FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 25.05.2023 | Juan Rodríguez Teruel

Will Spain's left stand or fall?

Spain's upcoming regional elections will be a gauntlet for the left, the social democrats and the conservatives alike

On 28 May, Spain will hold local and regional elections. It will be a relevant vote for several reasons. Amongst them is the fact that despite not being a completely federal system, both levels of government spend around 50 per cent of the public budget, and both have strong political autonomy to rule citizens' ordinary lives. Moreover, this subnational political setting gives regional and local political forces an important position in the overall political system, which makes them strategic actors determining the balance of power at the national level – especially when there is no clear majority in the Spanish parliament. It is no wonder then that Spain – with the exception of Belgium – is the European democracy with the highest number of non-national political parties. It is also no wonder that these forces have a lot of power to negotiate territorial payoffs for their constituencies in exchange for parliamentary and institutional support to national parties.

A litmus test for the Spanish government

This election will also be meaningful as it is the first state-wide vote in Spain since 2019. Since then, only six regions so far have held their own regional elections, which were dominated by regional topics and very much conditioned by the exceptional context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the regional and local elections in May will have a focus on specific local issues, the simultaneous vote in all 8,131 municipalities and 12 Autonomous Communities (all but Catalonia, Basque Country, Castilla-Leon, Andalusia and Galicia, which have already held elections in the last years) will provide the first nationwide test for Spanish politics since the election in 2019.

The period between 2019-2023 has been particularly challenging for governments around the world because of the many extraordinary events that took place, such as the coronavirus pandemic (enormously painful in Spain), the war in Ukraine and its economic consequences and natural

disasters (in the fall of 2021, a volcanic eruption destroyed parts of the Canary Island La Palma). In Spain, all this happened under the first national coalition executive since the Second Republic (1931-39), which was formed by the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) and the radical left-wing coalition Unidas Podemos ('United We Can') — surrounded by an unfavourable political environment with increasing polarisation amid left and right and new forms of adversary politics. The 28th local elections might thus become a mood barometer of this increasingly difficult political landscape and, therefore, many politicians and analysts consider it as a sort of first round for the upcoming general election, expected to be held in December.

Saving the strongest social democratic party in Europe

Local and regional electoral campaigns are not a simple reflection of national politics because voters make their decisions according to local leaderships and governments' performance. However, this electoral contest will also revolve around three national factors.

First, the election will be a test for Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and his government agenda. Sánchez has become the symbol of the last decade's deep political transformation in Spain. His resilience and his alliance with the radical left, as well as several regionalist forces, promoting Keynesian economics, feminism and pragmatism, has probably saved the Spanish Social Democracy from the path of decline that this political family has followed in other European countries. Today, the PSOE is one of the strongest social democratic parties in the EU. But the price has been an increasingly noticeable polarisation between the left and right, which contributes to a harsh political environment in the country. Despite the many signs of economic recovery after the pandemic and the decreased levels of poverty and unemployment, Sánchez's support remains bound to the left-wing electorate as he fails to expand towards more moderate voters.

The upcoming elections will also be a test for the Spanish radical left-wing Podemos.

On 28 May, the PSOE will defend the incumbent position in nine governments, as well as a few relevant cities — an institutional predominance that reflects the recovery of the party in the previous election of 2019, when the right-wing candidacies were deeply divided. The forecasts anticipate that in many of these regions the next governments will have to rely on very narrow multi-party majorities, which

may be a foretaste of the difficulties to build a majority in the national parliament in the upcoming general election. The PSOE will have to rely on its allies doing well in the election.

In this respect, the upcoming elections will also be a test for the Spanish radical left-wing Podemos. The party runs in the elections as part of different coalitions, and in some important cities like Madrid, it is split in different competing candidacies. The sum of those votes will show the level of commitment of the party's electorate, especially following the recent internal controversies. It will also define the balance of power between the different radical left-wing candidates, who will then negotiate the formation of the newly established electoral alliance *Sumar* for the general elections in December. Sumar is led by the Deputy Prime Minister Yolanda Díaz, who had been proposed by Pablo Iglesias as his successor for the top Podemos candidacy, but has since become his opponent.

The only exit for Núñez Feijoo is to win the largest proportion of the conservative electorate in order to reduce Vox's blackmail potential in regions and municipalities.

Finally, the election will be a test for the new leader of the main conservative party, the People's Party (PP). Elected as chairman one year ago, Alberto Núñez Feijoo has improved the party's support because of his moderate profile and his long experience as the regional prime minister of Galicia. However, he is still faced with obstacles in his own electorate. On the one hand, the unlikely achievement of majorities (at any electoral level) and the lack of other potential allies at the centre (after the downfall of the liberal Ciudadanos) or among regionalist parties will force the PP to build executive coalitions with the far-right-wing Vox. This scenario might demobilise his moderate supporters and fuel the mobilisation of the left in the future. The only exit for Núñez Feijoo is to win the largest proportion of the conservative electorate in order to reduce Vox's blackmail potential in regions and municipalities.

Nevertheless, Núñez Feijoo faces his main political opponent within the party itself: Isabel Díaz Ayuso, regional leader of the Community of Madrid, is representing the antagonistic version of Sánchez and has become a clear contender to replace Núñez Feijoo if he doesn't appear able to defeat the PSOE in the following months. Díaz Ayuso is expecting to gain a sharp majority in Madrid's assembly — a result that

would increase pressure on Núñez Feijoo in the future. This pressure will further increase if Núñez Feijoo does not perform well on 28 May. In this sense, the local and regional elections could provide a boost for the PP's chances in the general elections but also lead to the end of its current leader if the results do not meet expectations.

This is a joint publication by Agenda Publica and IPS-Journal

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Juan Rodríguez Teruel
Valencia

Juan Rodríguez Teruel is a professor of political science at the University of Valencia and editor of *Agenda Pública*.