained 12,9 per cent of votes and 11 per cent of the Spanish MEPs.

Regional elections

According to electoral calendar, thirteen Spanish regions held elections in 2019. The Valencian region celebrated its regional elections a month before other regions, coinciding with the general elections held in April. In this way, this region was the one that, together with *Navarra*, reached the highest levels of participation (73 and 72 per cent respectively). The lowest levels of participation were at 53 percent in *Baleares*, eleven points below the average.

The parliamentary party systems in these regional elections were similar to those from 2015, which were characterized by high fragmentation due to the entry of new parties such as C's, *Podemos* and *VOX*. By contrast, the result in terms of governments were quite different to the former ones. Two regions recovered their historic socialist governments with absolute majorities, in *Extremadura* and *Castilla la Mancha*. There was only one minority government formed by the PSOE in *Asturias*. The socialist party formed majority coalition governments in six regions. PSOE built a coalition with *Podemos* and other left parties in *Rioja*; in *Baleares* and *Valencia* the coalition government also included independentist and nationalist parties (MES and *Compromís*) and in *Aragón* and *Canarias* nationalists and regionalist parties (NC, CHA and PAR). *Cantabria* region saw a coalition government built with PSOE and a regional party (PRC). Only in *Castilla y León*, a majority coalition was formed by PP and C's. On the other hand, a minority coalition cabinet was formed in *Navarra* between PSOE and *Podemos* and supported for the investiture by a former terrorist party BILDU. Moreover, two minority coalition governments were formed in Madrid and Murcia between PP and C's with support for investiture by *VOX*.

Local elections

Local elections were held on 29 May 2019. In total, 67,121 local councillors were elected. The turnout in the local elections was 65.2 per cent, 0.3 points higher than in 2015 and 4.7 points lower than the general elections held a month before. The gap between the two main statewide parties was higher than the previous local elections held in 2015, but this time PSOE at the government at the national level, won by a margin of 1,536,612 votes, more than six percentage point ahead of the opposition party, PP. Thus, the PSOE obtained 1,999 more local councillors than the PP. The distribution of gains and losses varies across regions. The PSOE improved its results in all regions, and particularly in *Asturias*, *Galicia*, *Aragón*, *Extremadura* and *Castilla La Mancha*. The PP, on the other hand, suffered electoral losses in all 17 regions, although success in *Madrid* helped to mitigate the situation. In general, the PP wins more votes in large cities, whereas the PSOE does well in small towns and rural areas. The PSOE's victory in local elections confirmed the change in political trends in Spain. The sum of the vote share of the two main big parties—51.9 per cent—was somewhat lower than in general elections. In general, nonetheless the local electoral system reinforced the multi-party system at the local level too.

Cabinet report

The cabinet composition of Prime Minister Sanchez experienced two changes during this year. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, the European Union and Cooperation, José Borrell, was appointed by the PSOE to head the party list for the European elections. Mr. Borrell, a veteran European politician who had previously been elected to the European Parliament and headed this European institution from 2004 to 2007, was designated High Representative of the European Union for

Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. On 30 November he was replaced in cabinet by the Minister of Defence, Margarita Robles who assumed the representation of the two Ministries. On 20 May, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food assumed the Minister of Territorial Policy and Public Function that was occupied by Meritxell Batet when she was appointed as President of the Lower House.

Parliament report

In January, the Government presented the draft State Budget in Parliament. The Catalanian secessionist parties declined to support it, leading consequently to the calling of elections in April. Before dissolving the Parliament, the Government approved several executive decrees qualified as “social protection”: increasing pensions and civil servants’ salaries, family’s aids, subsidies for unemployed people over 50 years old, aids for dependents people’s caregivers and “gender equality” and the extension of paternity leave. That legislation was denounced as opportunistic and electioneering by the opposition party.

In May, the newly elected deputies took possession of their seats, except the Catalan politicians convicted for sedition that were not allowed to by the Supreme Court. Legislative activity was almost stopped during the time that the negotiations for the government formation took place. In July, the Parliament refused Pedro Sánchez’s investiture, therefore, at the end of the legal period in September, the legislature finished. In December, the new Parliament was constituted, and the year ended without an investiture session to form a new Government.

Political party report

In March, *Podemos* changed its candidate for the European Parliament after the renouncement of Íñigo Errejón the number two of the party, who then created his own political party to run for regional and local elections in Madrid.

The main important change occurred in Citizens. The leader, Albert Rivera, resigned after November's electoral defeat. Inés Arrimadas accepted the interim leadership of the party and she called for primaries in March 2020. For its part, in January, PP held a convention to promote its new leader, Pablo Casado, and to discuss the party program.

Institutional change report

No changes were introduced to the Constitution and the electoral law in 2019. This year the main issues on the agenda were the renovation by the Parliament (both the Congress and the Senate) of the chairs of, among others, the Constitutional Court, the General Council of the Judiciary and the Ombudsman. Nevertheless, the lack of parliamentary consensus (a majority of 3/5 is required for the appointments in all three cases) left these questions open. Another issue that arose during the year was the conflict between the Central Electoral Commission and the convicted Catalan leaders who asked to be allowed to exercise their functions as member of Parliament and of the European Parliament, despite not complying with the rules of procedure for taking up their seats which are stipulated in the Spanish electoral law. Endorsed by the Supreme Court, the Central Electoral Commission denied the possibility of exerting the functions of MP without fulfilling these legal prerequisites. In the case of the European elections, this conflict led to a controversial Sentence by the European Court of Justice (19 December 2019, C-502/19) following a prejudicial question posed by the Supreme Court on the immunity regime derived from the acquisition of the condition

of MEPs in July 2019. In the sentence the European Court determined that the immunity of MEPs dated back to the day of the electoral results announcement. This criteria was in contradiction with the Spanish electoral law which only acknowledged the condition of MEP once the elected candidates have complied with the legal procedure for the acquisition of this condition at the national level.

Issues in national politics

The year 2019 was almost irrelevant from a legislative point of view. During most of the year, the government was in office due to the repetition of the general elections of April 2019 and failure to form a government subsequently. In judicial terms, the year was particularly intense with three outstanding sentences affecting political representatives. First, the Sentence by the Supreme Court on the Catalan secessionist process which convicted most of its leaders for sedition and caused radical reactions in Catalonia. Second, also on Catalonia, the disqualification of the regional President of Catalonia, Joaquim Torra, for disobedience to the Central Electoral Commission (*Junta Electoral Central*), was provisionally sentenced by the Constitutional Court in December 2019. Moreover, there was a Sentence on the ERE (*Expediente Regulador de Empleo*) corruption case in *Andalucia* (fraudulent use of funds in employment policy) with the conviction for perversion of justice and misappropriation of two former regional presidents of *Andalucia* and members of their cabinets in November 2019. In political terms, it is worth mentioning the launching of an incipient bilateral process of negotiation between the Sánchez' government and the regional government of Catalonia, the so-called *Pedralbes meeting*.

Finally, economic data confirm the trends observed in previous years as the steady decline in growth. In 2019, the GDP growth rate was 2 per cent, which means 0,4 per cent less than in

2018 and 0,9 per cent less than in 2017. GDP growth has decelerated as private consumption growth has slowed slightly and external demand has softened more significantly. The unemployment rate was 13,7 per cent which was an improvement of 0,7 per cent with respect to 2018 (14,4 per cent). Although there was a moderate decrease, unemployment inevitably meant a decline in the disposable income of many families, and particularly in deteriorating welfare conditions for the lowest income groups (Ministry of Economy, 2019).

Sources

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