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Is Spain on the right track?

Much is at stake for Spain and Europe. If the Spaniards vote right in July, they would be yet another country in the growing right bulwark

On the last Sunday in May, 36.6 million Spaniards were called to the polls. In the weeks leading up to the election, the right-wing conservative opposition had done everything in its power to turn the regional and local elections into a plebiscite on the work of the Sánchez government. From their point of view, it was a question of voting on 'Sanchism', which, over the past three and a half years, brought the country to an abyss. Despite positive economic trends and a multitude of legislative initiatives that have particularly benefited the middle and low-income classes, this view has sold surprisingly well. Local and regional issues, which are usually at the forefront of these elections, have hardly played a role.

After the regional elections, the right-wing conservative party *Partido Popular* (PP) emerged as the winner. Nationwide, it received 31.5 per cent of the vote, leaving the social democratic PSOE behind with 28.1 per cent. The PP has become the strongest force in seven of the twelve autonomous communities in which elections took place last Sunday. It will also determine the mayors of 30 of the larger cities. In Andalusia, the bastion of the Spanish socialists, where the state government went to the PP last year, seven out of eight larger cities – Almería, Cádiz, Córdoba, Granada, Huelva, Malaga and Seville – will be governed by the PP. Alberto Núñez Feijóo, the president of the PP who was elected to office a year ago, already sees himself as the next prime minister. The PP owes much of its success to the almost complete demise of the centre-right *Ciudadanos*.

Normalising the ultra-right

Although the far-right *Vox* party came in well below its national poll ratings at around seven per cent, it has significantly expanded its presence in the regions and municipalities and is consolidating itself the third-strongest political force in Spain. Similar to other ultra-right or right-

wing populist parties, *Vox* has undergone a transformation from a party that sees itself as the opposition to one that is interested in governmening. Its leader, Santiago Abascal, announced on election night that their support would come at a price.

In five regions and municipalities, the PP will only be able to govern with the help of the ultra-right, either as a coalition partner, as has been the case in Castile and Leon since 2022, or as a government tolerated by *Vox*, as has been the case so far in Madrid and Andalusia. This means that the PP, which wants to present itself as a moderately conservative party under its new chairman, faces a delicate fundamental decision and – should it take the step of 'politically normalising' an ultra-right partner – difficult coalition negotiations.

The debate about the legitimacy of coalitions with Vox and the lack of alternatives in this regard will also determine the national debate and mobilise voters in the progressive camp more strongly.

While the political and media public was just beginning to deal with the election results – the 'blue wave', the 'tsunami', the 'landslide' – and the right-wing conservative People's Party was busy organising government majorities, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's announcement of the elections in two months succeeded in putting the focus on the question of who the Spaniards trust to be in charge of government for the next four years.

Pedro Sánchez's decision appears like an act of liberation that is allowing the Prime Minister to take charge again. He seems to be seizing the opportunity even as he swims against the tide. The opposition PP has set a different timetable for itself and will be very busy in the coming weeks as it conducts difficult negotiations in the regions with their only possible coalition partner on the right. The debate about the legitimacy of coalitions with *Vox* and the lack of alternatives in this regard will also determine the national debate and – according to this calculation – will also mobilise voters in the progressive camp more strongly.

A window of opportunity for the social democrats

The Spanish electorate has currently shifted to the right, as shown by the latest polls. However, the PP has no coalition options beyond *Vox*. This may reduce their chances in the elections less than two months away. Economically, Spain is in good shape at the moment – at 3.2 per cent, the country has one of the lowest inflation rates in the EU. In this respect, too, from a social-democratic point of view, the timing of the elections is

good.

Currently there is a fragmented party landscape to the left of the PSOE. The left-wing parties have performed appallingly everywhere. *Podemos* has been kicked out of six regional governments and has been able to hold only 18 out of 49 seats in the regional parliaments. Spain's electoral system creates additional disadvantages for this ongoing fragmentation. The *Sumar* alliance of left-wing political forces – which was formed in recent months under the leadership of Labour Minister and Vice President Yolanda Díaz with a view to the national elections – has been weakened by the defeats of its cooperation partners in Barcelona and Valencia. Consequently, it now sees itself faced with even more of a challenge of creating a stable, united alliance of left-wing forces.

However, for the existing political constellations, the early election date is bringing a breath of fresh air. *Sumar* and *Podemos* must now come to an agreement quickly so as not to squander their chance to form a progressive government led by the PSOE — they only have until 9 June to do so, before the statutory deadline of 10 days. Díaz's first course of action was to register the *Sumar* alliance as a party., Thus, it can now stand in elections nationwide. For the first time, more conciliatory voices can also be heard from *Podemos*, so that an agreement no longer seems to be completely out of the question.

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It will be interesting to see how the new left will form and whether it will be able to send convincing and clear messages to voters. If there were a more reliable partner to the left of the PSOE with whom a coalition could be formed, with the PP only managing to find a partner in the controversial *Vox*, then the progressive camp would be in a much better starting position.

The election, coming so soon after the start of the Spanish EU Council Presidency on 1 July 2023, brings with it a number of uncertainties. However, Spain is not the first country to face a major election during the EU presidency. The responsible ministers emphasise that the staff of the ministries will ensure that everything runs smoothly. Politically, the so-called golden presidency – the last presidency of the incumbent Commission President Ursula von der Leyen before the upcoming elections to the European Parliament, which should place her in a good position to bid for a second term – is now moving into uncharted waters. The conservatives in the European Parliament are very much hoping for a change of power in Spain in 2023. The European People's Party under

Manfred Weber had bet on a victory for the PP towards the end of the year, which would then also result in a stronger position from which to define the election of the candidate for the Commission head.

Much is at stake for Spain and Europe. If the majority of Spaniards vote right-wing conservative in July, Spain would be another building block in the shift to the right in Europe. It remains to be seen whether Spain can resist this trend.



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