

**2019-2**  
MIDEM-Report

# THE GENERAL ELECTIONS IN SPAIN 2019

BY MARIANA S. MENDES



# CONTENTS

	<b>SUMMARY</b>	4
1.	<b>THE SPANISH PARTY SYSTEM</b>	4
2.	<b>THE SALIENCE AND POLITICIZATION OF THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE</b>	7
3.	<b>THE ELECTORAL RESULTS</b>	11
4.	<b>OUTLOOK</b>	13
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	15
	<b>AUTHOR</b>	16
	<b>IMPRINT</b>	17

## SUMMARY

- Spain recently held its third national election within a period of four years. This is a result of the increasing fragmentation of its party system, on the one hand, and of growing political polarization, on the other, particularly after the challenge posed by the Catalan independence bid.
- The results gave a clear victory to the ruling center-left government of Pedro Sánchez (28,7 % of vote share, well ahead of the 16,7 % of its closest rival), in what represents an extraordinary comeback for a party that had been hard hit by the economic and political crisis that followed the 2008 financial crash.
- The days of absolute majorities are long gone, and Sánchez will be forced to find partners. National-level coalition governments have never existed and single-party minority cabinets capable of drawing support from parliamentary allies have been the preferred formula up to now. Ethno-regionalist parties are crucial in this regard, but their support is now complicated by the Catalan issue.
- A radical right party, Vox, won parliamentary representation for the first time, gathering about 10 % of the vote. The timing of the emergence of this party has a great deal to do with the Catalan crisis – and the Spanish nationalist backlash it provoked – and the tarnished reputation of the conservative party, following corruption scandals and the handling of the Catalan crisis. Geographical voting patterns suggest that immigration is a factor too.
- The territorial conflict over Catalonia obfuscated other issues during the electoral campaign. Despite the growing attention paid to immigration over the last year – following a spike in the number of migrants reaching Spain last summer –, a media analysis shows that immigration has not yet become an object of systematic and overt politicization. There was neither an increase in attention to immigration during the campaign period nor was the issue politicized to the extent that it had been in the 2008 election.

## 1. THE SPANISH PARTY SYSTEM

Spain's transition to democracy in the late 1970s put an end to an authoritarian regime born out of the civil war some forty years earlier. The newly inaugurated democratic regime – resulting from negotiations between the conservative forces, who had been under the umbrella of the Franco regime, and the left-wing opposition – was built on the premises of consensus and reconciliation. The long-lasting and most salient political cleavages – the left-right division (associated to class and religious cleavages) and the territorial conflict – were finally given room to translate into institutionalized forms of political competition, even if the overall spirit of moderation initially precluded their overt mobilization.

The success of the democratic enterprise has been attributed, at least in part, to a skillful combination of consensual and majoritarian principles (Gunther and Montero, 2009). Most notably, the development of a peculiar quasi-federal territorial system has allowed for varying combinations of self-rule and shared rule. Its electoral system, on the other hand, although formally proportional, exhibits a strong majoritarian bias – helping prevent the fragmentation and polarization that had plagued the short-lived democratic experiment of the 1930s – and thus favoring the overrepresentation of big parties and those with territorially concentrated support (regional nationalist parties).

The 'critical elections' of 1982 inaugurated what would become an imperfect bipartisan system, dominated by a center-left social democratic party – the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) – and a right-wing conservative force – the Alianza Popular, transformed into the more moderate Partido Popular (PP) in 1989. It was not until 1996, however, that the latter ousted the PSOE from power for the first time, putting an end to its fourteen years of consecutive rule. Since then the electoral pendulum has oscillated between the two

which, up until the transformative elections of 2015, have jointly held more than 80% of the seats in the Congress of Deputies (the parliament's lower chamber and, by far, the most important one [Figure 1]). The pattern of adversary politics is clear, as no coalition governments have ever existed. When failing to secure a majority, single-party minority cabinets have been formed, drawing support from the constellation of small parties in parliament instead – most notably ethno-regionalist parties, which have naturally used such bargaining power to advance their demands.

If both mainstream parties have adjusted themselves to the moderate median voter and, in this process, adopted centrist catch-all electoral strategies, the fact is that noticeable ideological and programmatic differences remain. These have become more visible since the PP secured its first absolute majority in 2000 – politicizing previously dormant issues such as the Church-State relationship – and, in particular, since the PSOE of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero adopted a markedly post-materialism agenda in 2004-2008 (Gunther and Montero, 2012). The push for social rights – such as equal marriage, the extension of abortion rights, or gender quotas – and the attempt to deal with Spain's thorny past – via a 'law on historical memory' – pitted a conservative and traditionalist right against a left aligned with cultural liberal values, and contributed to an exceptional degree of polarization among the two mainstream parties (Vidal/ Sánchez-Vítóres, forthcoming).

More significantly, topics of crucial importance in Spanish politics, and which had previously approximated the two main parties – such as anti-terrorism and regional devolution policies –, became a source of open division during this period. The PP fiercely opposed the PSOE's attempts to reach a negotiated peace process with ETA (the Basque terrorist organization) and bitterly decried the reform of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2014). The latter would prove particularly significant since, by contesting the

## Glossary: Political Parties with Parliamentary Representation

<b>PP</b> Partido Popular	<i>People's Party, Conservative/ Centre-right to right</i>	<b>PNV</b> Partido Nacionalista Vasco	<i>Basque Nationalist Party, Basque regional party</i>
<b>PSOE</b> Partido Socialista Obrero Español	<i>Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, Social Democratic / centre-left</i>	<b>EH Bildu</b> Euskal Herria Bildu	<i>Basque Country Unite, Basque regional party</i>
<b>C's</b> Ciudadanos	<i>Citizens, Liberal /Centre to centre-right</i>	<b>CCa-PNC</b> Coalición Canaria	<i>Electoral alliance for the Canary Islands</i>
<b>UP*</b> Unidos Podemos	<i>We can/United we can, Left to radical left</i>	<b>Navarra Suma</b>	<i>Electoral alliance for Navarra</i>
<b>Vox</b>	<i>Radical right</i>	<b>Comp</b> Compromís 2019	<i>Electoral alliance for Valencia</i>
<b>ERC-SOBIRANISTES</b> Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya	<i>Republican Left of Catalonia, Catalan regional party</i>	<b>PRC</b> Partido Regionalista de Cantabria	<i>Regional Party for Cantabria</i>
<b>JxCAT-JUNTS</b> Junts par Catalunya	<i>Together for Catalonia, Catalan regional party</i>		

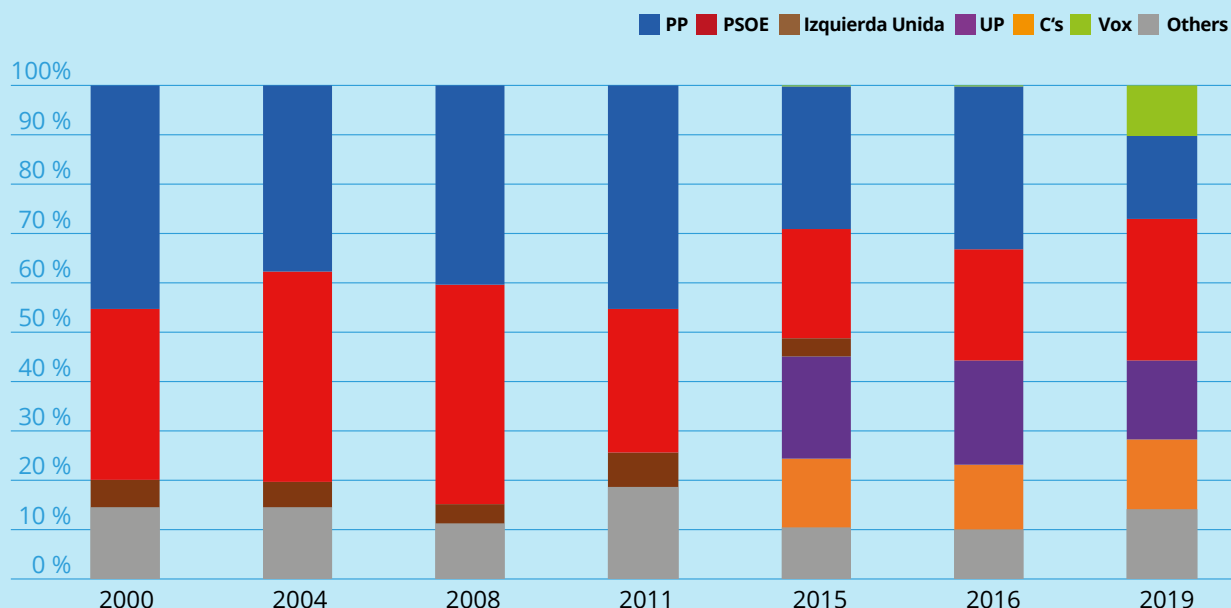
\*Coalition with Izquierda Unida (Left United) and other small parties, formed in 2016

constitutionality of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy the PP was at the origin of the 2010 Constitutional Court verdict that declared several of its articles unconstitutional, helping to fuel resentment and nationalism in Catalonia. The accusations that the left was collaborating with 'terrorists and separatists' and contributing to 'break up Spain' were an early prelude of what is plain obvious today – the politicization, salience, and unprecedented degree of polarization revolving around the national identity/ territorial cleavage, following the Catalan declaration of independence in October 2017.

### From a *de facto* bipartisan to a multiparty system

Before the Catalan independence challenge fully materialized, however, a new stage in Spanish politics had already been opened by the 2015 electoral contest. The 2008 financial crisis and the sharp economic downturn of the following years, together with the implementation of 'austerity policy packages', produced a wave of mass mobilizations that shook Spain from 2011 to 2015.

Fig. 1: Evolution of vote share (2000-2019)



Source: Own elaboration based on El País and Congreso de los Diputados (<http://www.congreso.es/consti/elecciones/generales/index.jsp>)

This, in turn, has helped fuel a major ‘crisis of political representation’, visible in the sharp rise of mistrust and dissatisfaction with the political system (Muro and Vidal, 2016). This explains the subsequent breakdown of the two-party system and the emergence of two new party formations – Podemos and Ciudadanos –, which together gathered more than 34% of the popular vote in 2015 (Orriols and Cordero, 2016).

With a message centered on political renewal and democratic regeneration – which resonated particularly well in light of the corruption scandals that in the meantime engulfed mainstream parties –, Podemos and Ciudadanos were able to attract those most dissatisfied with the political system (particularly among the young), even if the structure of political conflict remained largely unidimensional (Vidal, 2018). Their ideological profile is, however, sharply different, with Podemos occupying a radical left space and Ciudadanos a center-right one (Figure 2).

The 2015 electoral outcome resulted in a highly fragmented parliament, where neither a left-wing nor right-wing bloc had an absolute majority. After months of institutional paralysis and failed inter-party negotiations, new elections took place in June 2016. Though the political deadlock remained, the right consolidated its simple majority and, after bitter infighting, the PSOE eventually agreed to abstain in the PP’s investiture vote (so as to avoid a third electoral contest). The PP’s government would, however, last less than two years, after one corruption revelation too many. A parliamentary no-confidence vote brought down the conservative government on June 1 and automatically replaced it with the proponent of the motion – the PSOE of Pedro Sánchez.

Sánchez’s government lasted even less, though. As its weak minority cabinet had been invested with the support of regional nationalist parties – most notably Catalan separatists –, it was largely dependent on their parliamentary support for survival. The PSOE’s attempts to dialogue with the latter were naturally an object of much controversy and hysteria, in a political environment which is hyper-polarized over the Catalan question. The failure to secure their support for the national budget left the government of Pedro Sánchez with little choice but to call for snap elections in February 2019.

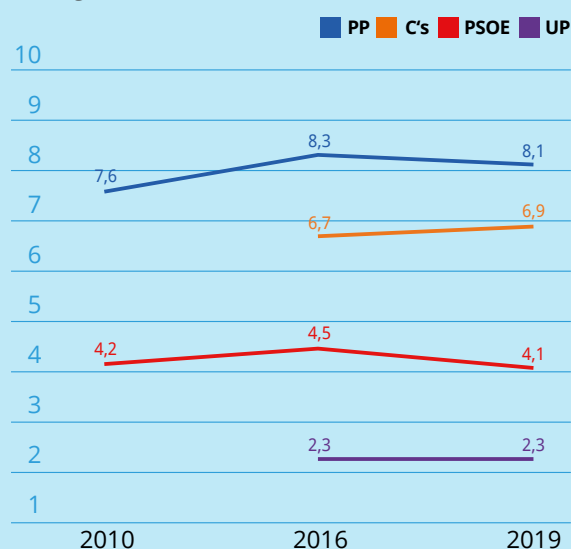
### The effects of the Catalan secessionist challenge

If the recent transformation of the party system has contributed to cabinet instability – in a setting where parties have not yet adjusted to coalition-building dynamics –, much of the current predicament has its actual origins in the Catalan separatist challenge. The botched push for self-determination was not only met with a firm legal response – as Catalan leaders face charges of sedition and rebellion in the so-called ‘trial of the century’ –, but has also given origin to a Spanish nationalist backlash, the hardening of right-wing positions, and the striking polarization of the political scene.

A country which could previously take pride in the absence of a radical right challenger has seen the rapid ascent of a populist radical right party in the last few months. Vox, established in 2014 by disgruntled former members of the PP, achieved an electoral breakthrough in December 2018 when gathering 11% of the popular vote in the Andalusian regional elections. It has capitalized on the perception that the conservative government did not have a firm enough hand in handling the secessionist challenge and supports nothing less than the overall suppression of regional autonomies and the recentralization of the Spanish state. It is an assiduous presence in marches for the unity of Spain – together with PP and Ciudadanos representatives –, and has become a co-accuser in the Catalan leaders’ trial.

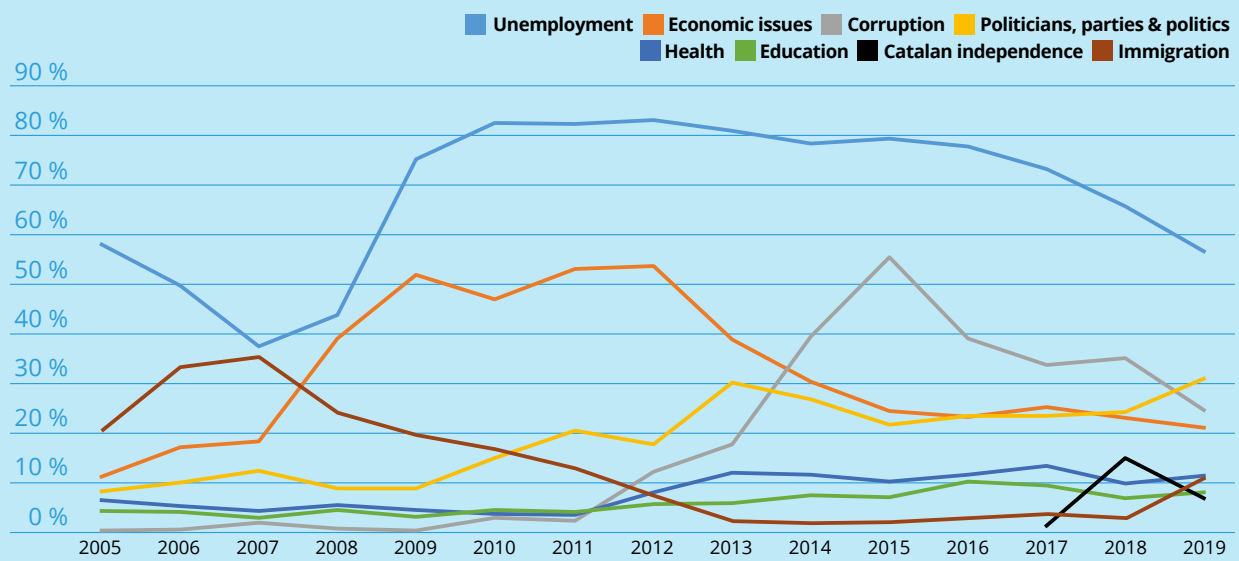
As a result, both the PP and Ciudadanos have visibly moved to the right in the last few months. PP’s new leader, coming from the most conservative wing of the party, has not only talked tougher on regional nationalism, but also on issues such as immigration and abortion (Torres 2019). Ciudadanos, who saw its pool of potential voters on the center-right spectrum increase with the Catalan crisis, has moved to dispute the right-wing space with the PP, after announcing that it would not enter into a post-electoral alliance with the PSOE in light of the latter’s willingness to engage with Catalan separatist parties (Mount 2019). The left is also divided on this issue, with Podemos and its allies in favor of an independence referendum and the PSOE apparently rejecting it, pushing instead for a

Fig. 2: Voters’ placement of main parties on a 1-10 ideological scale



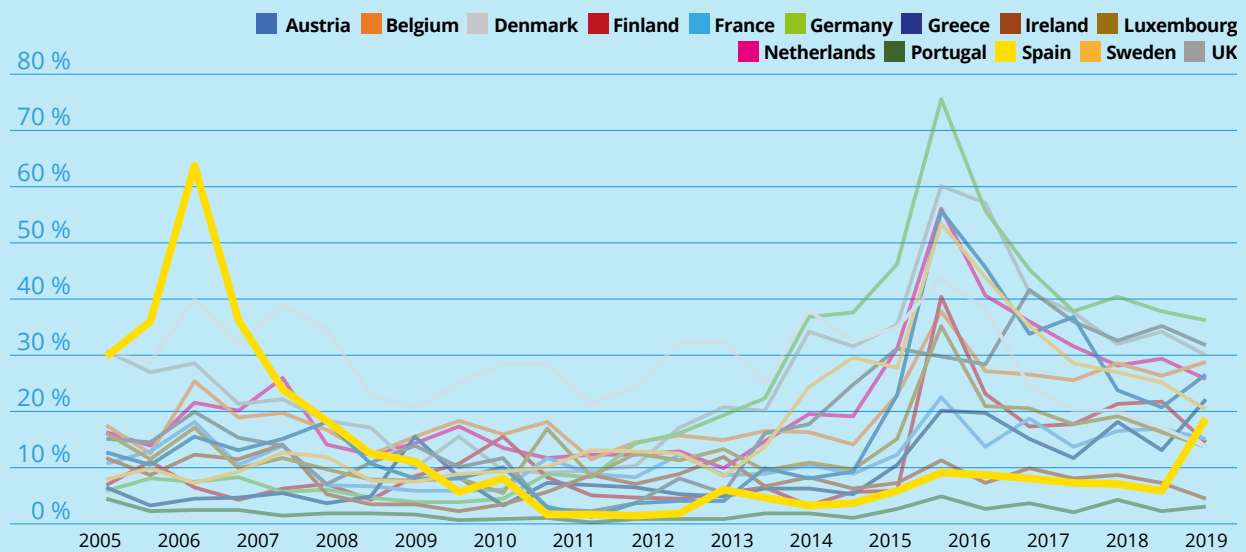
Source: Own elaboration based on CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas) surveys. Respondents were asked to place each party on a scale from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).

Fig. 3: Top concerns in Spain (2005-2019)



Source: Own elaboration based on CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas) surveys. Respondents were asked to name the **three** most important issues affecting their country.

Fig. 4: Percentage listing immigration as one of the top two issues affecting their country



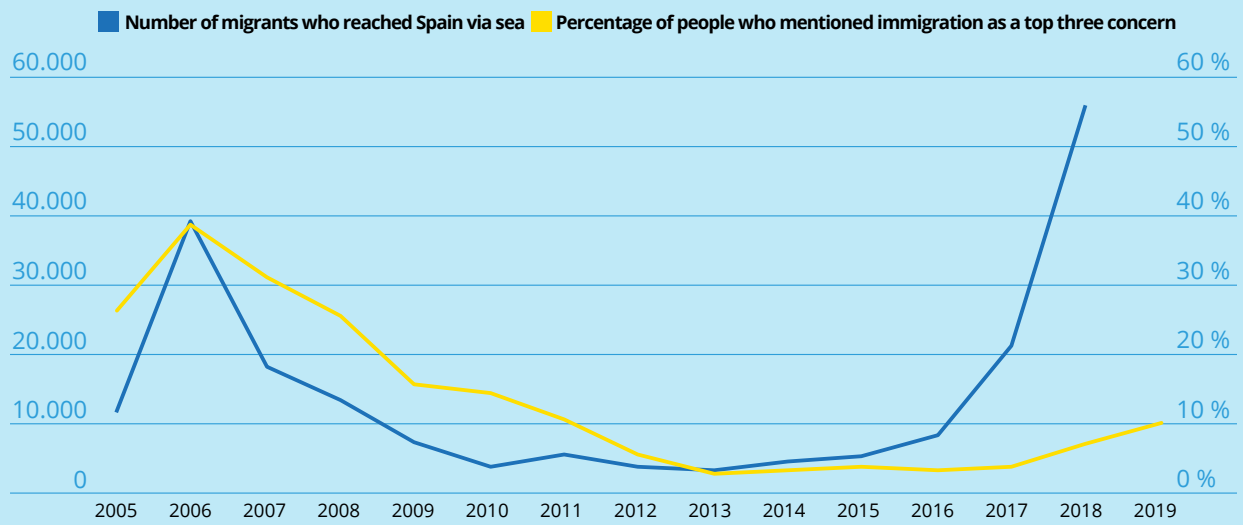
Source: Eurobarometer survey, May 2005-November 2018 / own representation

dialogue ‘within the current constitutional framework’. Unless Ciudadanos goes back on its word and enters into an agreement with the PSOE, all seems set for a crystallization of a left-wing and right-wing bloc, deeply polarized over the issue that has largely dominated the electoral campaign. The apparent willingness of Sánchez’s cabinet to negotiate with ‘separatists and terrorists’ serves as a powerful electoral tool for its opponents, even if surveys continuously show that the average Spaniard is more concerned with issues such as unemployment or corruption (which are naturally less polarizing than the former) (Figure 3).

## 2. THE SALIENCE AND POLITICIZATION OF THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE

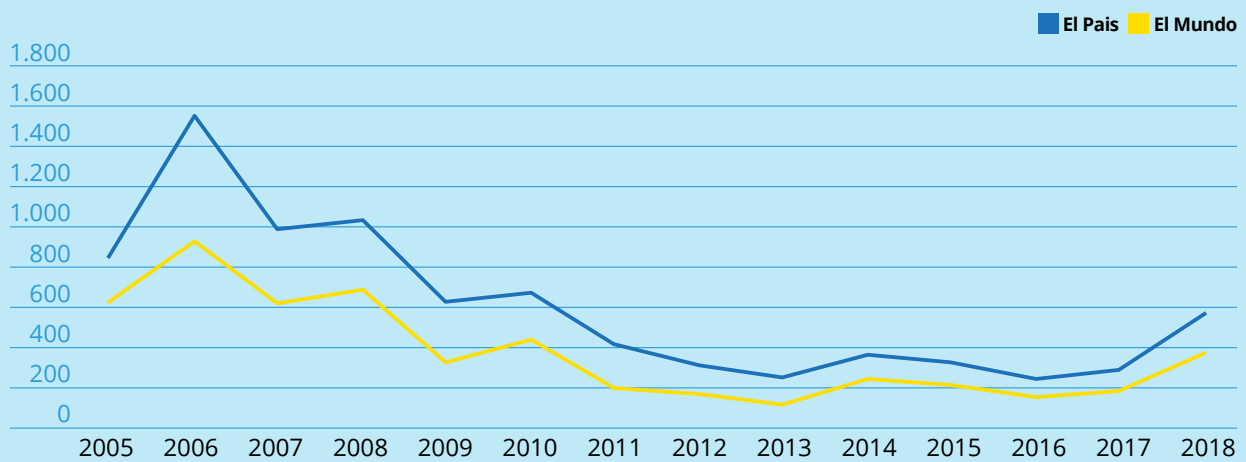
The salience of the immigration issue has not been the same in Spain as in most other European countries (Figures 3 and 4). At the peak of the ‘refugee crisis’ (2015-2016), when other Mediterranean and European countries were grappling with record number of arrivals and asylum seekers, Spain’s relative geographical distance to the most used sea routes kept it somewhat at the margins. This would pronouncedly change in the summer of 2018, when Italy decided to close its ports to rescue

Fig. 5: Number of irregular arrivals (reaching Spain via coast) and levels of concern over immigration in Spain



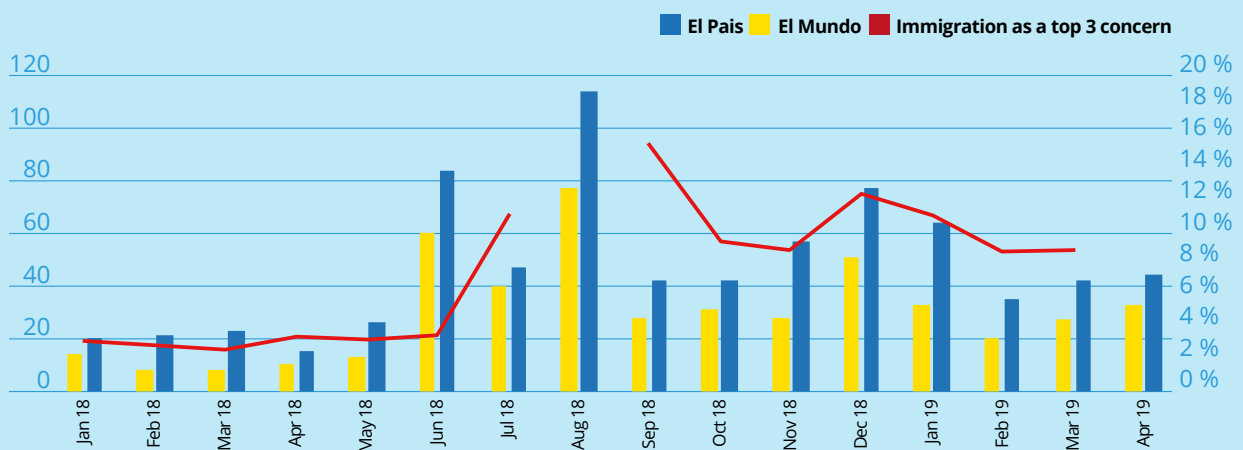
Sources: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas and Spanish Ministry of Interior / own representation

Fig. 6: Evolution of media attention to immigration (2005-2018)



Source: Number of news that included the words 'immigration' and 'Spain'. Retrieved via Factiva for two top quality newspapers in Spain, a center-left (El País) and a center-right (El Mundo) one / own representation

Fig. 7: Media attention to immigration 2018-2019



Source: Number of news that included the words 'immigration' and 'Spain'. Retrieved via Factiva for two top quality newspapers in Spain, a center-left (El País) and a center-right (El Mundo) one. Salience measures based on surveys by Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (not available for August) / own representation.



vessels and the strait between Morocco and Spain became a preferred overseas route. This trend is visible in the number of asylum applications: while in 2016 Spain received around 15,000 requests – which made it the 12<sup>th</sup> EU country with most applications, far behind Germany, Italy, Greece and others –, this number exceeded the 50,000 in 2018 (though it should be kept in mind that the Venezuelan crisis plays a large role here too and that Spain has a rejection rate superior to other countries with a similar amount of asylum requests).<sup>1</sup>

However, Spain had already dealt with its own ‘mini migrant crisis’ a decade before the European ‘refugee crisis’ (in the early and mid 2000s), when an extraordinary surge of migrants reached the Canary Islands by boat, in what became known as the ‘cayucos crisis’ (or ‘boat crisis’). In 2006 alone, more than 30,000 people travelled from the Western coast of Africa to the Canaries, with many perishing in the attempt. This explains why immigration was such a salient concern in Spain at the time, when compared to other European countries (Figure 4). In fact, it is interesting to note the salience of the immigration issue tends to follow closely both (1) the number of irregular migrants reaching Spain via sea and (2) media attention to the immigration issue, as Figures 5 and 6 show.

The peak in salience and media coverage registered in 2006 has, however, not been matched by a similar attention peak in 2018, when the number of migrants arriving on southern Spanish shores sharply increased to levels unseen in Spain before (surpassing the 55,000). This suggests that salience is a function of media attention (as several studies have demonstrated - e.g. MIDEM 2018 - and as Figure 7 puts into evidence), though salience measures should not be taken at face value (as they are always relative to other issues). It is possible that the overt dominance of other issues in the Spanish political scene throughout 2018 – most notably the Catalan issue – have tamed media attention to the migrant crisis and consequently public opinion salience.

Even though the comparatively lower levels of media coverage in 2018 (when put against 2006) are a good indicator that immigration has not become an excessive focus of media attention, there were nonetheless specific episodes which received wide coverage. This was most obviously the case in June 2018, when the recently invested government of Pedro Sánchez reacted to Italy and Malta’s decision to turn away the Aquarius vessel (carrying over 600 migrants) and welcomed it in the port of Valencia. The diplomatic row created by this episode and Spain’s friendly migration stance made headlines worldwide. This occurred at the same time

that the number of people crossing to southern Spain by sea was surging (taking advantage of the summer weather), reaching an unprecedented level in the next few months and creating considerable pressure for rescue services and local authorities in Andalucía. This largely explains why – when zooming in on media coverage of immigration in 2018/2019 –, the summer months are the ones with the greatest share of attention.<sup>2</sup>

### **The politicization of immigration ahead of the 2019 general elections**

Although the 2018 surge in the number of migrant arrivals has a good deal to do with the closure of other routes and was far from unanticipated, the apparent (and widely publicized) ‘open-arms’ stance of the Spanish government was used by the right-wing opposition to accuse the Spanish cabinet of generating a ‘pull effect’ (*efecto llamada*) (Izarra 2018). Ciudadanos and the PP blamed the government of Pedro Sánchez for attracting migrants with its “opportunistic strategy and gestures” and for failing to effectively manage the problem it created, while defending the need to reinforce Spain’s external borders (Carvajal, 2018).

The PP’s recently arrived leader, Pablo Casado, went as far as to state that “it is not possible to have papers for everyone, Spain cannot absorb the *millions* of Africans that want to come to Europe” (Junquera, 2018). In a country where immigration had only on a few occasions been an object of overt politicization, this statement was met with much opposition and taken as evidence that the Spanish right was trying to surf the European anti-immigration populist wave. PSOE’s representatives accused Casado of “agitating fear, xenophobia and racism” (*La Vanguardia*, 2018). Interestingly, even though this row occurred before Vox’s media breakthrough in October 2018, Casado had already stated earlier on he was interested in recovering the voters that were moving to Vox, which possibly explains why he adopted a controversial tone (Aduriz, 2018). It should be noted, however, that the PP’s current emphasis on the need for a ‘regular, ordered and labor-market oriented’ migration policy, respectful of Spanish customs, does not constitute a significant departure from what the conservative party had advocated in the past and that a similar attempt to politicize immigration – which also included numerous controversial statements and proposals – had already been made in the 2008 campaign (Morales et al., 2015: 16).

In fact, if one focuses exclusively on the months preceding the current April 2019 electoral contest, the immigration issue does not seem to attract more attention than

1 Eurostat and European Parliament asylum statistics.

2 It should be noted that the Aquarius case is not representative of a systematic ‘open-arms’ policy and that the Spanish government was later on accused by humanitarian NGOs of taking steps backwards. This was most clear in recent months, with rescue ships being denied departure permits (allegedly because they do not meet security standards). See [https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/01/28/inenglish/1548672833\\_325170.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/01/28/inenglish/1548672833_325170.html)

Fig. 8: Parties' statements on immigration

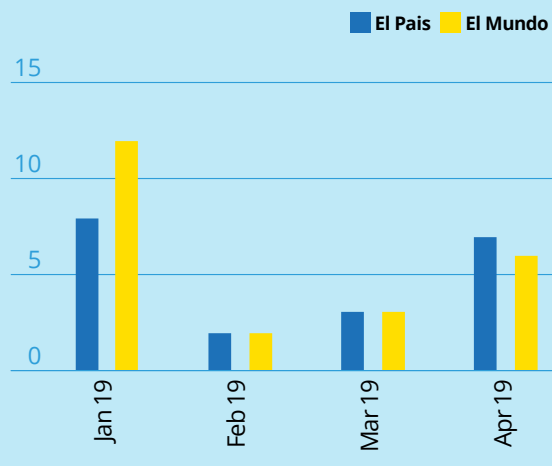


Fig. 9: Statements on immigration per party

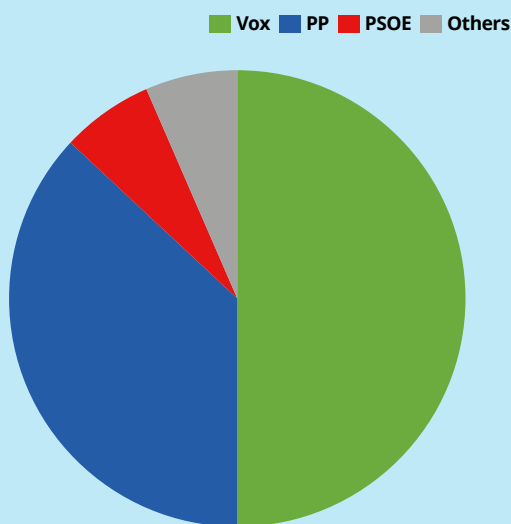
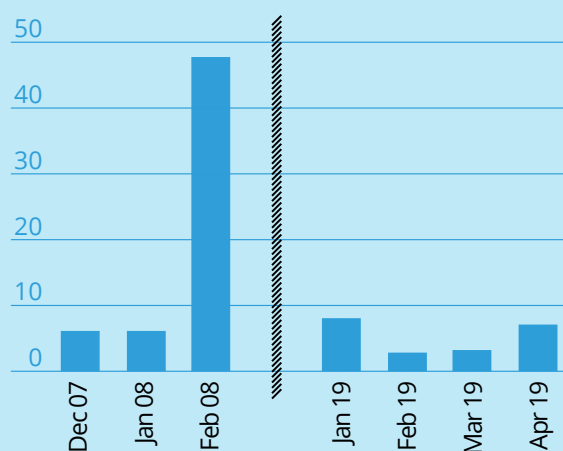


Fig. 10: Parties' statements on immigration – 2019 vs 2008



Source: Retrieved manually via Factiva. Note: Only numbers of news pieces in which there are party statements on immigration were coded (not the number of statements). For Figure 10 only El País was used.

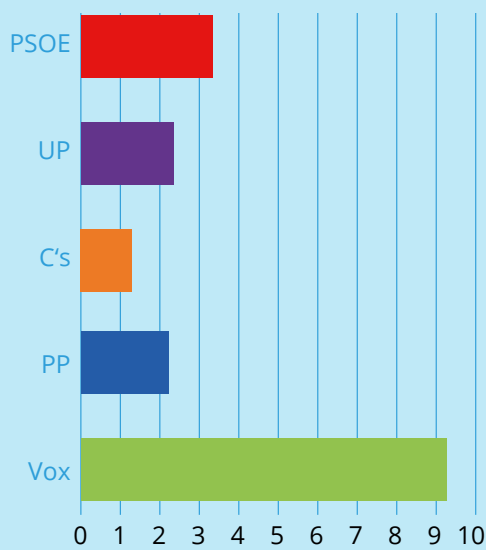
before. The relative increase in the month of December is explained by the ascent of Vox in the December regional elections in Andalucía. The hardline and populist anti-immigration rhetoric of this party was a shocking novelty in the Spanish political scene. Migrants, in particular Muslim ones, – second to ‘coup-mongers’ (Catalan separatist leaders) and together with ‘feminazis’ –, are among Vox’s favorite targets, in an aggressively nativist/ nationalist discourse. Vox’s positions became increasingly visible in the Spanish media from October 2018 onwards, when a large and unanticipated Vox rally, congregating almost 10,000 people in Madrid, put the spotlight on the party.

In order to empirically assess the levels of politicization of the immigration issue in the months prior to the election (January to April), the pieces of news in which party representatives made any statement concerning immigration were isolated, first separated by month (Figure 8) and secondly by party (Figure 9). They were later put against the year of 2008 or, more precisely, the three months that preceded the electoral contest of 2008 (which took place in early March), so that a comparison could be established with a previous electoral contest (Figure 10). The year of 2008 was chosen because, as mentioned, it is known that the PP attempted to politicize the immigration issue, at a time when the ‘Cayucos crisis’ was still fresh in the minds of Spanish citizens. Morales et al. (2015: 15) show that, in contrast, immigration was not a relevant theme neither in 2011 nor in 2004.

The news pieces in which party representatives made statements (or were quoted as making any statement) on immigration were first sorted by month in order to assess how politicization changed as the electoral contest approached (Figure 8). It is interesting to observe that there was not a sharp increase in the month preceding the electoral contest – that is, in the electoral campaign period –, and that political attention to immigration was actually superior before snap elections were announced in February. This is an indicator that, contrary to popular perception, there was actually not an overt attempt at politicizing immigration for electoral purposes. When there was, it came primarily (and unsurprisingly) from Vox (Figure 9), a party that had not yet reached parliamentary representation at the national level (Figure 9).

Most strikingly, it is clear how (low) levels of politicization in 2019 are in stark contrast to (high) levels of politicization in 2008, which increased sharply in the month prior to Election Day (Figure 10). At that time, the attempt of the PP to capitalize on the immigration issue was unambiguous. Statements were made connecting immigration to crime, a controversial ‘integration contract’ was proposed, and restrictions on the use of the veil were suggested. The issue had a more prominent place in the debate between the various candidates at the time, with most statements either coming from the PP or from oth-

Fig. 11: Salience of immigration in electoral manifestos



Source: Percentage of words devoted to the immigration issue in party manifestos. Manual coding.

er parties reacting to the PP's stance. While it is the case that in 2019 the media presence of a radical right party makes the issue even more incendiary and demagogical, Vox has naturally not received the same amount of coverage and mainstream parties did not directly engage with Vox's proposals.

In fact, all other parties seemed surprisingly quiet on the issue, with the slight exception of the PP. Though its attempts at politicizing immigration were, in a comparative perspective, much less obvious than in 2008, the party could legitimately expect to reap some benefits in this regard. On the one hand, its stance on secure borders was instrumental to undermine the Sánchez's government, repeatedly accused of creating a 'pull effect' (Lamet, 2019); on the other hand, its occasional adoption of an aggressive rhetoric was a means of winking at Vox's electorate – which is majoritarily composed of people who previously voted for the PP. This was most clear when a PP representative suggested that migrants "have greater access to welfare and preference in health and education" (Junquera, 2019a) or when Casado said at a rally "here there is no genital cutting or rams killed at home. One either respects our customs or one has chosen the wrong country" (Junquera, 2019b).

The most visible instance of political confrontation on the immigration issue occurred in the second round of televised electoral debates among the four main candidates (April 23), when this topic captured a few minutes of the parties' attention (Vox was excluded from the debates given its lack of parliamentary representation). As with almost every other theme, there was a visible division between the PP and Ciudadanos, on the one hand, and the PSOE and Podemos, on the other, even if there were 'intra-block' confrontations too. The right did not

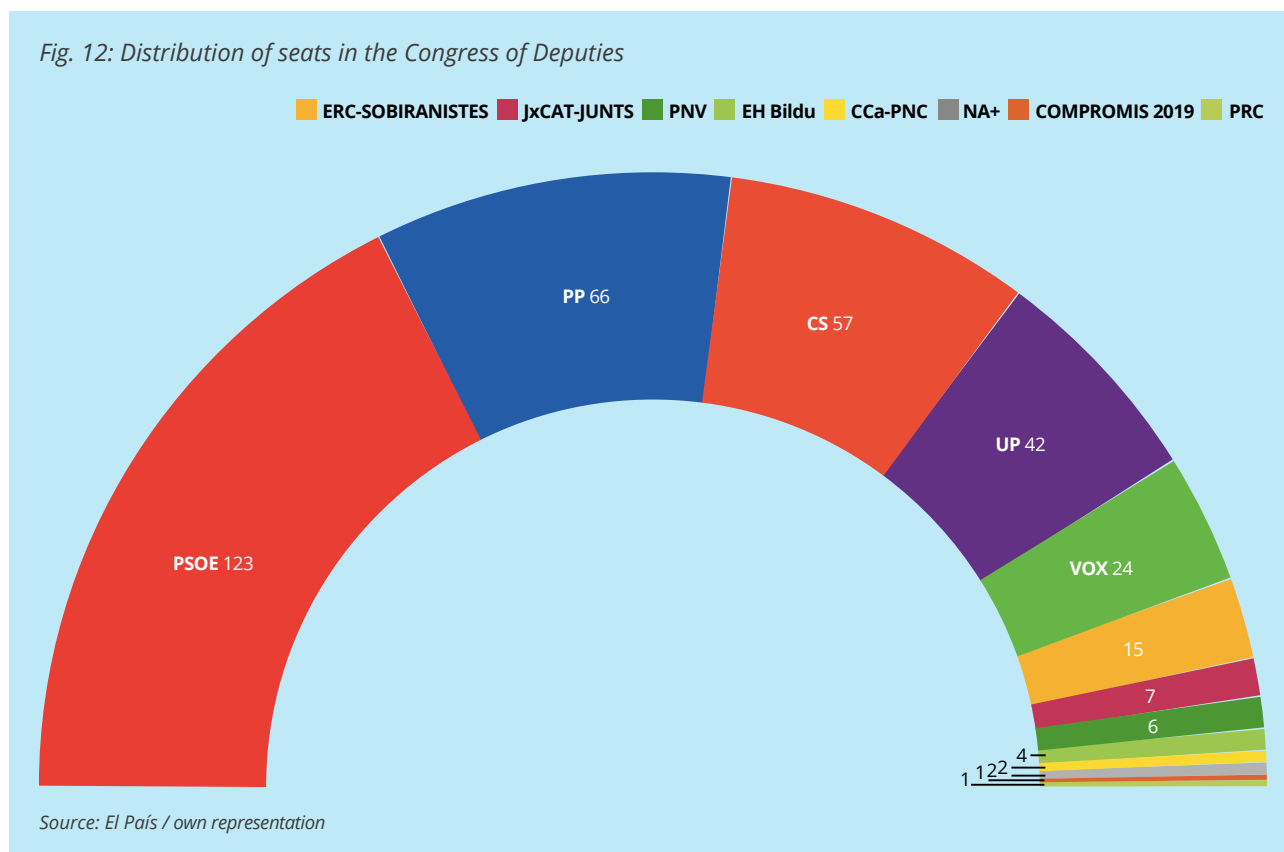
fail to attack Sánchez for producing a 'pull effect' or for his 'naïve humanitarianism' (*buenismo*), while Podemos adopted a strongly human rights-centered discourse. The PP and Ciudadanos argued for a tougher approach toward 'immigration mafias', while Sánchez shifted the blame to the previous PP government for failing to take any action on a crisis that had long been anticipated. In essence, the parties did not differ from what was expected from them (and from what their positions were in the past), with Podemos focusing on moral principles, the right applying a law-and-order perspective and using primarily instrumental justifications for immigration (in terms of what serves the Spanish labor market) and with the PSOE oscillating between the two.

These positions are largely in line with each party's electoral manifesto. Even though the right is invariably the one 'on the attack' on this topic and Podemos and the PSOE avoid politicizing the issue, the latter actually devote slightly more space to the immigration issue in their electoral manifestos, though this difference is not significant (Figure 11). When compared with previous years – and taking Morales' et al. (2015: 12) identical measurement as a baseline for comparison –, the space devoted by the PP and the PSOE to the immigration issue does not significantly differ from previous general elections, with the exception of the 2008 one, where immigration occupied about 6 % of their respective manifestos' space. This is yet another good indicator that, despite the emerging presence of Vox, the immigration issue has not yet become an object of systematic and overt politicization in Spain.

### 3. THE ELECTORAL RESULTS

The exceptional degree of political polarization in the 2019 campaign – with each of the three right-wing parties competing to be the most hardline on the Sánchez's alleged accommodation of secessionist demands –, proved ultimately unsuccessful (Figures 12 and 13). The radicalization of moderate center-right options turned out to be a blessing for the PSOE, the only party which would credibly claim the center position, while appealing to the left too. Its electoral victory, with about 29% of vote share and 123 parliamentary seats – up from 85 seats in 2016 – represents an extraordinary comeback for a party that, like many of its European homologous, had been hard hit after the 2008 financial crisis. On top of defeating a fragmented right-wing opposition, the PSOE emerged well ahead of the second most voted party – the PP (with 16,7% of votes) –, and reinforced its position of leadership on the left, after a 2015-2016 period in which it had Podemos at its heels. It furthermore achieved an absolute majority in the Spanish Senate, for the first time in more than two decades. As expected, however, the PSOE's results are far from the absolute majorities of its glory days and the 2019 elections cemented the definite fragmentation of the Spanish party system. Together with its most likely ally, Podemos, it holds 165 seats, short of the 176 they would have needed to secure a comfortable absolute majority.

Fig. 12: Distribution of seats in the Congress of Deputies



The fear of a right-wing government endorsed by the radical right has most likely played a role in driving voters to the polls. Turnout rates increased from 66,5 % in 2016 (or 69,7 % in 2015) to 75,8 % in 2019. Though it is early to say whether the ‘activation’ of left-wing voters was a result of other factors too – namely the social agenda<sup>3</sup> of the Sánchez government at a time when the economy is performing well –, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Sánchez was successful in agitating the fear of a hardline right-wing government. Andalucía provides a good example in this regard. While only five months ago the PSOE lost 14 seats in the regional elections of an autonomous community it had always controlled, it attracted about half a million votes more in the national contest, going from an overall vote share of 27,9 % in the December 2018 regional elections to 34,23 % in the same region in April 2019.

Perhaps even more extraordinary than the PSOE comeback is the extent of the debacle of the PP and the fragmentation of a right-wing space in which it had always been hegemonic. The party lost half of its parliamentary seats, in what was the worst electoral result of its history (if one excludes its precursor Alianza Popular in 1979). Corruption scandals, its management of the Catalan crisis, the recent ideological move to the right, and the emergence of competitors on both sides of the spectrum are all factors that help account why this is the case. On the one hand, Ciudadanos has made a clear bid to take over the leadership of the center right space and this strategy seems to have worked well for

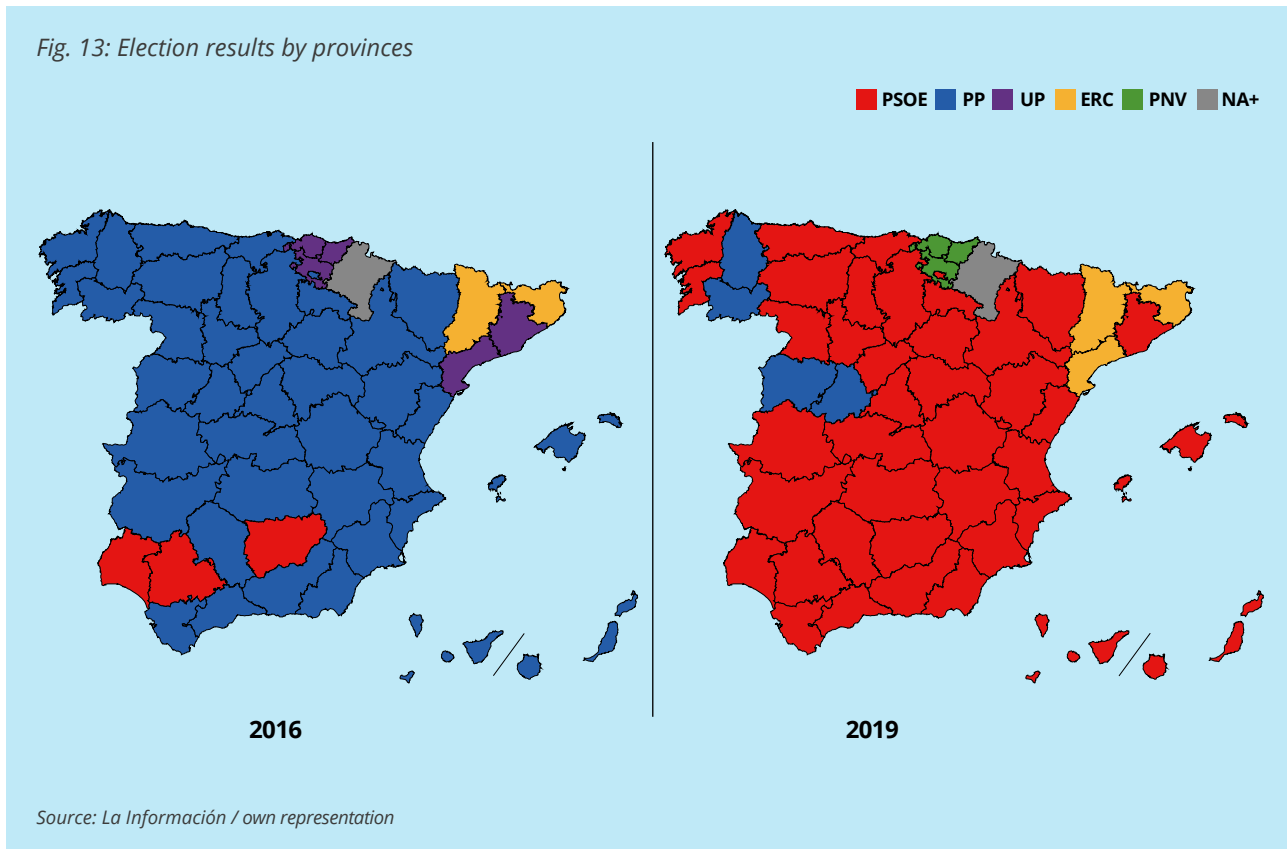
the party, falling close behind the PP nationally and overtaking it in core regions. On the other hand, Vox’s announced rise feeds itself directly from former PP voters. This was the case in the Andalusian regional elections and, even though we only have aggregate data at this point, the relationship in the national elections seems clear too: the municipalities where Vox scores best are the ones where the PP crumbles (Grasso et al., 2019).

It is therefore not surprising to see that Vox, together with Ciudadanos, have grown in municipalities with higher per capita incomes, where the right tends to be comparatively stronger. The demographic indicator that better correlates with Vox’s vote is, however, age, with the party performing significantly better among young voters. In addition, it attracts more men than women, an unsurprising fact in light of its anti-feminist discourse. Unemployment rates and low educational levels, on the other hand, correlate better with vote for the PSOE than with other parties. Particularly relevant for our purposes is the fact that there is positive correlation between the number of foreigners in a given municipality and vote for Vox (Carpio, 2019).

Indeed, and even though there are multiple reasons underlying the ascent of Vox – the Catalan secessionist crisis being surely one of them –, it is hard to miss the fact that the geographical distribution of the vote is not uniform and that the party does particularly well in regions with high concentration of non-EU migrants. This correlation had already

<sup>3</sup> This included a spectacular increase of the minimum wage by 22%.

Fig. 13: Election results by provinces



been demonstrated at the municipal level in the Andalusian regional elections (Llaneras et al., 2018; Toshkov, 2018). It is striking that, against a national total of 10,3 %, the party had 19,2 % of the vote in the province of Almería and 18,6 % in the adjacent region of Murcia, two areas known for their “sea of plastic”, that is, the miles and miles of greenhouses that make “europe’s vegetable garden” and where a large number of migrants work in the ultra-intensive farming industry. Tellingly, Vox’s greatest municipal stronghold is El Ejido, a local municipality of about 90,000 (in which 30 % are immigrants) that became known for a vicious (and rare) episode of racial violence in 2000.

#### 4. OUTLOOK

All seems to indicate that the PSOE is in no rush to negotiate the formation of the future Spanish government and that parties are now focusing on the local, regional and European elections that will all take place on May 26. Long gone are the days in which an extensive negotiation process was not anticipated after general elections. PSOE’s representatives have meanwhile suggested they will attempt to govern without (official) coalition partners (Mount and Hall, 2019). The PSOE will likely try to replicate the single-government minority formulas of the past – when it either relied on the informal support of a few parties or shifted allies as deemed convenient. With Ciudadanos seemingly consolidating its tilt to the right, the PSOE will have no alternative but to rely both on Podemos and small regional parties for the big votes, a scenario which might well include pro-independence regional parties. Though the PSOE is in a stronger po-

sition now, its predicament stays essentially the same – to find support in a fragmented parliament, divided not only along the left-right cleavage, but also polarized over the territorial divide. This makes agreements with small regional nationalist parties more difficult and politically costly than in the past. The existence of regionalist parties with different left-right sensibilities further complicates this equation, as some conservative regionalist parties will find it difficult to negotiate with a government which has Podemos as its main ally. The good news for Pedro Sánchez is that, taken together, the right has no more than 149 seats and therefore it is a considerable number of seats away from posing a threat to governmental stability.

Unless Ciudadanos changes its stance on the policy of no-deals with the PSOE (an option which seems highly unlikely at the moment), the PSOE’s first negotiation challenge will actually take place on the left, as Podemos will push for a coalition cabinet between the two rather than freely acceding to the PSOE’s preferred single-party minority government. The second challenge will be to gather the necessary votes to invest Pedro Sánchez. This does not seem excessively problematic at this stage, as a simple majority suffices in a second round of votes (meaning that regional nationalist parties will have to, at least, abstain). The third and most fundamental challenge is obviously being able to govern in this scenario. The poisonous impasse over Catalonia – together with the ongoing trial of pro-independence Catalan leaders (four of which have been elected to the Congress of Deputies) –, represents the single greatest challenge for

any Spanish government. Moreover, while pundits agree that the Spanish constitution and its territorial model are in deep need of reform, this would require an ample, and highly improbable, supermajority of two-thirds.

Finally, it is to be seen what the consequences of Vox's breakthrough will be. If it manages to lock up a spot in the party system, there are no reasons to think it will be significantly different from its European counterparts in drawing attention to previously marginal topics, such as immigration, and pushing the mainstream to take a harsher stance on its preferred issues. The key difference might be in its yet to be seen capacity of going beyond the typical right-wing voter and attracting the traditional working class, which in Spain has not (yet?) given up on the left (Cornago and Montuega, 2019).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aduriz, Iñigo* 2018: Pablo Casado se presenta como el candidato 'de integración' para liderar el PP y 'recuperar' a votantes de 'Cs o Vox'; in: *El Diario*, 18.06.2018.
- Carpio, José Á.* 2019: Elecciones generales 2019: Radiografía del voto: dime quién eres y te diré cómo votas; in: *Rtve*, 30.04.2019.
- Carvajal, Álvaro* 2018: Albert Rivera acusa a Pedro Sánchez de provocar un 'efecto llamada' y urge a fortalecer las fronteras; in: *El Mundo*, 30.07.2018.
- Cornago, Luis / Chueca Montuega, Enrique* 2019: Han dejado los obreros de votar a la izquierda en España?; in: *Agenda Pública*, 16.04.2019.
- Grasso, Daniele / Andriano, Borja / Sevillano, Elena / Llaneras, Kiko* 2019: Dónde ha Ganado y perdido votos cada partido; in: *El País*, 30.04.2019.
- Gunther, Richard / Montero, José Ramón* 2009: *The Politics of Spain*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gunther, Richard / Montero, José Ramón* 2012: From Consensus Transition to Adversary Democracy; in: Jordana, Jacint / Navarro, Vicenç / Pallarès, Francesc / Requejo, Ferran (eds.): *Democràcia, Política i Societat*; Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, pp. 101-135.
- Izarra, Josean* 2018: Santamaría culpa a Sánchez del 'efecto llamada'; in: *El Mundo*, 25.06.2018.
- Junquera, Natalia* 2018: El PP agita el miedo de la llegada de 'millones' de inmigrantes; in: *El País*, 30.07.2018.
- Junquera, Natalia* 2019a: Las hipérboles del PP en plena batalla para frenar la fuga de votos a Vox; in: *El País*, 27.02.2019.
- Junquera, Natalia* 2019b: Leyes para cazar voto; in: *El País*, 12.01.2019.
- La Vanguardia* 2018: El PSOE-A acusa a Casado de 'agitar el miedo, la xenofobia y el racismo'; in: *La Vanguardia*, 30.07.2018.
- Lamet, Juanma* 2019: El decálogo de Casado para llegar a la Moncloa; in: *El Mundo*, 20.01.2019.
- Llaneras, Kiko / Galán, Javier / Andriano, Borja* 2019: Vox crece donde hay más inmigrantes: un mapa de sus votos en cada municipio; in: *El País*, 03.12.2018.
- MIDEM* 2018: *Migration und Populismus. Jahresbericht 2018*, Dresden.
- Morales, Laura / Pardos-Prado, Segi / Ros, Virginia* 2015: Issue emergence and the dynamics of electoral competition around immigration in Spain; in: *Acta Politica* 50(4), 461-485.
- Mount, Ian / Hall, Bell* 2019: Spain's Socialists will seek to govern alone after election win; in: *Financial Times*, 29.04.2019.
- Mount, Ian* 2019: Spain's Albert Rivera shifts party rightward ahead of vote; in: *Financial Times*, 24.03.2019.
- Muro, Diego / Vidal, Guillem* 2016: Political Mistrust in Southern Europe since the Great Recession; in: *Mediterranean Politics* 22(2), pp. 197-217.
- Orriols, Lluís / Cordero, Guillermo* 2016: The Breakdown of the Spanish Two-Party System: The Upsurge of Podemos and Ciudadanos in the 2015 General Election; in: *South European Society and Politics* 21(4), pp. 469-492.
- Sánchez-Cuenca, Ignacio* 2014: La política en los Gobiernos de José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero; in: Navajas Zubeldia, Carlos / Iturraga Barco, Diego (eds.): *España en democracia. Actas del IV Congreso Internacional de Historia de Nuestro Tiempo*; Universidad de la Rioja, Logroño, pp. 97-109.
- Torres, Diego* 2019: Spain's conservative revolution; in: *Politico*, 18.04.2019.
- Toshkov, Dimiter* 2018: Does immigration explain the comeback of the radical right in Spain?; in: *LSE Europe Blog*, 07.12.2018.
- Vidal, Guillem* 2018: Challenging business as usual? The rise of new parties in Spain in times of crisis; in: *West European Politics* 41(2), pp. 261-286.
- Vidal, Guillem / Sánchez-Vitores, Irene* forthcoming: Out with the Old: The Transformation of Spanish Politics in the Great Recession; in: Hutter, Swen / Kriesi, Hanspeter (eds.): *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

## **AUTHOR**

### **MARIANA S. MENDES, M.A.**

Mariana S. Mendes is Visiting Fellow at MIDEM, Dresden, and doctoral researcher at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the European University Institute, Florence. She holds an M.A. in Nationalism Studies from Central European University and an M.A. in International Affairs from Sciences Po Paris. Her research interests are situated within the broad field of comparative political sociology and include nationalism, transitional justice & memory politics, and the rise of the radical right, with a focus on Portugal and Spain.

Mariana.Mendes@eui.eu



## PROFILE

In recent years in particular the topic of migration has led to new political polarisations in the societies of Europe. The political and social challenges associated with this development are not yet foreseeable. There is a need for studies which explore the relationship between migration and democracy.

The Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) asks about the impact of migration on democratic institutions, policies and cultures and looks into political decision making processes in the field of migration policies - in individual countries and in a comparative view of Europe. A spotlight is put on the relation between migration and populism.

### MIDEM examines:

- Crisis discourses on migration and integration
- Populism
- Policies of migration
- Migration in urban and regional contexts

### MIDEM's objectives:

- Practice-oriented research
- Advising policy makers and civil society
- Establishing international networks
- Providing a forum for public debates

## IMPRINT

ISSN 2570-0707

### Editor:

Prof. Dr. Hans Vorländer, Director  
Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy (MIDEM)

TU Dresden  
Institute of Political Science  
Centre for the Study of  
Constitutionalism and Democracy  
01062 Dresden  
Germany

Tel.: +49 351 463 35811  
midem@mailbox.tu-dresden.de  
www.forum-midem.de

### Editing:

Dr. Oliviero Angeli  
Felicita von Mallinckrodt

### Design:

Vollblut GmbH & Co. KG

© MIDEM 2019

*This publication benefited from the cooperation between MIDEM and the European University Institute (EUI).*

*MIDEM is a research centre of Technische Universität Dresden (TUD) in cooperation with the University of Duisburg-Essen, funded by Stiftung Mercator.*

