

“Which side are you on?": Spain's Most Polarised Election

Article by **Adriana Mayor**

July 14, 2023

On 23 July, Spain's general election could determine its future course, but the extremely divisive electoral campaign shows that the country has already changed profoundly. Amid personal attacks and heated tones that match the sweltering summer, there is little room to discuss political proposals – including the green agenda.

As happens every summer, Spain is being hit by one heatwave after another, increasingly so in recent years, as summers become hotter and last longer. In the suffocating July heat of more than 43 degrees Celsius, the people of Spain are spending their holidays (if they are lucky enough to even have any) immersed in an electoral campaign which will bring many of them back home to vote on 23 July. The election run-up is dominated by personal attacks while important political issues, including climate policies, are being pushed into the background.

Hours after finding out the results of the regional elections on 28 May, when the conservative Partido Popular (People's Party – PP) made resounding gains in most of the country's autonomous communities, socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez dissolved the parliament and announced that national elections – previously set for the end of the year – would be held on 23 July.

According to surveys, no party will reach an absolute majority. Alliances seem the only viable option to form a government. Under these circumstances, the people of Spain will decide whether the next government will be in the hands of the right – possibly a coalition of the PP and the far-right party Vox – or if it will remain in the hands of the left, with a potential agreement between the Partido Socialista (Socialist Party – PSOE) and Sumar (an umbrella party encompassing various organisations to the left of the PSOE).

Shifting balances

The picture painted by the right's victory in the regional elections on 28 May suggests that the population may be unhappy with the current progressive government (a coalition between PSOE and the left-wing party Unidas Podemos), and that there might already be a pivot underway in Spanish society towards a more conservative stance.

Nevertheless, as political scientist Ramón Mateo highlights, “In terms of the vote, the margin is much tighter than recent shifts in institutional political power might suggest. [...] What these elections confirm is that the PP has regained its momentum and consolidated its position as the leader of the centre-right,” says Mateo who, prior to working as director of analysis at the advocacy group beBartlet, coordinated the advisory team in the parliament for the political party Ciudadanos (Citizens – Cs), as well its economic office. The PP has increased its share of the vote by almost two million, Mateo points out, but this is partially explained by the catastrophic election results obtained by Cs in the recent local elections.

Cs, which has been vying for space on Spain's political right with the PP since 2015, lost close to 1.3

million votes on 28 May compared to 2019. Vox also lost ground, gaining 1.5 million votes in May compared to 3.6 million in 2019, but the party is expected to fare much better in the national elections, nearing the 15 per cent achieved four years ago.

For its part, the PSOE has lost 400,000 votes since the 2019 elections. “But its losses have actually been quite contained,” Mateo comments. “Those on the left who have really lost out, ultimately tipping the scales, fall within the bloc to the left of the PSOE,” which includes Podemos and [the Valencian party] Compromís. Both forces have been completely shut out of government in the Valencian Community and Madrid.

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Altogether, parties to the left of the PSOE have received almost a million fewer votes than they did four years ago. There are, however, some exceptions: the Basque party EH Bildu, which now threatens the hegemony of the (conservative) Basque Nationalist Party; the Bloque Nacionalista Galego (Galician Nationalist Bloc – BNG) which has gained more than a hundred new council seats in Galicia and has surpassed the socialists in the region’s capital Santiago de Compostela; and Más Madrid (More Madrid), which made gains and came in second in the Community of Madrid, despite the PP’s resounding victory in the region.

The cases of Bildu and the BNG are similar. “They have both occupied the space that various Podemos-affiliated entities helped to build in these regions, overcoming the conventional confines of the left by finding a way to unite a coalition made up of more traditional nationalist elements and those from more typically left-wing backgrounds, including left-wing PSOE voters,” Mateo states.

Happening in the wake of the regional and municipal elections, the campaign is a fight to engage voters and increase turnout: the Right, led by the PP, is striving to maintain the level of mobilisation and turnout that it achieved in May, while the Left is trying to mobilise all voters to the left of the PSOE, in hopes that they accept the prospect of another socialist-led government.

No room for climate

In an increasingly polarised political climate, meaningful debates are largely absent from the campaign. Discussions about specific public policies such as the economy, employment, healthcare and other topics of pressing importance to the electorate are being sidelined in favour of personal attacks. “This election boils down to two questions: the first is ‘Which side are you voting for?’ The second is ‘Do you want to support the more moderate party or the more extreme one?’” Mateo summarises.

Despite droughts, heatwaves and other extreme weather events showing the serious impact of climate change on the life of the Spanish people, the green agenda is conspicuously absent from the electoral campaign. “Spain is the country that has the most to gain and lose in the ecological transition,” says climate activist and educator Javier Peña on his channel “Hope”, a platform that has made him the

foremost environmental influencer in the Spanish-speaking world, with videos reaching over 400 million views.

“Spain is the European country most under threat of desertification. We are seeing more and more unbearable, dangerous temperatures, deaths every summer from extreme heat, and crop losses,” Peña notes. But at the same time, he says, the ecological transition presents an opportunity: “An economy so wedded to ‘sun and sand’ tourism suddenly has the greatest potential for renewable energy production and the cheapest electricity in the EU. At a time when Europe is reindustrialising, we can use this competitive advantage to become an industrial powerhouse.”

Yet the environmental crisis and the energy transition remain on the margins of political debates, and climate denial is worryingly on the rise, with doubt being cast on “the fact that we are in a climate emergency that demands action in order to save what defines us as a society”, says Peña. In the contest for the hegemony of the right, the activist notes, the PP is taking a leaf from Vox’s book, linking the politics of the ecological transition to impoverishment and curtailed freedoms, which is precisely “the agenda pushed by the climate denial lobby”.

The “Hope” founder condemns, for example, the rolling back by city councils in Gijón, Palma, Valladolid, and Elche, of policy measures that are in no way inherently left-wing, such as freeing up public space for foot or bicycle traffic to combat air pollution and climate change. The first measures of these cities’ administrations, with recently inaugurated right-wing governments, include the elimination of pedestrianised areas or bike lanes in order to return space to cars.

Reframing the transition

To fight this trend, Peña believes that environmental organisations must change the way they communicate the need for the green transition, presenting it not as a sacrifice of our current way of life, but as something that can improve it. It is a shift in communication that he has adopted in his own videos and “is yielding very good results,” he says. He claims his videos receive more universal support when they focus on the benefits that green policies can have for everyone, including in sectors which often butt heads with environmentalists, such as agriculture.

“We must stop trying to make people support policies by telling them about the climate crisis so they can understand and act on it. Instead ... we need to focus on awakening desire, on proposing an alternative horizon that is more desirable than the one we have right now, and really focus on all the numerous advantages,” he adds.

This is partly how Sumar is approaching the topic, by integrating an ecological perspective into social policies, as stated by Paz Serra, a candidate for Sumar in Madrid and member of the Verdes-Equo (Spanish Green Party) executive. An example of this would be reducing the working week to 37.5 hours by 2024, with a view to gradually lowering it even further to 32 hours without impacting salaries. “When we talk about the right to time and to rest, we are also talking about the fact that we need to spend less time commuting,” says Serra.

The main progressive political forces – PSOE and Sumar – make reference to the climate emergency in their electoral programmes and speeches but fail to bring climate policies to the political arena, dominated by attacks between the two blocs.

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This lack of substance in political confrontation has led the former socialist prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to intervene in the pre-campaign, lashing out at the media for asking more questions about Sánchez's use of the Falcon (the private plane used by the Spanish prime minister) than about his management of the government. The use of the Falcon has been one of the Right's main lines of attack in this campaign, along with deals the PSOE has made over the last years with nationalist parties such as EH Bildu and Esquerra Republicana (Republican Left of Catalonia – ERC). The Right has tried to link EH Bildu with ETA, a Basque terrorist organisation that killed over 850 people between 1968 and 2010. However, the Spanish judiciary repeatedly found that EH Bildu is a democratic force that should be allowed to legally exist.

“A governing agreement means that there are ministers from a political party in your government, but there aren't any, there's no parliamentary agreement. What there have been are occasional agreements on specific laws,” Sánchez stated in an interview with the radio station Onda Cero when asked about these alliances.

Turning to the counterattack, Sánchez accused the PP of joining the far-right, which is “obscenely slashing human rights in exchange for votes.” The prime minister was referring to the first measures adopted by newly formed regional governments led by the PP and Vox regarding the LGBTQI+ community, such as the removal of rainbow flags from public buildings.

Sumar leader Yolanda Díaz predicted that the debate between the PP candidate Alberto Núñez-Feijóo and the PSOE's Pedro Sánchez on 10 July would be a “smack-talking faceoff” between the leaders of two parties that are looking “to the past,” and criticised their confrontations for their total lack of “useful politics”.

It went precisely as Díaz feared. The face-to-face, which became the most watched non-sporting broadcast of the year, was “a debate to forget”, as the director of eldiario.es, Ignacio Escolar, described it in a column. “The two leaders spoke more about ETA than about the climate crisis, health or education,” he noted.

“It's going to be difficult to introduce any kind of topic in the tense political climate that we have at the moment,” Serra laments. “Sumar's whole platform has gender and sustainability woven into all of its policies,” she adds, “but there are hardly any chances to explain this in depth because there isn't any space to do so, and the media aren't paying any attention to it.”

Roots of polarisation

For Serra, the increased polarisation that experts often point to can be partly explained by “the way that we produce and consume culture and ideas”, especially in the wake of the pandemic, when “we all closed in on ourselves a little bit more”.

Serra thinks back to when the Spanish public shared stronger cultural references. Popular TV shows like Verano Azul, broadcast on public TV in the early 1980s, brought the Spanish audience together

regardless of their background and ideology. “There were a shared story, culture, and background,” she explains. “Now, when we can have three people in the same room all watching or looking at different things, different news, with views that are totally opposed to the people around them, there’s no room for analysis or contrast”.

Experts concur that the way we consume information is governed more and more by our own worldviews, biases and identities as they relate to a particular political bloc – the Left or the Right – leaving no room for grey areas or reflection.

Political polarisation is one of the results of disinformation, a phenomenon that has arrived in Spain somewhat later than in neighbouring countries but continues to be on the rise, as demonstrated in a recent report from the digital media observatory IBERIFIER.

Disinformation creates a feedback loop, as the circulation of false news, reinforced by social media echo chambers, is itself fed by a mistrust of the Spanish people towards their media outlets. The Oxford Digital News Report shows that the perception of media polarisation among Spanish people is among the highest in the world – “comparable to such politically charged countries as Argentina, Thailand or Hungary,” IBERIFIER states.

According to Mateo, polarisation in Spain began to intensify with the vote of no confidence presented by Pedro Sánchez that ousted Mariano Rajoy (PP) from government in 2018. The move followed a ruling that found the PP to have participated in the Gürtel corruption case. From that point on, criticism among candidates took on different tones: individuals, not their party, became the main target of attacks.

“Political adversaries are discredited and delegitimised, and there is no space for dialogue or even the possibility of a fair confrontation. Each bloc is preaching to the choir, reinforcing and entrenching the views of those who are already on their side. This, in terms of democracy, is very worrying,” Mateo observes.

“It is extremely difficult to build a democratic model without a common story of what is going on,” Serra agrees. “We cannot even agree on the fact that we need to advance towards a more sustainable and less unequal society where everybody has basic rights.”

In the absence of shared coordinates, what dominates is the logic of confrontation between segregated spaces. Mateo fears that Spain will follow the same path as Hungary or Poland, in which the government “does and undoes” as it pleases, and the only hope for the opposition is to get into government, repeal everything that their opponents have done, and start from scratch.

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Published July 14, 2023

Article in English

Translation available in Spanish

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/which-side-are-you-on-spains-most-polarised-election/>

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