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Who's barking now?

Spain's right-wing opposition has spent years attacking Pedro Sánchez. Now those attacks could help him pull off another electoral comeback

In July 2023, just 10 days before that year's general election, the conservative Spanish newspaper *La Razón* ran the headline: 'The PP is 8.6 percentage points ahead of the PSOE.' Most newspapers expected the conservative People's Party to win the election comfortably, possibly even securing an absolute majority. As we know, things turned out differently. Incumbent Pedro Sánchez and his Socialist Party staged a remarkable comeback, which ultimately saw him re-elected as Spain's prime minister in parliament.

A little over three years later, the question is whether Sánchez can pull off the same political feat again. Paradoxically, years of unrelenting opposition from the Spanish right could help him do just that. The prospect of a government formed by the PP and the far-right Vox is now mobilising the left.

Both Sánchez's supporters and his opponents may find the question of his re-election rather puzzling. From the supporters' perspective, the progressive Spanish government has been able to point to economic growth and employment figures for several years that virtually every other EU member state would envy. Sánchez has also received widespread applause, including from abroad, for his firm defence of international law, most recently during the US attack on Iran. Surely these should be the ideal conditions for a comfortable election victory? His opponents, meanwhile, point to several allegations and proven cases of corruption involving people within the PSOE in recent years. Since the influx of tens of thousands of refugees from North Africa into the Spanish exclave of Ceuta in the summer of 2026, which they see as evidence of the state's loss of control, critics have been asking how Sánchez has managed to stay in office for so long.

The conservative opposition itself also seems to find it difficult to explain why the polls suggest that the race could once again be close. Its nervousness has even reached the point where senior PP figures are

publicly casting doubt on the electoral system and the integrity of the electoral process, without providing any evidence.

A fragile majority

The reason why the PSOE is gaining ground in the election campaign becomes clear when we look at how the government was formed in 2023. The election's winner, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, failed to secure a parliamentary majority for a government comprising the PP and Vox. Sánchez, by contrast, was able to secure a majority in the parliamentary vote to elect the prime minister. This matters for Sunday's election for three reasons.

First, the PP felt robbed of what it had considered a certain election victory and, from the very beginning of the legislative term, accused Sánchez of being an 'illegitimate prime minister'. Yet in a parliamentary democracy, it is perfectly normal for the prime minister not necessarily to come from the largest parliamentary group, but to be the person able to command a majority in parliament.

Second, Sánchez made some far-reaching political concessions to other parties in order to secure a parliamentary majority. Most importantly, he promised the conservative Catalan separatists around Carles Puigdemont to pass an amnesty law for those involved in the illegal independence referendum of 2017.

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Third, Sánchez now headed a minority government comprising his PSOE and the left-wing electoral alliance Sumar, which depended on the support of a diverse group of other parties. The complicated parliamentary arithmetic made it difficult for the government to push through its political agenda. In three years, it failed to present a single new national budget to parliament. At the same time, the opposition from PP and Vox intensified Spain's already bitter political battles. Personal insults directed at Sánchez became commonplace. He was variously called a 'dog' – a play on his first name, Pedro, and the Spanish word *perro* – or a 'son of a bitch', sometimes subtly, sometimes quite openly. He was also demonised as a 'despot' who posed nothing less than a threat to Spanish democracy itself.

Sánchez's promise of an amnesty for the leaders of the Catalan independence movement played straight into the hands of the conservative opposition, which saw it as a betrayal of Spanish unity. Today, there is barely any trace of the conflict between Catalonia and the central government that escalated in 2017.

Nevertheless, Sánchez faced demands from the opposition for early elections throughout virtually the entire legislative term, particularly vociferously in the summer of 2026 following the influx of refugees into Ceuta. As in 2023, when his party had suffered a crushing defeat in nationwide local elections shortly beforehand, Sánchez chose to go on the offensive just a few weeks later. The nationwide protests against evictions and in favour of affordable housing, sparked in September 2026 by the case of 87-year-old Maricarmen Abascal, offered him an unexpected opportunity to do so. At the time, the left-wing camp was trailing well behind, but the housing issue gave the PSOE a chance to mobilise its own base around a social issue.

Against this backdrop, the conservative and far-right opposition's years of relentless attacks on the Sánchez government are suddenly proving to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they have kept the desire for a change of government consistently high among their own supporters. On the other, the PSOE can now turn this very uncompromising opposition to its advantage and issue a stark warning about a PP/Vox government. In fact, Spain's political system gives a new government considerable room for manoeuvre, which, in the eyes of left-wing supporters, could be used to roll back many of the achievements of recent years.

The final stretch

Since there is little movement of voters between the political camps, the outcome will depend primarily on how successfully each side mobilises its own supporters. While some pollsters believe that the PP and Vox have already exhausted their combined potential of around 12 million votes, they see greater scope for the PSOE to win over undecided voters. Sánchez is once again proving himself to be an excellent campaigner, while the PSOE is a well-oiled campaigning machine. Alongside mobilising non-voters, tactical voting within the left-wing camp is also playing an important role. Supporters of the numerous parties to the left of the PSOE appear to be switching to the PSOE in unprecedented numbers. Spain's electoral system favours larger parties and penalises smaller ones that are fragmented. Since the parties to the left of the PSOE have failed to agree on a broad electoral alliance, social media in particular are awash with recommendations and guides on so-called *voto útil*, or tactical voting.

Another peculiarity is making the election outcome particularly difficult to predict: according to numerous experts, Spain is currently experiencing its first genuinely 'hybrid' election campaign, one that is playing out to a considerable extent on social media. The most prominent figure in this context is influencer Jordi Wild, whose YouTube channel alone has almost eight million followers. Both Sánchez and Feijóo have sat down for lengthy interviews with him. The response has been enormous in both cases: Sánchez's interview has now been viewed 8.5 million times, while Feijóo's has attracted 7.3 million views. In the final stretch of the campaign, the PSOE has also received support from André Janones, who is credited with playing a significant role in Lula's most recent election victory in Brazil through his mobilisation efforts on social media.

It is difficult to gauge how all this will affect the result on election day. What is clear, however, is that a large proportion of the more than 1.6 million first-time voters get most of their information through such channels.

Will this be enough for another successful comeback? The experience of the 2023 election suggests that the current polls should be treated with a degree of caution. Nevertheless, it is entirely possible that the PSOE could still emerge as the largest party. However, if turnout does not exceed 75 per cent – an exceptionally high figure by Spanish standards – the PP and Vox are likely to secure an absolute majority of seats in parliament between them. This would reverse the balance of power that emerged after the last election in July 2023. But that would not necessarily spell the end of Pedro Sánchez's political career. He could continue as opposition leader, remaining a familiar alternative should a PP/Vox government fail. In the medium term, this might even be the better option for the PSOE. After all, another legislative term under parliamentary conditions as difficult as those of recent years could prove to be a Pyrrhic victory.



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