



# TO INSPIRE EUROPE: INSIGHTS FROM THE SUCCESS STORY OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN SPAIN.





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# INTRODUCTION.

*DR ANIA SKRZYPEK, FEPS SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW*

The last European Elections saw PSOE – the Spanish Socialist Workers Party – win and become the largest among the progressive delegations in the S&D Group in the European Parliament. And this was not just a victory in numbers. Indeed, comrades from across the continent have been looking at Spain as a place where new politics is taking its course under the charismatic leadership of Pedro Sanchez.

How did it come to this? In fact, not many remember now that only two years ago the situation in the country was quite the opposite to what it is today. The traditional two-party system has been challenged by the emergence of new forces. They politically consolidated the protest voices raised in the social mobilisations observed in the midst of the 2008 crisis and its aftermath. They would suggest that the citizens no longer trust the political system and its actors to deliver on a promise of social justice and hence a prosperous future for everyone.

To make things more complicated, the persistent debate on devolution became a focal point in national politics. Demands for de-centralisation, as well as calls for more autonomy, or even independence for some regions, have been brought to the forefront. The context it created prompted the developments, such as the one in Catalonia. There, an illegal referendum showed, among other issues, a drastic split of opinion among the region's inhabitants.

When it comes to the PSOE itself, it was searching for its way forward. After the failure in the negotiations to form a government and the arrival of Partido Popular to power, Pedro Sánchez gave up both the party leadership and his mandate in the Parliament. This has been an unprecedented move, since not too many contempo-

rarians would indeed feel that kind of level of direct responsibility and to that end would be ready to give up on both. This has been a sign of Sanchez's readiness to act only alongside what he considered the highest ethical standards. This in fact made him appear as most honourable that was soon to translate.

The subsequent months saw the PSOE in difficulty. When it comes to Pedro Sanchez himself - he decided to start from a proverbial scratch and win back the trust of the party members, and emerged victorious. His win was accomplished perhaps even against many odds. He was back, bringing a wave of enthusiasm, freshness and attracting many young people to sign up. Indeed, he reemerged as a person that voters and sympathisers would queue to attend the meetings with. In that sense also, Pedro was the leader that has proven himself to be different to any other contender. He was able to conquer the ground that made him a politician who could carry also the earlier mentioned votes of discontent with the establishment. He would aspire to lead his party forward within the premises of the system, while rejecting all malpractices that would undermine the system's democratic character. As events have proven, this was what the PSOE needed to see the return of its leader be also the return of the party altogether into the centre ground.

From that moment onwards, developments seem to have been taking place with an incredible pace. The non-confidence vote against PP, the election of Pedro Sanchez to lead the government, some regional votes with mixed results, the call for the elections, the exhaustive national campaign that intertwined with the European elections campaign – it is even hard to enumerate them all to show the immense dynamic. What may have been decisive, when it comes to the PSOE not only holding up, but moreover fortifying its stand – was that the party was committed to forging a positive message of hope, exciting prospects and equal opportunities. It put the times of reckless austerity behind. It presented modernity as the exhilarating era of possibilities, which could improve



people's lives, should equality (especially gender equality) and social justice (especially when it comes to young people and climate change) be the guiding principles for political actions. To that end, politics should always be carried out with attention to the highest moral standards, which for Pedro Sanchez's PSOE were not abstract ethical principles, but the guidelines for action. It made them set an agenda to defend and promote democracy based on transparency, a sense of historical responsibility and respect to the public mandate.

Those few points offer at least a partial explanation why understanding the Spanish social democrats' success story is considered to be a potential source of inspiration for others across the continent. But there is more that makes the PSOE a particularly exciting case study nowadays. In fact, it is through Pedro Sánchez as Prime Minister, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Defense - Josep Borrell; and the new chair of the S&D Group in the European Parliament – Iratxe Garcia; accumulated all the key positions to lead the entire socialist family not only through ongoing negotiations on top EU positions, but also into the new legislative period 2019 – 2024. Having that in mind, it is only self-evident that a greater comprehension of the situation in Spain and the PSOE's internal positioning is crucial for all those who form the ranks behind it in the European context.

To that end, the initiative "To inspire Europe: insights from the success story of social democracy in Spain", which has been brought to FEPS by two of its members - Masaryk Democratic Academy and Fundación Pablo Iglesias - is to respond to that need for a greater understanding on the European level. It is to offer inspiration, as well as pointing out some of the most instructive lessons that can be taken away. The scope is therefore not only from the recent victory, but even more so the entire period of the recent political history of Spain. The intention is to offer insights, while cautiously recommending not trying to take the Spanish solutions as a blueprint to be simply applied elsewhere. It is a well-estab-

lished truth that while every time needs its own answer,; every national context would need its own particular strategies.

In that sense the study presented below by Jorge Galindo is indeed most exceptional and is being recommended wholeheartedly by all the partners to a broad European readership. Its uniqueness begins with the ability of the author to sketch the context in which the renewal of the PSOE was accomplished. Galindo puts the overall transformation of the partisan system effectively in the spotlight, which frankly speaking, is an innovative approach in comparison to the social democratic literature. The later usually focuses its attention predominantly and exclusively on the sister parties. To that end, the hypothesis that Galindo draws about the re-invention of the neo-bi-partisan system in Spain is a profoundly important conclusion allowing the less-involved commentators to afford predictions regarding the future of once system-challenging parties such as Podemos or Ciudadanos.

Furthermore, Galindo offers a comprehensive analysis on why VOX as a party did not celebrate success that it had been expected to do during the last general elections. It would seem that this party's nationalist, xenophobic rhetoric may have resonated in one of the regions – Andalusia – that in fact is facing particular economic predicament and is a transfer ground (to say the least) for migrants coming to Spain from across the Mediterranean. But while that was the case, the complexity of the ongoing devolution debate leaves little if any real space for an agenda of that kind to carry when it comes to the national level. In that sense, it is unlikely that VOX would stand a real chance to continue on the political growth curve and realise aspirations to become a powerful force equal in its strength to, for example, the French Front National.

These two elements of Galindo's excellent paper, backed further by illustrative graphs, allow two conclusions to be formulated. First, thinkers and politicians should not give in to a kind of a doomsday scenario that these current times will go down in history as

a moment of collapse of the democratic political systems. Spain showcases that indeed, there is a need for a transformation on the back of which social democrats can not only re-invent themselves with a solid, forward-looking and positive agenda, but can also emerge as a trustworthy victorious force to be eventually entrusted by citizens with a mandate to govern again. Secondly, the right wing extreme forces are not destined for success by default. The most important thing is to understand in which specific conditions, why, and with whom their messages would resonate – and address politically root causes without fear, neglect or ridicule. People living in the south of Spain, as well as inhabitants of many other European regions, feel under pressure due to the malfunctioning economy, persistent unemployment and social exclusion. They may be vulnerable towards those, who appear to offer them at least a chance to channel their anxieties and anger. But it does not mean that their commitment has been allocated and their support has been lost forever. To that end, democracy is all about believing that next time other arguments can also prevail. Hence also Progressives elsewhere should dare to hope that theirs will make a stronger, encouraging case winning back the votes of the disenfranchised to rather jointly fight for a better future for all.

Galindo's study has been scheduled to inspire two conversations. The first taking place in Prague on 4th July during a closed event hosted in the Spanish Embassy, and the second being an event open to the public and featuring a discussion in Madrid on 15th July. Because of the value of the contribution that the study presents, the project partners are also seriously considering holding another exchange in Brussels later on this year, and of course remain open to any invitations or suggestions that readers may wish to share.

In both cases the first respondent was Andre Krouwel, Professor of Vrije Universiteit and Director of Kieskompas, and also a long serving member of the FEPS Next Left Research Programme. Quite recently he has completed research regarding attitudes manifest-

ed by the European voters in 12 different Member States, which knowledge allowed him additionally to place the conclusions and recommendations of Jorge Galindo in a larger context. That has been giving the exchange a supplementary added value allowing debates' participants to debate also potentially successful strategies that social democrats both in Spain and elsewhere could embark on in the years to come.

Alongside the scholars, the events also benefitted from the presence of diverse stakeholders, to whom organisers owe immense gratitude for their commitment and invaluable input – starting from Beatriz Corredor, President of Pablo Iglesias Foundation and a Member of the Spanish Parliament; Vladimir Spidla, Chair of Masaryk Democratic Academy, and also former Prime Minister of Czech Republic and former EU Commissioner; and Jiri Dienstbier, Member of the Czech Senate. Undoubtedly the project wouldn't have existed without all the hard work of Patrik Eichler and Jiri Koubek (MDA), Jesús Greciet (FPI) and Elena Gil (FEPS) – whose contributions should also be recognised and celebrated.

With the support of them all, it is therefore a great pleasure to recommend this booklet to the attention of the European audience with the hope that it will accomplish the aim set out in the title: To inspire, while providing interesting insights from the success story of social democracy in Spain.

# **CONTAINING THE ASCENT OF THE FAR-RIGHT WITHOUT LOSING THE CENTRE-LEFT. PERSPECTIVES FROM SPAIN.**

*JORGE GALINDO* \_\_\_\_\_

On the 28th April 2019 the Spanish exception was over: VOX – a party that was born half a decade ago, but had only acquired national significance over the last year – became the first far-right party to obtain parliamentary representation in more than three decades. The already scanty list of European countries without meaningful presence of this type of political groups was thus reduced. Or this is at least how the results would be read by someone who pays attention to Spanish politics only once every two, three or four years. However, for those who look at them closely, another possible interpretation exists: the arrival of the far-right, which actually occurred, fell short of their own expectations. With just 10% of the vote (which resulted in slightly over 7% of the total seats of the Congress of Deputies), it was far from the 15% that the most optimistic forecasts predicted. This happened, besides, in a less favourable context than it might seem at first sight, something which became clear during the regional, local and European elections that took place one month later, at the end of May. In these elections, VOX saw its support decline significantly. Its fall in the European ballot is particularly relevant, given the fact that small parties usually get better results in these elections because they have a second level of importance and a single constituency, thus facilitating the vote for less prominent options since proportionality is secured.

At the same time, the 2019 electoral cycle added Spain to another exclusive list within the continent: the one made up by countries where social democracy maintains a strong presence. The electoral

success of the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE), a European exception, is the other side of the coin of the far-right's limited entry. Besides, this happened while winning over voters with a young, urban and left-wing profile, who previously seemed to have abandoned the party. Spain thus quarantines the hypothesis according to which the post-war political competition models based on the traditional opposition between the left and the right have been totally overcome. The Spanish case proves that a party originating from traditional democratic socialism (and in fact one of the oldest in Europe) can actually lead the electoral battle against a united right, in this case with liberal, conservative and reactionary elements. The question is under what conditions PSOE achieved this.

With no pretension of giving closed nor universal answers, but rather with the humblest and most realistic aim of exploring a particular case that could provide some useful learnings for the present and future of other countries in Europe, this article will go over the connection points between the contained uprising of the far-right and the social democratic revitalisation, paying special attention to four aspects: the dynamics of partisan competition in Spain, which can be said to be characterised by a 'polarised fragmentation'; the ideological considerations that go with it, where all dimensions and nuances tend to come down to a single left-right axis (including the differential element of Spanish politics: the disagreement about the territorial organisation and the limits of national sovereignty mainly represented by the recent attempt of a constitutional breach by the Catalan independence movement); the impact of the rules of the game (electoral rules and rules on the formation and change of governments) and their effect on the strategies related to the candidacies and voters; and, lastly, the socio-demographic basis of all this. The text will follow a chronological perspective, starting with some background on the functioning of the Spanish political party system and its first wave of change in the years immediately preceding the emergence of the far-right. This emergence and the way it was inserted into the existing competition logic will then be considered in the light of that party system. At this point, it will

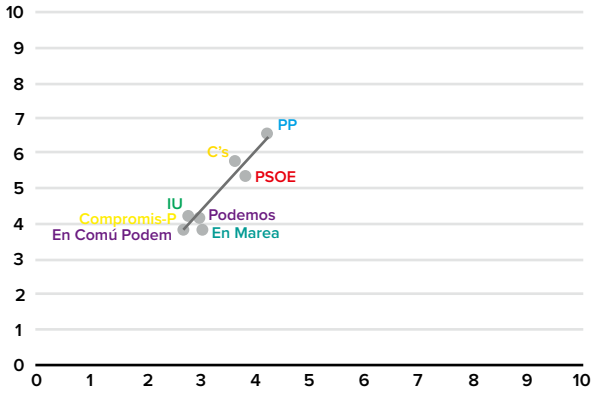
be possible to go through the dynamics of the campaign ahead of the general elections in April, before turning to a brief analysis of their results together with those of the elections in May. Finally, a conclusion will try to set down in black and white the teachings provided by this double-sided analysis.

## **1. Background: the political party system in Spain before the emergence of the far-right**

In Spain, there have historically been two reference axes around which the political positioning of parties and voters has revolved. The left-right division has brought together aspects both of an economic and of a social and cultural nature: a progressive left block (material redistribution, individual freedom) represented by PSOE versus a more conservative than liberal right block (embodied by the Popular Party – PP –), with an electoral system that favours the concentration of votes due to its slightly majoritarian bias (Lapuente, 2016). The following chart shows the correlation between different positions in the state surveys by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research, highlighting the one-dimensional nature of the left-right axis.

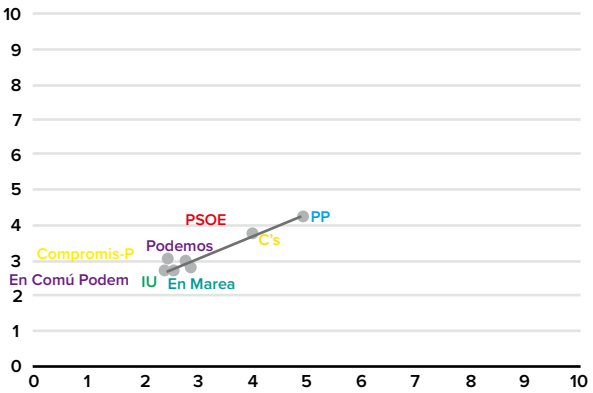
### Average voter position

Better public services (1) vs lower taxes (10)



Migration: positive (1) vs negative (10)

Better public services (1) vs lower taxes (10)



Migration: positive (1) vs negative (10)

Source: CIS post-election survey, 20D2015



In this sense, Spain is not so different from the other big nations in Mediterranean Europe: in essence, Italy, Greece and Portugal have followed similar developments (with the unavoidable historical exceptions). However, the differential fact of Spanish politics lies in the other fundamental axis: the territorial aspect. The dispute between centralisation and decentralisation takes on greater dimensions in certain areas of the country, mainly in Catalonia and the Basque Country. In both regions, there are local parties which, ranging from the centre-right to the far-left, take positions in favour of minoritarian nationalism up to the point of suggesting secessionism. But there are also other areas in Spain with their own parties that focus on the defence of their own interests: political groupings from the Community of Valencia, the Canary Islands, Navarre or Cantabria have a continuing presence in the Congress of Deputies and determine the formation of governments in the same way the Catalan or Basque parties do. This 'dependency' factor exists both on the right and the left, but has come to be a (so far) unavoidable prerequisite for the left.

For the last quarter of a century, Spain has not had a left-wing government without the participation of the so-called peripheral nationalisms, with the Catalan one having a bigger specific weight than the others (measured in terms of votes and their corresponding deputies in the national Congress). This arithmetic regularity has particularly strained the progressive block. The underlying reason is that, as a rule, the positions regarding the territorial organisation of Spain are more heterogeneous in the centre and left of Spanish politics than in the right. Therefore, the preferences in the matter of a socialist voter in Catalonia and those of his/her equivalent in Andalusia differ more than those of their likes in the centre-right. This is why the PSOE has been subject to increasingly intense dilemmas as Catalan nationalism has become more extreme to the point of reaching a pro-independence majority in favour of a unilateral secession. That is to say: to the point where the independence movement has challenged national sovereignty, something unthinkable for the median voter in the rest of Spain

– and also for the voter of PSOE.

## **2014-2016: first change in the party system**

These discrepancies within the progressive coalition have facilitated the emergence of two alternative political groupings in the last half a decade that have come to dispute the dominance of the social democratic and conservative blocks. A third platform appeared on the far-right at that very same moment: it was, indeed, VOX, but it has taken longer for them to find demand among the electorate.

Between spring 2014 and summer 2016 five important elections were held in Spain: starting with European elections and ending with a re-run of the general ones, the new parties took advantage of this ‘supercycle’ to fight for a place in Spanish politics. Podemos arose as a left-wing proposal that mixed ‘green’ and ecosocialist elements with a populist drive that eventually came to dominate the party. In the territorial axis, the project led by Pablo Iglesias identified an opportunity in a proposal of greater decentralisation, which even included the demand for a referendum on self-determination for Catalonia. With this, they expected to find kind of a middle ground between a pro-independence position and the state’s left. Ciudadanos (Cs) was somehow the reverse side of Podemos: they defined themselves as a purely liberal proposal (both socially and economically), something new for “the Spain in red and blue”, as they called it (Lucas, 2019). Regarding the territorial issue, Cs used an outright rejection of any negotiation with the Catalan independence movement as their key driver for growth. VOX, by contrast, was not so interested in breaking the traditional axes but was rather seeking to simply join in on the right of the political spectrum.

<b>Electoral results, 2014-2016 cycle</b>				
	EP 2014	Local 2015	General 2015	General 2016
<b>PP</b>	26,1%	27,1%	28,7%	33%
<b>PSOE</b>	23%	25%	22%	22,6%
<b>Cs</b>	3,2%	6,6%	13,9%	13,1%
<b>UP*</b>	18%		24,3%	21,2%
<b>VOX</b>	1,6%		0,2%	0,2%

Source: Ministry of Interior

\*NB: UP, or Unidos Podemos, does not only include Podemos party, but also all its regional alliances.

In the years after 2014 Spain changed from a two-party to a multi-party system still dominated by the pair PSOE-PP. Podemos took advantage of the last throes of the Great Recession, whose effects were particularly strong among the youth, and the widening of the abovementioned territorial discrepancies within the progressive coalition (Galindo, 2015). They thus built a voter base consisting of new generations from urban areas in regions with more decentralising preferences, which gathered almost half of the left.

Ciudadanos, for their part, started to grow from the liberal position, with a distribution of voters including almost a quarter or a third of former socialists, and between two thirds and three quarters of former PP voters, thus amounting to 13% of the total number of voters in 2016 (CIS, 2016).

VOX was founded more or less at the same time Podemos and Ciudadanos made the leap to national politics. It was not by chance: they spotted on the right the same space that had been previously identified on the left and the centre. In their early days, they represented the project of a group of people who were critical of Mariano Rajoy's management of the PP. Santiago Abascal (parliamentarian of the PP in the Basque Country, a particularly intense place for a representative of this party given its scarce presence

there and the dominance of the nationalist discourse historically linked to violence) took the lead in what can only be understood as a division of the right with a strong content of Spanish nationalism. However, this division found little support at a time when (1) the conservative right had an incentive to stay together with the PP in the face of the 'attack' from the centre that Cs represented; (2) the main drivers of extreme vote, that come down to the search of an enemy of the nation (usually immigration), were not sufficiently present in the agenda, or rather the voters did not have the feeling that a harsher discourse than the one developed by the PP itself was needed at that moment.

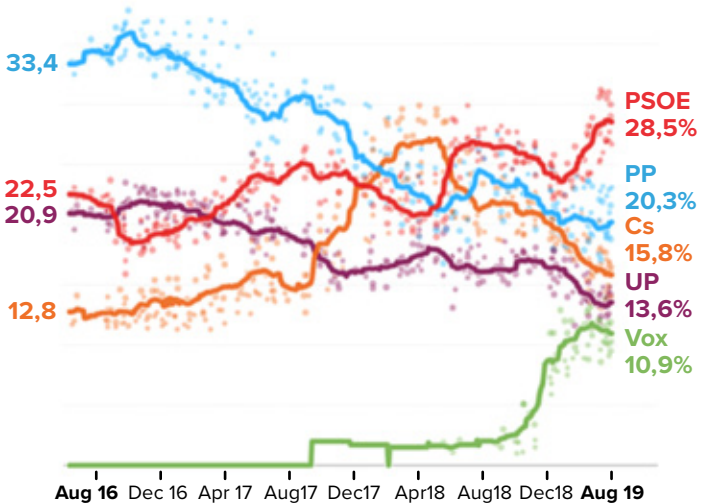
In any case, the resulting four-party balance proved to be unstable.

## 2017-2018: the rearrangement that welcomed the far-right

In the next chart, we can see the evolution of the voting intention in Spain since the general elections on 26th June 2016 until the last survey published before the 28A elections according to estimates of Kiko Llaneras, opinion poll analyst of reference. It is useful to keep this as a reference because it will serve to illustrate the changes that paved the way for VOX's success.

### General election polling in Spain, 2016-2019

Polling average estimated by Kiko Llaneras for EL PAIS



Source: EL PAIS / Kiko Llaneras

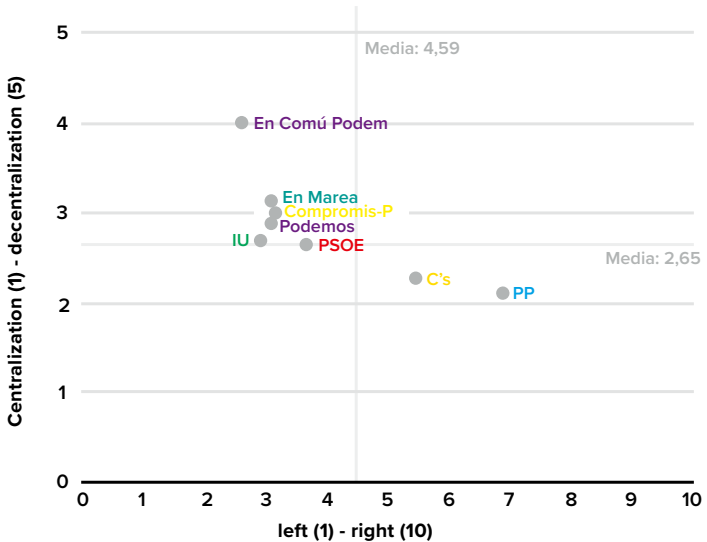
Two trends can be immediately observed in the year from May 2017 to May 2018.

**A regression to the mean on the left.** The base built by Podemos would prove to be particularly weak, as we could see as from May 2017, coinciding with PSOE's turn to the left and the polarisation around the Catalan issue, which dismissed their above-mentioned strategy. In addition to this, the party experienced an organisational weakening and kept accumulating unresolved internal conflicts.

**The rise of Ciudadanos.** As the independence challenge reached its peak, Cs broadened their base. Thus, between September 2017 and April 2018, their 13% would double, outperforming all the other parties. At that moment, the bet of the orange leader, Albert Rivera, was for the national axis to come to dominate Spanish politics. He counted on taking votes not only from the PP, where most of them came from, but also from the area of PSOE which felt closer to the centralising theses, precisely in regions where preferences were far from the Catalan independence theses: the Castilian, Andalusian and Madrilenian Spain. With this, he targeted a relatively broad socio-demographic profile, but mainly oriented towards middle-aged and middle-class people onwards (Galindo, 2015). The strategy was actually effectively welcomed by the electorate since it coincided with the attempt of constitutional breach by the Catalan secessionist government: between September and October 2017, they called for and held a referendum on self-determination with no legal basis and declared the independence of Catalonia – which was shortly afterwards suspended. The effective rejection of the integrity of Spanish sovereignty was thus confirmed. Rivera took advantage of this window of opportunity to try and position himself as the only credible alternative to respond to this challenge.

The resulting division was roughly the following. As the chart shows, the gravitational force around a single axis is significant.

## Average voter position: left/right and centralization/decentralization



Source: CIS post-election survey. 20D2015

## 2. The social democratic rearming

However, as shown in Llaneras' chart, in May 2018, Spanish politics took a big turn: taking advantage of a harsh court ruling against the PP leadership for corruption charges, Pedro Sánchez won the first motion of no-confidence of the democratic era. In Spain, the motion of no-confidence follows the constructive model (as is also the case in Germany, Belgium, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia): an alternate candidate shall be submitted who must secure an absolute majority in the Congress of Deputies. That is to say: it is not enough for the opposition to agree on bringing down the govern-

ment, but they must also agree on who is going to replace it. The PSOE achieved this milestone thanks to the vote of Podemos and that of the Basque and Catalan nationalists. To this effect, the latter temporarily renounced the 'red line' of sovereignty. Ciudadanos, however, voted against the change of Head of Government (therefore staying on the side of the Popular Party). The line drawn between these two blocks would mark the new political cycle, and would serve as a welcoming point for VOX.

In this sense, the motion of no-confidence reveals two basic facts:

- 1. The dual political competition among the big parties in Spain (ideology-territory) tends to come down to a single dimension. To a single axis that represents both the traditional division left-right and the preferences for greater or lesser centralisation in the management of the State.
- 2. This single dimension, besides, tends to be reflected in two distinct blocks in spite of the party fragmentation.

Based on this rationale, we observe, on the one hand, an increasing capacity of the PSOE to gather the vote of the left. In a sense, the initial bet of Pablo Iglesias led to his subsequent fall. If the political struggle is based on blocks and the electoral system has a certain majoritarian bias, the incentive for the voters of each block is to coordinate around the most feasible alternative in order to prevent the victory of the opposing block. Whenever there is a draw or an uncertainty about which party has more chances to win (for example, in the 2015-2016 elections), opportunities are opened to everyone. However, if one of the options gets more weight (due to a successful motion of no-confidence or the ideological and organisational weakening of the opponent), this triggers strategic voting. The Greek case is a good counterexample: Alexis Tsipras used a much deeper economic and institutional crisis than the



Spanish one to outperform, with his left-wing party Syriza, the social democrat PASOK in the small window of opportunity that was opened. From then on, with the country embedded in the same 'rationale of blocks', the centre-left voter had to choose between shifting to the new leader of their trench or let the right win. Iglesias tried to achieve what Tsipras did, but unsuccessfully. This inability to sufficiently influence the vote of the left in order to balance the coordination towards their side implied a round trip for many young and urban voters from areas of the country with decentralising aspirations. Thanks to such trip, the PSOE had the possibility to rebuild an inter-class coalition which would actually help to face the far-right once it appeared.

On the other hand, the rationale of blocks with a breakdown of axes forced Cs to choose. Since so far most of their voters came from the right side of the spectrum, the party was likely to have more to lose if they moved to the left. At the same time, in that same space, there were actually the nationalist and pro-independence proposals against which Cs had built their platform in their most successful moments. But all this does not mean that staying on that side is costless: it reduces the chances of getting the 'Jacobin' vote (centralist left). Besides that, and for this very reason, it exposes the party to the possibility of a close fight to dominate the right-wing block. And this is exactly what would happen in the face of the emergence of VOX.

### **3. The advent of VOX**

#### **The logic of competition in the light of VOX's success**

From its foundation, VOX has been clear about its stance in the rationale of blocks, with no chance of transversality or break with this logic. In this sense, VOX differs from the most successful versions of the far-right in Western Europe. It was not born with a predominantly populist content, nor does it seek to represent the

old working classes, as is the case with Marine Le Pen in France or the British UKIP. They go for a deep social conservatism, more similar to that of the ultra-catholic Polish (Law and Justice, PiS), and are the result of a journey from the traditional to the reactionary right, pretty much like Orbán in Hungary. But they do share the national dimension of their discourse with all of them. However, such discourse is not so much against Europe, but rather against the Basque and Catalan nationalisms, among others. These starting points, which probably prevented their initial growth, helped to boost it afterwards, once they were supplemented by some strategic refocusing.

As mentioned above, during the 2014-2016 cycle, the dikes that were retaining the ascent of the far-right in Spain still existed. None of the two big drivers of vote choice for this type of party in Europe was available: to start with, nobody, not even VOX, was creating an anti-immigration discourse that resonated among the public; besides, the right did not yet have an 'enemy of the Fatherland' who was big enough to be able to demand a more radical response than the one provided by the PP. Consequently, the new party barely managed to gain votes in the successive elections. The creation of such an enemy would eventually take place in the autumn of 2017 upon the outbreak of the Catalan crisis, and due to what was pictured as a weak position of Mariano Rajoy during the following months. The opportunity for the anti-immigration discourse, which VOX added to its strategy during 2018, came up during a regional election. In December of the same year, the Andalusian elections provided the opportunity for VOX to test its refocus. The 11% they got suggested that the deepening of the nationalist discourse had been positively received in one of the regions that benefit the most, economically, from the redistributive mechanisms maintained by the central State, and where the purely Spanish identity has deeper roots. And VOX did particularly well in municipalities with a great presence of African-origin immigration. But this was not in the neighbourhoods where migrants actually live, and here we have an important point: the party succeeded

in old strongholds of the PP (Sánchez, 2018), usually middle-class (Llaneras, 2018). That is to say: immigration was the driver of a vote that was more conservative-reactionary than populist in nature.

In any case, VOX validated its position in the block of the right. They did it as the third party in the block, but with enough strength as to be key in any type of alliance that could offer an alternative to the left – and they even stood as strong candidates to obtain the second position in terms of seats and votes within the block. This was how Spain was left out of the exclusive list of European countries without a far-right party in their Parliament, and thus triggered the same dilemma the liberal-conservatives have faced in the whole continent.

### **VOX and the dilemma of the right**

The moderate parties have followed two typical strategies in order to stop the ascent of the far-right in Europe. The **cordon sanitaire** implies the exclusion of this type of political groups from any government agreement. Those who suggest and apply the ‘cordon’ base themselves on two parallel assumptions. The argument of principles, very rarely disputed, claims that the far-right cannot be allowed to have any influence on the decision-making process. Its strategic dimension is, however, more challenged. A cordon sanitaire has two possible effects on the party that is left out. It could be (and this is the argument of those who support it) that the inability to come to power and to implement their programme eventually destroys them since this fosters the perception by their followers that their vote was useless. However, the opposite reasoning is also valid on paper: if a movement born at one of the ends of the spectrum as an alternative to the existing political offer is actively marginalised from the orthodox dynamics, such movement could seize the opportunity to justify their own existence through an anti-establishment discourse, making the positions of all the moderate parties look identical. Those who suggest **integration** instead of a cordon sanitaire argue that the exposure to

decision-making and the need to share responsibility of government will reduce the ability of the far-right to resort to the populist strategy. This view somehow assumes that the new nationalist movements are here to stay and that the aim should be to moderate and contain their impact as much as possible.

Typically, the liberal-conservative and Christian Democratic parties are the first ones to decide between both strategies. However, the centre-left has a veto power whenever a government agreement requires their intervention: if social democracy rejects an agreement towards the centre, they will force the liberal-conservatives to choose between the far-end and the void (or an eventual re-run of the elections). Therefore, we are not talking about a sleeping partner who simply accepts the decision of the pivotal player (the centre-right). In fact, it is the competition structure already established between left and right itself that usually favours one inclusion or the other in the logic of government agreements. The same goes for the campaign logics and the positioning in the axes.

In Spain, the rationale of blocks which started to consolidate during the motion of no-confidence of May 2018 hinders the concentration strategy. To this must be added VOX's nature itself, an ideological demarcation from the PP which, as can be seen in the following table, takes votes both from the latter and (to a lesser extent) from Cs. It would prove potentially costly for any of the two parties to openly establish a 'cordon sanitaire' against the far-right.

On the other hand, the renewed leadership of the progressive left by the PSOE and VOX's apparent inability to win over a significant number of socialist voters (the old working class) removes incentives to seek messages of a nationalist or a protectionist nature, promoting instead the consolidation of two separate and distinct blocks – unlike the above mentioned examples of national-populist right in places such as France.

All these elements, which were visible in the negotiating process

of the Andalusian government (which ended up with an agreement PP-Cs where VOX was needed to reach a majority), served to build the road towards the elections of 28th April 2019.

### **VOX as an inescapable reality on the way to the elections**

The block majority (left+nationalism) that helped the PSOE succeed in the motion of no-confidence was then left to govern. The very same half plus one of the Congress was needed in order to pass any new law or reform, including the General State Budget, key instrument of democratic governance. The key question was, therefore, whether it was possible to keep the issue of national sovereignty on the second level. It was not: the negotiations between the PSOE and the Catalan pro-independence movement broke down when this specific point came into question and it became evident that none of the two sides was willing to give in sufficiently in order not to lose the support of a substantial part of their voters.

This failed process of negotiation proved that, in spite of the consolidation of the blocks, the rule according to which the heterogeneity in the preferences on territorial organisation is greater in the left+peripheral nationalism block than in the right+centralist nationalism block was still valid. VOX played a key role in this dynamic because they influenced the strategy of each of the parties when the elections were almost a reality.

The breakdown in negotiations between the PSOE and the pro-independence movement coincided with the call for a mass mobilisation of the centre-right block, precisely with the aim to protest against what their leaders regarded as Pedro Sánchez giving up on the red line of national sovereignty. With this, Albert Rivera probably expected to regain centrality in the ‘Jacobin’ space, in an attempt to dissociate the axis of territorial debate from the ideological one. However, even if some voices in the most centralist area of social democracy were critical of and cautioned against what they considered to be an excessive concession of the government

to the pro-independence demands, the breakdown in negotiations and, especially, VOX's presence in the scheduled mobilisation excluded any possibility of breaking the blocks dynamic. That is to say: the far-right acted as a galvaniser of the progressive position in spite of the heterogeneity regarding the national sovereignty issue.

The aforesaid demonstration took place on Sunday the 10th of February. This event provided the first meaningful picture of the leaders of PP, VOX and Cs. Albert Rivera, Santiago Abascal and the new PP president, Pablo Casado, appeared together in the so-called 'Colón picture', in reference to the square where the demonstration ended. This irrevocably laid the foundations for the split of Ciudadanos and PSOE, thus disabling any chance of agreement towards the centre and reducing the possibilities of 'red' voters fleeing to 'orange'.

Strategically, the PSOE seized the moment to highlight the image of the right as a single block, reactivating the logic that dominated the motion of no-confidence. VOX's presence made it easier for them, since they could now use the likely arrival to the Congress of a far-right party as a reference framework to define the opponent in the eyes of the voters. The focus of the social democratic discourse then shifted to the need to defeat such opponent, which was implicitly addressing an "either with us, or with them" to the social-liberal moderate voter. All this happened just before the general elections were called, when all eyes were on the first far-right party to have a specific weight in the, until then, Spanish exception.

#### **4. The key drivers of the campaign**

One week after the breakdown in the negotiations on the budget, Pedro Sánchez called for general elections for the 28th April. At that time, VOX was at its peak of media attention and strength in

the polls, reaching close to the 12% in the average of polls. They also achieved that using the competition logic inside their block. The gathering of the PP, Ciudadanos and VOX in the same space, which implied the possibility of agreements outside the election period, promoted a campaign in the opposite direction: that of the fight for the other half of the votes. In this process, the selection and predominance of certain topics over others was essential, since they could introduce nuances of (de)mobilisation for the abstainers or decision for the undecided. All this happened within an institutional framework that favoured even further the intra-block concentration, awarding a bigger prize to whoever would get the first place at each of the two sides of the spectrum. Thus, in spite of the disproportionate coverage in the media and in bar and family talks, ideology, mobilisation and competition rules would coordinate in order to limit VOX's window of opportunity.

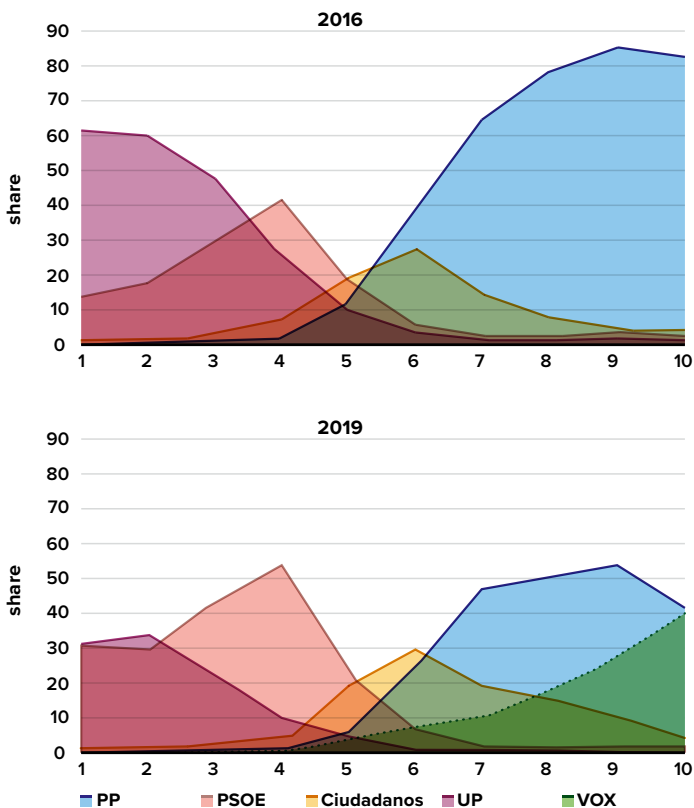
### **The ideological division**

A few days after the call for general elections, the image of Madrid's demonstration would have a political correlate: from the very beginning, Albert Rivera announced his intention not to reach any agreement with Pedro Sánchez. This 'red line' implied a bet for the leadership of the centre-right block.

The blocks dynamic was thus consolidated, focusing competition on just one axis. Diagonal moves and cross-cutting projects became more unlikely. Instead, Cs, VOX and Podemos stayed in their respective ideological spaces. The following chart shows the percentage of penetration in each segment of the left-right axis in 2016 and 2019.

## Ideological vote in Spain, 2016-2019

Vote share for each ideological position from 1 (far left) to 10 (far Right)



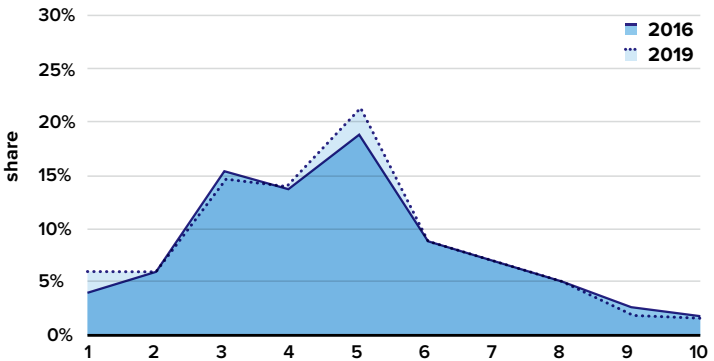
Source: CIS, post-election 2016 barometer and pre-election 2019 barometer



The two blocks can be clearly distinguished in both charts. In 2016, as already mentioned, the left was more fragmented, while now the PSOE has managed to take back control by diminishing UP. Even more striking is the change taking place on the right: Cs is barely losing balance in the virtual centre of the distribution (5) but is actually giving in on the centre-left (4). It is worth mentioning that, as seen in the chart, the Spanish median voter has been – and still is – placed between 4 and 5. That is to say: the transfer from ‘orange’ to ‘red’ is more significant than it would first seem when it comes to supporting polarisation. In exchange, Cs are adding at their right more than they are losing at their left: in sections 6-7-8, which are the traditional centre of gravity of the PP. The latter, in turn, is completely losing its hegemony while VOX is bursting in with a clearly extreme pattern: their significant percentages start at 8 and become greater than ever at 10.

### The ideological distribution in Spain, 2016-2019

Percentage of vote + sympathy in each ideological band of 1 (far left) to 10 (far right)

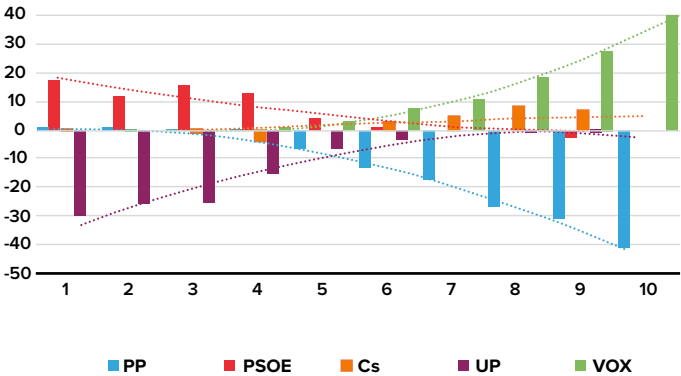


Source: CIS, post-election 2016 barometer and pre-election 2019 barometer

All these variations are even more noticeable in the following chart, which divides the gains and losses of each of the five big parties at every point of the ideological spectrum.

### The evolution of ideological vote in Spain, 2016-2019

Change in vote share for each ideological position from 1 (far left) to 10 (far right)



Source: CIS, post-election 2016 barometer and pre-election 2019 barometer.

However, it is important to keep the ideological distribution of the entire population as a reference, as well as its stability over time: barely one in ten potential voters is located in the right third (8-9-10). Therefore, in order to grow, VOX needed a greater presence in the standard conservative stances, where Cs gained presence (and, in the case of the centre-right represented in section 6, appeared as the strongest party).

This right-wing race of three has a double impact. On the one hand, it sets three runners to fight for a space that amounts to around 42%-46% of the vote (margins of the PP and Cs in the three last general elections). This 'broad spectrum' can serve to gather more votes since it offers more alternatives, but it is also likely to pay a cost in the ratio of seats finally obtained by the block. On the other hand, this race upholds the central argument of PSOE's campaign: the need to 'stop the right' (that can now also be and is defined as 'extreme' in the context of the electoral propaganda). It also makes it easier to mobilise the strategic voting towards the left, at the very least to the extent of matching it up with the renewed capacity of the block of the right.

### **Socio-economic categories and mobilisation against the right**

The blanket opposition PSOE-VOX has a structural foundation that aligns with the strategic guidelines (and one could also say it somehow predetermines the latter): during all the cycle of change of the Spanish progressive vote, the PSOE managed to keep a significant portion of the vote of the most popular segments for itself. Workers (whether skilled or unskilled) and unpaid domestic workers stayed closer to social democracy in Spain than they did in other countries, where especially the former diverted to abstention (Galindo, 2019). The shift of the centre-left towards the new middle-classes that has led to a reduction of their voter base all over Europe (Hanretty, 2015) did not happen in Spain. It was rather the opposite: even at times of greater electoral weakness, Spanish socialism kept a large base of working class voters.

This reserve of votes did not only help PSOE go through the times of greater difficulty, enabling them to compete with Podemos, which, in the meantime, was getting the new younger voters belonging to the services sector. During the final stretch ahead of the elections, this was also a key element of the walls retaining the rise of the far-right: VOX, as seen above, is closer to the reactionary ultra-traditionalism than to the new populisms of the Le Pen/Salvini kind. This is actually

evidenced by them having recently joined the ECR group (European Conservatives and Reformists) in the European Parliament, together with reactionary Catholic parties from Eastern Europe such as the Polish PiS. This affects their capacity to reach voters that are typically demobilised or leftish. It does not directly restrict them to a competition for the segments traditionally supporting the conservative right, but it does make them start out at a disadvantage in their fight for the working-class vote.

The following table summarises the approximate distribution of Spanish voters according to occupation. Each percentage must be read out of the total and not only out of those in each row or column. Thus, one can appreciate that 10% of the grouping vote+liking according to the pre-election barometer of the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (2019) corresponds to retired people that give their support to PSOE. But 5% of them are also unemployed and the workers (skilled or unskilled) account for the same portion. We are talking about around 1.2-1.3 million voters under each of these headings. Podemos and Ciudadanos account for just over half of these figures, while VOX or the PP barely reach a fifth of them. Even if a majority of the voters of the far-right belong to socio-demographic categories similar to socialism, their volumes are markedly lower. The room for manoeuvre to get atypical votes onto the streets is not as big as in other countries where the abandonment of the traditional centre-left by these segments is higher.

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## The Weight of each socio-economic group

Percentage represents the value over all potential voters (march 2019)

	PP	PSOE	Cs	UP	VOX
Directors & professionals	0,43%	1,00%	1,41%	0,84%	0,40%
Technicians	0,61%	3,21%	2,27%	2,19%	0,37%
Small owners	0,34%	0,74%	0,84%	0,60%	0,37%
Clerks & service workers	0,17%	1,98%	1,20%	0,88%	0,10%
Qualified manual workers	0,40%	2,11%	1,10%	1,34%	0,67%
Non-qualified manual workers	0,47%	3,35%	1,74%	1,74%	0,40%
retired	5,12%	10,50%	2,99%	2,42%	0,71%
Unemployed and seeking	0,80%	5,02%	1,67%	1,94%	0,94%
Students	0,44%	1,04%	0,87%	1,44%	0,27%
Non-paid domestic work	1,01%	2,21%	0,77%	0,20%	0,17%

Source: CIS pre-election survey 2019

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That is to say: VOX is competing in the opponent's field with ideological and discursive tools that do not exactly match with what they would need in order to take away significant space from PSOE, who never stopped dominating such space. Again, they confine themselves to the traditional space of the right. The way in which the agenda of topics to be discussed during the campaign was set also contributed to this.

In spite of the prevalence of a single ideological axis, during the campaign, each of the parties had certain interests regarding the content of the headlines. At this point, there were differences regarding preferences within each block: on the left, for example, Unidos Podemos tried to focus the debate on the corruption and

the misuse of State media for the political fight. They did that on the basis of a series of disclosures in the framework of a judicial inquiry for alleged political espionage under Mariano Rajoy's government. However, the PSOE, usually associated with the establishment in this type of rhetoric, tried to shift the focus towards social and economic issues, emphasising the need to stop the opposite block since, as depicted by the centre-left, they posed a threat to the rights that had been acquired in every field.

On the right, VOX was the only party with an incentive to pick up the gauntlet thrown down by PSOE. In the case of the PP, placing emphasis on differentiated policies could chase away voters with a very favourable bias to the status quo (Llaneras, 2019).

It was also not possible for the party of Pablo Casado to put the territorial issue at the heart of their discourse, since Ciudadanos had more to gain in that field. Not having held any government position during the Catalan challenge, Ciudadanos were totally free of allegations of weakness vis-à-vis the pro-independence movement and they had a discourse that was close to the views of the Spanish median voter (defence of national sovereignty and the current constitutional system). Against this backdrop, Albert Rivera was hoping that the combination of this position with a discourse that was critical of PSOE and PP would allow him to widen the margins of his base by reducing losses on the left and expanding gains on the right.

However, VOX could apparently afford to combine this same discourse (with much more centralist positions) with a confrontation in terms of social policies with the PSOE. Ciudadanos, on the contrary, did not have much to gain from a cultural polarisation dynamic: their stance in the matter has been historically closer to progressivism than conservatism. The party led by Santiago Abascal, well aware of this, allowed itself to nurture this dimension of confrontation. The fact that the campaign was partially influenced by a debate on euthanasia further to the case of a woman suffering from multiple

sclerosis who voluntarily died with the help of her husband added to all this. Some months before, PSOE and UP had defended before the Congress a Death with Dignity Law that was eventually blocked by the PP and Cs. This left the latter in a particularly complicated situation in the eyes of the progressive voter.

The predominance of the matter of rights over all the others, including the one regarding national sovereignty, ratified the PSOE in the closest position to the median voter. And, more importantly, they acted as an ultimate catalyst for the mobilisation against the right. In this sense, the holding of debates on rights during the campaign established an implicit balance between the progressive centre-left and the reactionary far-right. This dynamic could have worked as an incentive for VOX to gain support, and therefore must not be considered as a standard effective strategy to limit support for the far-right. However, in the Spanish context, it did not have such an impact due to the previously described barriers (three-sided competition within the conservative block, scarce presence of voters in the far-end, difficulty to mobilise the popular segments towards the right).

### **Learning the rules of the game**

In a way, it could be said that, in 2019, the block of the right in Spain was in a parallel situation to the one experienced by the left during the 2014-2016 cycle: there was more than one player competing for the control of the block, with almost total uncertainty among the reasonably well-informed electorate as to whom would gain it.

But, why should there be a winner for each block? Once again, the recent past of the left provides clues to understand the power of coordination: whoever manages to coordinate more votes gets the first place in the electoral race. The Spanish system grants a substantial electoral bonus to the one taking that honour, especially if their distance to the following position is big enough. It is not necessary for the voters to be perfectly aware of the arithmetic mechanics that lie behind the result – in the Spanish case, the existence of

many constituencies with low population and 3-4 seats, together with the distribution system according to the d'Hondt method that slightly rewards the candidacies that double, triple or quadruple the following ones: following a plausible rationality model, it can be assumed that it will be enough for them to observe and verify it once in order to assimilate it. While there are two or more contenders for the first place with similar performance, the incentive to coordinate the vote around one of the two options will also remain even: this is what happened with PSOE and Podemos in the general elections of 2015 and their re-run in 2016. But as soon as one of the two platforms (in this case, the PSOE) gained a certain distance from the other, the ability to coordinate votes almost became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The effect of the parliamentary majority adds to the effect of the electoral rule: as mentioned above, the half plus one of the Congress is needed both to govern and to safeguard against motions of no-confidence. Once again, the whole electorate had the chance to assimilate and embrace this logic on the occasion of the successful motion of no-confidence of Sánchez and the subsequent failed negotiations. The lessons learnt by the left-wing voter after a cycle comprising a divided double election plus success and failure of governance, reinforce the perception of the need to gather the vote in order to get the bonus of the electoral system.

However, this process has not taken place on the right. Voters can have the same elements of judgment at one side or the other of the spectrum – they probably do –, and the PP tries to promote them presenting itself as the only ‘viable alternative to Sánchez’. But the existence of a new player (VOX) and the rise of another who arrived less than half a decade ago (Cs) offer sufficient uncertainty, supported by the polls and the symmetric media attention, so as to prevent any effect of strong coordination on the right – which does occur on the left. However, this does limit VOX’s capacity to insist on the argument of the differentiated ideological vote, since the dilemma (which is always present, in any case) between reaffirming



their own identity or joining the greater cause becomes obvious for the conservative voter. This is how they paved the way for the time after the results of the general elections were known.

## 5. From April to May: the importance of coordinating also in the right

2019 electoral results in Spain			
	General Elect 28A	EP 26M	Local 26M
<b>PSOE</b>	28,7%	32,8%	29,3%
<b>PP</b>	16,7%	20,1%	22,2%
<b>Cs</b>	15,9%	12,2%	8,3%
<b>UP*</b>	14,3%	10,0%	
<b>VOX</b>	10,3%	6,2%	2,9%

Source: Ministry of Interior

The 28A results validated the social democratic strategy since the number of seats obtained by PSOE was almost doubled, while the situation of the rest of the parties was left open to analysis. While the PP got their worst result ever, Cs would have only needed 200, 000 more votes to overtake their conservative opponent. VOX, for their part, stayed a little over the 10%, but fell short of the expectations previously set by both themselves and the media. Most of their seats came from municipalities where the PP lost more votes (eldiario.es, 2019). The party of Abascal did particularly well in the southern half of the Iberian Peninsula: Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha, Murcia, as well as the Community of Madrid. In all these areas (except Madrid, where data are more diffuse) we can observe a positive correlation between the vote for VOX in each municipality and the presence of migrants, the percentage of the population with higher education and average income (eldiario.es, 2019).

These patterns, already spotted in the previous regional elections

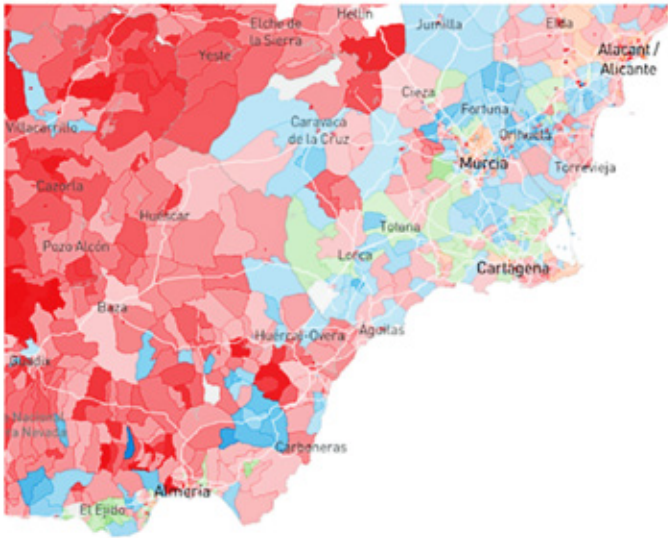
to the Andalusian Parliament, reaffirm the efficiency of socio-demographic boundaries. Besides that, they delimit the space of electoral access for VOX to regions where conservatism has traditionally had a strong presence, but not based on the 'aged vote', as is the case in the northern part of the Peninsula. The south Mediterranean coast, with a significant relative differential as regards the presence of migrants from the north of Africa, is a paradigmatic case.

VOX did not manage to reduce the losses to less than a third anywhere, and in the worst cases they were well over the half. This was particularly true for regions where the party was already weak in the general elections. This trend supports the coordination hypothesis: once the far-right voter realises that the sum of VOX's votes is not sufficient to overcome the barriers of electoral rule and parliamentary coalitions, the strongest alternative within the block (the PP, in this case) benefits from a likely 'round trip' of the voters.

In the meantime, the PSOE managed to widen its margin of vote, further re-ducing the space remaining for Podemos. Ciudadanos, for their part, loses balance in their bet to dominate the centre-left. In other words: preliminarily, it seems that coordination takes place at both sides of the spectrum. For the moment, it revolves around the conservative and social democratic historic parties. Both of them probably leverage their organisational capacity and their territorial presence, unmatched by any of the new parties. But we must also recognise the fact that, after several ups and downs, they have eventually returned close to the positions they always held inside the left-right axis: in the respective centre of each of the two blocks. Therefore, we are probably witnessing a reconversion of the two-party system prior to 2014 into a 'neo-bipartite system' based on the polarisation of blocks, where social democracy dominates one of them while the far-right is unable to outperform the traditional right in the other.

## El voto a Vox en el litoral sudeste mediterráneo: entre Alicante y Almería Partido más votado en cada sección censal:

PSOE, PP, Cs, VOX.



Fuente: Borja Andrino, Kiko Llaneras, Daniele Grasso, Elena G. Sevillano.

"El mapa del voto en toda España, calle a calle". EL PAIS, 3 de mayo de 2019

However, VOX was unable to consolidate these gains. Less than a month later, on the 26th May, they remained considerably below their results of April. Their poor outcome in the local elections can be easily explained by their lack of both organisational and logistical local structures. However, their decline in the European elections as compared to the earlier general elections, as well as their losses in the Autonomous Communities that have been previously defined as strongholds, are more difficult to justify by mere issues of party growth.

## 6. Conclusions

The coincidence of a strong social democracy and a weak – but present– far-right is rather rare in the political party systems of today's Europe. This is why the Spanish general elections of 2019 are of particular interest: their analysis can probably give some clues that will help us discern under which conditions the centre-left can lead the progressive block.

### VOX's vote share losses between general and regional elections in 2019

	General 28A	Regional 26M	Diff
<b>Aragón</b>	12.2%	6.1%	-50.0%
<b>Asturias</b>	11.5%	6.0%	-47.8%
<b>Baleares</b>	11.3%	8.1%	-28.3%
<b>Canarias</b>	6.6%	2.5%	-62.1%
<b>Cantabria</b>	11.2%	5.1%	-54.5%
<b>Castilla La-Mancha</b>	15.3%	7.0%	-54.2%
<b>Castilla y León</b>	12.3%	5.5%	-55.3%
<b>Extremadura</b>	10.8%	4.7%	-56.5%
<b>La Rioja</b>	9.0%	3.9%	-56.7%
<b>Madrid</b>	13.9%	8.9%	-36.0%
<b>Murcia</b>	18.6%	9.5%	-48.9%
<b>Navarra</b>	4.8%	1.3%	-72.9%

Source: Ministry of Interior

Starting from their foundations, and in spite of the ups and downs during the change of cycle, the PSOE has managed to maintain a considerable inter-class alliance with access to the popular vote. This contributed in facilitating a shift of the new right from their own space, a potential populist platform, towards one end of the old right. The fact that VOX was born from the core of this old right was, by all means, important to determine this positioning. As was, probably more than anything else, the division of the Spanish political debate in two more or less monolithic blocks, without the question of the national legal order and the Catalan secessionist challenge (probably the aspect with a higher potential of breaking the left-right axis) coming to disturb the existing balance.

The coordination of the strategic voting against a unified right-wing alternative without losing the centre-left was possible thanks to this competition scheme. During the election campaign, the social democratic argument was essentially based on equating all 'the rights' (including the extreme one) with just 'the Right'. From there, the call for strategic voting and coordination to prevent the alternative became a much stronger argument for the progressive voter. The gradual organisational weakening of Podemos and the aforesaid shift to the right of Ciudadanos facilitated the gathering under a 'red' umbrella of social-liberals and voters of the new left that were looking for alternatives when the need for coordination was not yet so obvious, or rather, when the possibility to coordinate the vote in a different space still seemed feasible. During the campaign, the predominance of the competition axis where social democracy is more competitive – social rights, in this case– also helped. The fact that VOX also considered strategically convenient to counteract the progressive discourse in that area facilitated even further the coordinated mobilisation of the centre-left. VOX, for their part, suffered the consequences of their marginal location in the block, as well as of the existence of a triple competition within the same.

Finally, the strategic use of the rules of the game acted as an inescapable institutional framework for the resulting balance: in Spain, the slight but existing seat bonus granted by the electoral system to the most voted party and the influence of absolute majorities on the establishment and removal of government programmes encourages the voter to ultimately prioritise strategic voting over purely ideological voting.

It remains to be seen to what extent these specific lessons can be applied to other contexts without their validity being seriously affected by the substantial difference in backdrop. However, what the Spanish case certainly proves is that the far-right can be contained even if it is inserted in a polarisation rationale and is welcomed by the traditional right. And, above all, it shows that this can be done without the need to replace the old left-right axis with an opposition between (economic and social) liberalism and protectionist national-populism. In other words: even if there are new and necessary allies in the pluralist cause, the role of social democracy as a guarantor of progressivism is still in force in today's Europe.



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The last European Elections saw PSOE – the Spanish Socialist Workers Party – win and become the largest among the progressive delegations in the S&D Group in the European Parliament. And this was not just a victory in numbers. Indeed, comrades from across the continent have been looking at Spain as a place where new politics is taking its course. To that end, the initiative “To inspire Europe: insights from the success story of social democracy in Spain” is to respond to that need for a greater understanding on the European level. It is to offer inspiration, as well as pointing out some of the most instructive lessons that can be taken away.

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