

# Spanish General Election 2023: The Retreat of Populism, Including the Far Right, and Its Lessons for Liberal Democracies Around the World

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## Abstract

This paper provides a briefing on the Spanish general election held on July 23, 2023, focusing specifically on the result of the Congress of Deputies vote as well as the situation both before and after the election, and examines the implications of the results for the country and abroad. The general situation is that no party was able to win a majority of 176 seats in the 350-seat Congress of Deputies, and whether the outcome is a coalition government or a single ruling party seeking support from outside the Cabinet, inter-party talks are essential. As for future scenarios, the probability of a second term for the leftist coalition of the pre-election ruling party is seen as somewhat high, but the possibility of a second general election due to the failure of inter-party talks cannot be ruled out. One feature of the election results is the retreat of populist parties on the left and, especially, on the right. After the Lehman Shock, Spanish politics, like in other Western or advanced countries, exhibited a similar pattern of polarization, albeit with variations in degree and issues. This was concurrent with the rise of populist political parties. However, in the recent general election, it may have been possible to discern a “polarization fatigue” among the electorate. In addition, the timing of the snap general election held shortly after the far-right’s emergence in local parliamentary elections could serve as a practical example for liberal democracies around the world to address polarization and the rise of the far right.

## Introduction

This paper is a briefing on the Spanish general election held on July 23, 2023, focusing especially on the results of the Congress of Deputies vote as well as the situation before and after the elections.

The overall situation is that none of the parties has been able to obtain a majority of 176 seats in the 350-seat lower house of parliament, making inter-party talks essential, whether to form a coalition government or to seek support from outside of Cabinet as the sole ruling party. In terms of future scenarios, the probability of a second term for the pre-election ruling leftist coalition is seen as somewhat high, but the possibility of a second general election due to a failure of inter-party talks cannot be ruled out.

After presenting the background leading up to the general election and the electoral results, this paper will examine several possible future scenarios and discuss their implications for Spain and abroad.

## Background: Rise of the Far Right in May 2023 Local Elections

This general election is not the result of the expiration of the term of the current Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez (Partido Socialista Obrero Español – PSOE), but of Prime Minister Sánchez’s exercise of his power to dissolve the upper and lower houses of Congress, as provided for in Article 115 of the current Constitution. The reason is simple: the local council elections held on May 28, 2023 were expected to result in the formation of right-wing coalition governments, including those of the far-right, in a number of Autonomous Communities and municipalities.

Prime Minister Sánchez’s response came without delay on the morning of the 29th, the day after the local elections were held. After meeting with the King first thing in the morning, he held an emergency press conference to announce the dissolution of the Congress to be followed by a general election.

The results of the local elections in May received significant media attention across Western European countries. It was reported that the growth in support for far-right movements in Western European countries, such as Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National in France, and AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in Germany, along with the establishment of Giorgia Meloni’s government in Italy, had also reached Spain. Subsequently, at both the Autonomous Community and municipal levels of local government, traditional national parties like the conservative Partido Popular (PP) and the

far-right party VOX, established in 2013, made significant advances. Particularly, VOX experienced a surge, resulting in coalition PP and VOX governments in numerous municipalities. Among the 17 Autonomous Communities (the largest administrative units located between the national and provincial levels), four formed right-wing coalition regional governments composed of PP and VOX.

In the subsequent predictions for the general election results, which were based on opinion polls conducted by mass media and public research institutions, there was initially a widespread expectation that this right-wing coalition would take the lead and secure a majority in the lower house. However, a gradual resurgence on the side of the left-wing coalition government was also observed. An election campaign was deployed with the objective of raising awareness of the potential entry of the far-right into the national government, while also motivating middle-ground voters who were undecided or considering abstaining.

## General Election Results and Analysis

See Table 1 for a summary and distribution of seats for each party.

Table 1: Results of the Spanish General Election (July 23, 2023)  
(Turnout 70.40%; previously 66.23% in November 2019)

Name of Group (Abbreviation)/ Name of Representative	Number of seats in the Congress	Number of seats (pre-election)	Overview of Political Parties and Factions
PP / A. Feijóo	137	89	Founded in 1989 following dissolution of the right-wing Alianza Popular (AP) led by many of the former Franco regime members. PP was one of the two major political parties along with PSOE until the 2000s.
PSOE / P. Sánchez	121	120	Founded in 1879, PSOE formed two major parties with PP until the 2000s. The current provisional ruling party with Sumar.
VOX / S. Abascal	33	52	The far-right social movement organization Defensa de la Nación Española (DENAES), founded in 2006, became VOX in 2013.
Sumar / Y. Diaz	31	38	The former party is Unidas Podemos (UP), a political coalition that merged Podemos, a new socialist left populist party founded in 2014, and Izquierda Unida (IU), a coalition of parties affiliated with Partido Comunista de España (PCE). In this election, the coalition also included Más País, which had previously split from Podemos and had been a separate faction

			until the last general election. The party's name (Sumar) is derived from the verb "sumar," meaning "to rally." The current provisional ruling party with PSOE. There was a power struggle between the Podemos and IU factions over the number of approved candidates around the time of the general election, which was won by the IU faction led by Diaz.
<b>Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) / G. Rufián</b>	7	13	Moderate Catalan independence party, which has consistently advocated Catalan independence since its founding in 1931, but has taken a pragmatic approach by forming a coalition with PSOE-affiliated Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC) and the IU in Catalonia after the Spain's democratization. Current ruling party of Catalonia.
<b>Junts / M. Nogueras</b>	7	8	Radical Catalan independence party formed in 2020 by the merger between the independence-seeking social movement and the independence supporters of Catalonia's traditional conservative party, <i>Convergència i Unió (CiU)</i> . In the Catalan independence movement after 2010, there was a period where a coalition of pro-independence parties, including ERC, formed the party <i>Junts</i> , which was later dissolved. The party's name is derived from the Catalan word <i>junts</i> , meaning "together."
<b>Bildu / A. Esteban</b>	6	5	Basque pro-independence and economic leftist party. Established in 2012, it has a direct historical connection to the far-left Basque independence terrorist organization <i>Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA)</i> , which splintered from <i>Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV)</i> in 1959 and was dissolved in 2017. The party's name is derived from the Basque word meaning "gather."
<b>Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) / A. Esteban</b>	5	6	Moderate Basque regionalist party (advocating for increased autonomy) with right-leaning economic policies. Founded in 1895, it is the current ruling party in the Basque Country and adheres to Christian democratic principles.
<b>Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG) / N. Rego</b>	1	0	Galician regional nationalist party. Economic leftist.
<b>Coalición Canaria (CC) / C. Valido</b>	1	2	Regional political party in the Canary Islands. Economic right-wing.
<b>Unión del Pueblo Navarro (UPN) / A. Catalán</b>	1	2	While being a regional party in Navarre, it is right-wing in economic policies and follows Christian democracy, essentially holding an alternative position to PP in the same region.
<b>Ciudadanos - Partido de la Ciudadanía (Cs) / -</b>	Not fielding any candidates	10	In 2006, a social movement organization against Catalan regionalism transformed into a political party. It grew to become the third-largest party in the lower house in the April 2019 general election as a center-right party but then rapidly disintegrated. There were no candidates from the party in this election.

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Spanish Ministry of the Interior and *El País* newspaper.

PP made a major breakthrough, but VOX, contrary to the May local

elections, saw its seats plummet by two-thirds. On the other side, the leftist coalition provisional ruling party, namely PSOE, and the new party coalition Sumar remained almost unchanged from their pre-election seats.

In fact, all these results closely align with various [opinion polls](#) conducted frequently since the May local elections. The significant decline in seats for the far-right VOX, even when running independently, was within expectations. However, the speculation of VOX potentially entering government was fueled by both PP's substantial gains, also as anticipated, and VOX hinting at the possibility of cooperation in forming a government.

## Analysis of General Election Results

What caused PP's major breakthrough? It is difficult to imagine such a large increase in seats without a massive shift in voting behavior. At the time of writing this paper, the only reliable polling data on changes in voting behavior is available from [Sociometrica](#), but it is possible to examine several hypotheses.

Firstly, PP became the beneficiary of Cs. According to data from Sociometrica, PP received nearly a million votes from Cs. Cs, founded in 2006, positioned itself as a center-right party, gaining rapid prominence as an alternative force to PP due to its strong criticism of Catalan nationalism and allegations of political corruption within PP, and securing 57 seats in the lower house in the April 2019 general election. However, it swiftly disintegrated thereafter, primarily due to two factors: the two key issues that propelled Cs's rise had subsided, and it became challenging to differentiate itself from PP. The Catalonia independence movement had simmered down following the unauthorized second referendum in 2017 (declared unconstitutional and resulting in criminal convictions) and the subsequent suspension of regional autonomy. In addition, the leaders associated with this unlawful referendum who were held jointly responsible had either been arrested or had gone into exile. Regarding PP's alleged political corruption, the National Court (Audiencia Nacional) in 2018 delivered a verdict recognizing the organized involvement of PP in fraudulent political financing. Subsequently, Pedro Sánchez, Secretary-General of PSOE, swiftly introduced and passed a motion of no confidence against the then Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's PP government, taking office as the Prime Minister and maintaining power to the present. During this period, Cs adopted a tough stance during inter-party negotiations, contributing to the two runoff general elections in April and November 2019. In November's election, Cs

plummeted from 57 seats to 10, and it continued to suffer heavy losses in subsequent local elections, eventually announcing that it would not field any candidates in the 2023 general election.

Cs does not view the entire existing elite as its enemy, as it emphasizes its proximity to the existing political and business leadership. However, it is populist in the sense that it has not asserted the originality of its own policies, and instead has expanded by attacking two enemies: the Catalan independence movement and the political corruption of PP. [The label "populist" was often applied to its founder, Albert Rivera](#), both at home and abroad. It might be said that Cs supporters, having lost the target of their attacks, reverted to PP as if Cs had been an alternative party to it.

Secondly, about 500,000 votes from the PSOE support base shifted towards PP. While there hasn't been prominent news coverage about the causes for this, two possible explanations can be considered. First, criticism has existed for a while that the policies of the current left-wing coalition government are too liberal. These include policies related to what is often referred to as "memory politics," such as moving the tomb of the dictator Franco from a state-controlled locus to a private cemetery, changing place names that honor figures from the dictatorship era, and amending the penal code to explicitly criminalize non-consensual sexual intercourse. Additionally, there have been labor reforms aimed at providing strong protections for workers. A second, and more important, explanation is that the leftist ruling coalition, which does not have a majority in the lower house of Congress, requires the cooperation of regional nationalist parties in passing such bills. These partners include Catalan independence groups and parties close to the Basque separatist terrorist organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA). It is quite possible that this was disliked by a segment of the population that tends toward Spanish central nationalism rather than regional nationalism, even if they support PSOE.

Thirdly, about 440,000 votes from the far-right VOX also reportedly shifted to PP, and although right-wing coalition governments were formed in many Autonomous Communities and cities after the May local elections, PP President Feijóo dismissed right-wing coalitions at the national level as a "joke" and [declared his intention](#) to form a single minority ruling party rather than a coalition with VOX in the national government. As a result, many voters may have decided that a right-wing government would be more realistic if they voted for PP instead of VOX.

On the other hand, within the camp of PSOE and Sumar before and during the election, based on Sociometrica data, it proved beneficial that the

increase in voter turnout contributed to maintaining the existing power. However, that is not the only factor. Specifically, the votes that shifted from PP to PSOE accounted for a little over 9% of all PSOE votes, a not insignificant number. This can be explained by the expectation that many former PP supporters who, observing the entry of the far-right VOX in the May local elections and attributing it to the actions of PP, chose to shift their support towards the PSOE instead, out of dislike for VOX. The aversion towards the far-right VOX is likely more prevalent among generations that witnessed or experienced the repression during Franco's dictatorship, and if age-specific voting data becomes available in the future, it may confirm this.

## Future Scenarios

When considering future scenarios, it is important to keep in mind the traditional support blocs in Spanish national elections. These blocs consist of (1) the left wing of the national parties (PSOE + Sumar in this election), (2) the right wing of the national parties (PP + VOX), and (3) regional nationalist parties, including left and right (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya: ERC, Junts, Partido Nacionalista Vasco: PNV, Bildu, etc.). Although the number of parties within each bloc has changed, and there has been some inter-party and inter-bloc vote shifting, the composition of the blocs themselves has remained largely unchanged and solid since the democratization of the 1970s and the consolidation of the democratic system in the 1980s.

It may be useful here to review the provisions of the Spanish Constitution regarding the procedure for electing the Prime Minister. The Congress of Deputies is responsible for confirming the Prime Minister, but it is the King who nominates the candidate to the Congress. After the general election, the King meets with the representatives of each party in the Congress of Deputies to determine the prime ministerial candidate. Usually, the representative of the faction with the largest number of seats in the House of Representatives is nominated. After the candidate's policy speech and questioning, the Congress of Representatives holds two rounds of confidence votes, the first requiring a majority of at least 176 seats, and the second requiring a simple majority of votes cast. If a simple majority is not obtained in the second round, the King is allowed to recommend a candidate for Prime Minister to the Congress of Deputies one more time within two months of the start of the first confidence process in the Congress of Deputies, and the Congress of Deputies decides on a vote of confidence. In

that case, the first round of the confidence process requires 176 seats, and the second round requires a simple majority in favor of confidence, otherwise a second general election will be held.

In the post-general election scenario, there are four possible options for the formation of a government: (1) a leftist coalition of the ruling parties before the election, (2) a single minority government of PP, the first party in the lower house, (3) a rightist coalition of PP and the far-right VOX, or (4) a grand coalition of the traditional two major parties, PP and PSOE. Regarding (4), both PSOE and PP have clearly denied the possibility of any such coalition, both before and after this general election. The same is true for (3), with PP President Feijóo maintaining his position on denying a coalition with VOX and aiming for a single minority ruling party in (2). Therefore, three scenarios are realistic: (1), (2), and a runoff general election.

Comparing (1) and (2), (1) appears to be slightly more realistic. The four parties that have expressed unequivocal support for Feijóo as Prime Minister are PP and VOX, as well as the conservative regional parties Coalición Canaria (CC) and Unión del Pueblo Navarro (UPN). However, the total number of seats for these four parties is 172, and if all the rest go against them, they will be voted down. Of the 178 seats remaining, not only the two parties in the current leftist coalition, but also other regional nationalist parties in Catalonia, Basque, and Galicia are considered to be opposed to the centrist PP and VOX, and the probability of a vote of no confidence is high. While the approval of confidence is not entirely impossible if there are at least four defections from the PSOE, there is currently no indication in the news suggesting this possibility.

Nevertheless, on August 21, after meeting with PP President Feijóo and the interim Prime Minister Sánchez, King Felipe II decided to recommend Feijóo to the Congress of Deputies as prime ministerial candidate, in accordance with past practice. Although this is a continuation of the customary procedure, what attracted attention in the media was not only the issue of whether to recommend Feijóo (whose confidence is low), as is customary, or Sánchez (whose confidence is high), although this is contrary to customary practice, but also the fact that there is no strict regulation in the current legislation regarding selection of the candidate, leaving the decision to the King's discretion. Such a situation, in which the King could reflect his own arbitrary decision on matters of national importance, or in other words, "both reign and rule," has been theoretically possible ever since the constitution was enacted, but this is the first time it has been realized. Some critics argue that the King's power is a little too great for a



parliamentary monarchy.

The confidence deliberation and vote in the Congress of Deputies was set for September 26 and 27 by the Speaker of the Congress of Deputies, Francina Armengol (the second consecutive time a female member from PSOE has served in this role). This was to avoid any overlap with the winter break from Christmas to January 6, the date of Epiphany, in the event of a runoff general election.

The first round of the confidence deliberation ended as expected with a vote of no confidence against Feijóo. On October 2, the King held a meeting with representatives of all parties to again select a candidate for Prime Minister, and as a result, the current interim Prime Minister, Sánchez, was nominated. For Sánchez's credentials to be confirmed, and for the leftist coalition to begin its second term in 2019, will require the approval, without abstentions, of all the factions except the right-wing coalition owning 172 seats, and especially the seven seats of the moderate Catalan independence ERC as well as the seven seats of the radical Junts. In particular, Junts has a significant number of leaders, including Carles Puigdemont, who are being prosecuted for their involvement in the 2017 Catalan independence referendum and have gone into exile. Negotiations with the current left-wing provisional government have commenced, aiming for special amnesty of the leaders, the organization of a referendum, and an expansion of Catalonia's autonomy. If these negotiations are unsuccessful, a second round of general elections will become a reality. However, as of mid-October when this report was first published, the dominant tone in the local press was that the current interim ruling party, Junts, and the ERC might reach an agreement on a special amnesty, while there was little hope for a referendum, which has already been ruled unconstitutional. On the other hand, if the CC, which is close to PP but has cooperated with PSOE in the past, votes in favor of Sánchez, it is possible to form a Sánchez government with only Junts's abstentions, not with vote of confidence, and there are reports that majority negotiations along this line have not actually broken off. In any case, the notion that runoff general elections (as were held twice in 2019) should be avoided can be seen as an implicit assumption, since it is shared to some extent by politicians and experts on both right and left wings.

## The Retreat of Populist Parties and Its Implications

Another point worth noting is the retreat of the Cs and VOX on the right

and Podemos (a party within Sumar) on the left. The reasons for the decline of Cs and VOX have already been mentioned above, but some additional information about Podemos can be given here. Podemos is a political party that identifies itself as left-wing populism – which, in a unique sense, is argued by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to be a populism that deliberately promotes “hollow” slogans, under which minority and not individually significant forces form a majority by coming together.<sup>1</sup> The general definition of populism is a complex issue, but with regard to Podemos, it can be said that, at its inception in 2014, the discourse was more in line with widely accepted criteria of populism, such as opposition to the existing elite, rather than the left-wing populism advocated by Laclau and Mouffe. However, for the sake of maintaining its influence as a political party, Podemos formed a coalition alliance called Unidas Podemos (UP) with the traditional non-centrist left-wing united party, Izquierda Unida (IU), centered around PCE. After navigating through challenging inter-party negotiations and two general elections in 2019, UP managed to become part of the ruling coalition, and has adopted a relatively moderate discourse strategy. Differentiating UP from the existing PSOE and the former IU forces became difficult; and power struggles within the party, particularly related to the number of endorsed candidates before this general election, have been taking place. In these internal struggles, the former IU faction, led by Yolanda Díaz, who is now the Deputy Prime Minister and is regarded as the person closest to becoming Spain’s first female prime minister, prevailed, leading to a consolidation of their seat count in this election.

In the past decade or so, Spanish politics and society have been marked by severe confrontations and polarization between left and right: the austerity vs. anti-austerity conflict and the rise of social movements after the Lehman Shock; the rise of the Catalan independence movement and its confrontation with Spain, which began around 2010; the pursuit of political corruption allegations against PP; the realization of expanded rights for women and sexual minorities and subsequent backlash; and the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the Francoist repression and genocide. This is likely to remain the case after this general election, and the delicate balance between the three political blocs mentioned above will be maintained. Nevertheless, it is possible that a kind of “conflict fatigue” common to the electorate nationwide is actually beginning to exist. If so, the national

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<sup>1</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

significance of the setbacks shared by the populist parties, to varying degrees, may be attributed to this sense of fatigue.

In addition, one of the implications for other Western European countries, in particular, is that this polarization can be seen internationally in the advance of the far-right, and it may be widely recognized that Sánchez prevented the further advance of the far-right and its entry into power by unexpectedly bringing forward the general election. In fact, there is already a [report](#) suggesting that this is an example for other countries to learn from; but before that, it must first be examined whether there is a direct causal relationship between VOX's retreat and the timing of the general election.

While we need to be cautious, if polarization and the advance of the far-right threaten liberal democracy around the world, the Spanish general election may provide a practical example for how to face that critical challenge.

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