

General elections in Spain: from a two- to a multiple-party system?

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Spaniards are called on 20th December to decide whether the Government's job over the last four years in overcoming the crisis was good enough to win again their support. Europe's austerity framework was reflected in **Spain** in a series of unpopular measures in the shape of (considerable) cuts and (some) reforms. The **economic crisis** has been accompanied by a political crisis which, without any doubt, will have an effect in the electoral result with the emergence of two strong political forces.

Despite the already mentioned austerity cure, the still high level of unemployment at 21%, the pro-independence challenge from Catalonia and the multiple cases of corruption, the most likely scenario is the victory of the centre-right **Popular Party**. This win, however, will happen with an important loss of vote sharing compared to 2011, following the trend of the 2014 elections to the European Parliament and the 2015 local and regional elections, where it was also the strongest party but losing citizens' support.

Despite losing its overall majority, the likely victory of the ruling party – an anomaly in Europe during the economic crisis – is caused by the weak position of its traditional rival for power in Spain, the PSOE. The **Socialist Party** is still suffering from the loss of credibility of the second half of the second legislature of Rodríguez Zapatero, and has been unable to regain the electorate's confidence in spite of changing its leadership.

Two parties have emerged from nowhere, benefiting from the lack of trust in both the PSOE and PP. Contrary to what we have witnessed in the past years in other European countries, none of them has an anti-European or xenophobic attitude. On the one hand, there is **Ciudadanos**, a centre-liberal and reformist party. On the other, **Podemos**, who carries the spirit of the Indignants Movement, and encroaches on PSOE's support from the left. Both parties are strong contenders and may be kingmakers after the 20D, as they are now polling above 15% of the vote.

What can we expect the day after the elections? The four more likely scenarios are the following:

a) PP-Ciudadanos

This is the most probable scenario. As said, PP will win the elections but will still need a partner to rule. If the drop in support for the PP is great, it is difficult to see Ciudadanos be part of the Government or simply support Rajoy to become the next Prime Minister.

He is still tainted by the corruption scandals. However, with a different head of government (maybe Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, the current Vicepresident) and a clear pro-reform agenda and anti-corruption emphasis, a deal is likely. Nevertheless, to maintain stability, Ciudadanos might also support a minority government led by Rajoy if he obtains a strong result.

b) PSOE-Ciudadanos-Podemos

A united front between the three political forces seems the only way of impeding the PP to rule. Nevertheless, this is difficult to happen as Ciudadanos and Podemos only coincide in the fight against corruption and political regeneration, and have very different visions in many issues, from their economic program, to dealing with Catalonia or their social policy. If PSOE could rule only with Ciudadanos or Podemos it would be easier, as its positions are more flexible towards the two emerging parties.

c) PP-PSOE

Highly unlikely. In Spain, as it happens in other countries such as the United Kingdom (and unlike Germany), the main party “has to be” in the Government, and the main opposition party “has to be” in the opposition. If this coalition were to happen, it could cause even more damage to the Socialist party, which has already rejected the possibility of ruling with the Popular Party.

d) PP-PSOE-Ciudadanos

A very remote, although interesting, option could be that both PP and PSOE obtain bad results and humbly accept to form a consensus pro-reform government together with Ciudadanos. In this scenario Rajoy – a divisive figure – would step down and let the three parties agree on a compromise figure –Santamaría for example. Under this arrangement, the three parties would start a series of pending structural reforms that need a broad consensus such as reforming the labour market, the administration, the education system and even the Constitution. This scenario would be the best to deal with the Catalanian crisis.

In any of these scenarios, what seems self-evident is the fact that the traditional Spanish two-party system will not work for these elections (although it might remerge in the future). This will have an effect on the way the Congress will operate and on how the future Government will decide its policies. The stability of the Government will suffer but it may also increase the quality of the debate and the plurality of the policy options in what some describe as the “second transition period” for Spain. Still, there is a risk that the new Government will only rule for a short mandate if the agreements between parties are not solid enough. Indeed, after the 20D we will see whether Spain’s democracy is fit for **multiparty, consensus-based**, and perhaps even **coalition governments**.