



# Six months and two parliamentary elections in Spain: December, 2015 and June, 2016. The end of the two-party system?



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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the two recent parliamentary elections in Spain, held in December 2015 and June 2016. It also analyzes how the economic crisis, austerity policies and corruption have affected the results of both of these electoral processes. The economic situation has put the traditional Spanish two-party system at risk with the emergence of two new parties, Podemos and Ciudadanos.

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## 1. Introduction

On 26th June (26-J) 2016, Spain was faced with a political situation unseen during the nation's time as a representative democracy: A general legislation election was held just six months after the previous December 20th, 2015 (20-D) elections to the Spanish Parliament. Elections were necessitated by the inability of the political parties with seats in the 20-D parliament to form a government. Since 1982, the two biggest parties in Spain, the People's Party (Partido Popular (PP)) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)) had alternated with each other in government, sometimes with an absolute majority, and on other occasions with the government arriving at agreements with nationalist parties. This state of affairs was shattered by the emergence of two new parties onto the Spanish political stage: *Podemos* (We Can) which, for the ECFR (European Council on Foreign Relations) (2016) is a left-wing European insurgent party, and the liberally-minded *Ciudadanos* (Citizens-Party of the Citizenry), which began as a Catalanian regional party but made the leap to national politics in 2014.

This objective of the present paper is to provide an overview of the two most recent parliamentary elections in Spain and to analyze the context that has put the traditional Spanish two-party system at risk.

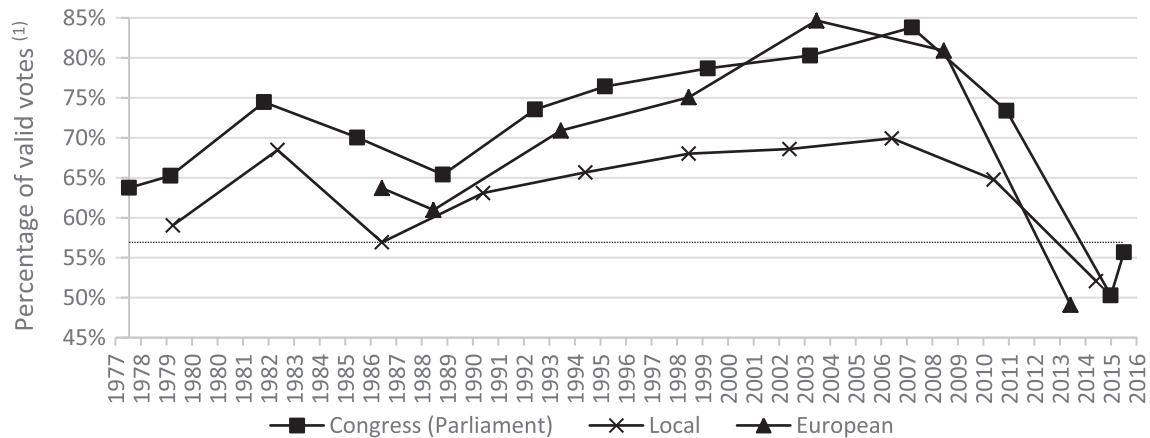
## 2. International context

In Spain, we see unfolding a pattern of electoral volatility and transformation present among the European countries (namely Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain) that have applied to the European Union for some kind of economic aid or “bailout” during the crisis. First, a change of government, with the party that had been in opposition at the beginning of the crisis coming out on top: in 2009, Greece moved from a New Democracy government to being governed by PASOK (Kovras, 2010). In Ireland, Fianna Fáil, the coalition in power since 2007, lost three-quarters of its seats in 2011, while the Greens and the Progressive Democrats lost all of theirs, and Fine Gael, which up until then had been the main opposition party, won the elections (Courtney and Gallagher, 2012). In Portugal in 2009, the Socialist Party lost its absolute majority (Espírito Santo, 2010), but managed to form a government until 2011, which was the year when it had to apply for an EU bailout. New elections were called, which were won by the conservative-leaning Social Democratic Party.

During a second phase, if the economic crisis did not abate, or if there were high social costs in the reconstituted budgets, there were new changes, with new political parties, often of the popular, or “people's” type, taking front stage. These were defined as European insurgent parties (ECFR, 2016). Thus, in Greece, the January 2015 elections saw the insurgent Siryza party come to power, with the previous two main parties in the system, PASOK and New Democracy, gaining an overall percentage of only 32.4% (Sánchez-Vallejo, 2015). In Portugal, in 2015, despite coming out top in the elections, the governing right-wing party was ousted by the Socialist Party thanks to the votes of the Left Bloc insurgent party (Martín, 2015). The second phase was not as extreme in Ireland,

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<sup>(1)</sup> Total votes given to the two parties with the highest numbers of votes in each of the elections.

Fig. 1. Evolution of the two-party system in Spanish elections (1977–2016).

possibly due to an economic recovery, although it should be noted that Sinn Fein, the insurgent party in the Irish system, obtained a significant increase in votes of almost 10%.

### 3. Spain's two election campaigns

The above-described trends were also observed in Spain. First, in the 2011 elections, with the country on the brink of an EU bailout, the People's Party, the main opposition party up to then, replaced the Socialist Party in government, with an absolute majority (Chari, 2013).

Four years later, in the run up to the 20th December elections, the economic crisis continued to be a determining factor. According to the December 2015 Center for Sociological Research (CIS)<sup>1</sup> barometer, unemployment was the main problem<sup>2</sup> in Spain according to 79.8% of Spanish people, while "economic issues" were in third place with 24.4%. In the month before the 26th June 2016 elections the percentages for these two problems had fallen slightly (75.3% and 23.6% respectively). In second place to unemployment was corruption, which has had a role in both election campaigns, standing at almost 39% in December 2015 and rising to 46.7% in May 2016. And in fourth place, the political system itself and the political parties it is made up of, with almost 15% of responses, rising to 21.3% in May 2016. In other words, over 20% of Spanish people considered that politics was part of the problem and not the solution.

Concern for the economy, corruption and dissatisfaction with the political class created the hotbed that spawned the new parties, Podemos and Ciudadanos, and the danger that they represented to the traditional Spanish PP-PSOE two-party system (see Fig. 1). However, despite it being apparent in the December 2015 elections that this two-party scenario had been torn apart, in the June 2016 elections the system bounced back, with the vote captured by two main parties rising from 50.28% to 55.70%.

Contrary to what might be anticipated, the debate about Catalonia breaking away from Spain does not seem to have had any significant influence in either of the campaigns. In fact, only 3.4% of the population considered nationalism to be the main issue in

Spanish society in December 2015, and this fell dramatically to 0.5% in May 2016. Lastly, just a few days before the 26th June elections in Spain, on 23rd June 2016 the United Kingdom held a referendum on whether to leave or stay in the European Union. The uncertainty that arose from the outcome of the referendum, which resulted in the biggest fall in the history of the Spanish stock market, the IBEX35 (12.3% on 24th June) may have had some influence on the vote being more conservative.

Considering the above, from the economic crisis to the resurgence of new political parties, all these factors have increased the electorate's volatility and affected the reliability of pre-election polls to gauge voting intention.

Two stages of voting intention have been detected by the CIS since the beginning of the previous legislature. The first, from December 2011 to April 2014, was one of clear wear and tear on the incumbent party (PP) because of the cutbacks it had made, on the one hand and, on the other, the fact that, before it got into power, it had denied that it would make any. The PP fell from an estimated 44.63% of votes to 31.9%, whilst the main opposition party (PSOE) was stuck firm at around 26–28%; at the same time, there was an increase in other parties already in parliament, both on the left-wing communist side (*Izquierda Unida* (IU) – United Left), which rose to 11.5%, and among the liberal party (*Unión, Progreso y Democracia* (UPD) – Union, Progress and Democracy), which managed 9.2%. There was a big shake up in the May 2014 European elections with the emergence of Podemos (Navarro, 2015).

According to the last barometer before the 20th December elections, in November 2015, estimated votes (as a percentage of valid votes) had fallen dramatically for the two main parties - 28.6% for PP and 20.8% for PSOE - while the new parties stood at 19.0% for Ciudadanos and 9.1% for Podemos. The results of the December 2015 elections showed that the polls had underestimated the number of people who would vote for PP and Podemos, while hugely overestimating the vote for Ciudadanos.

After negotiations to form a government had broken down, on 3rd May the Spanish King, in his role as head of State, signed the Decree for new elections to be held on 26th June. The last official voting intention polls before these elections were published by the CIS in May 2016, showing that, whereas PP maintained a similar percentage to the previous elections, 29.2%, PSOE had fallen to 21.2%; Ciudadanos still had 14.6%, whereas the Podemos-led left-wing alliance which, unlike for 20th December, now also included IU, had risen to 25.6%.

Once again, the results for the 26th June elections significantly

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/EN/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> CIS barometer percentages such as 79.8% are obtained by adding up the number of citizens who consider that a problem is the most important in Spain, the second most important, or the third most important.

**Table 1**  
Results of the last three parliamentary elections in Spain.

	Jun 2016		Dec 2015		Nov 2011	
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
PP	7,906,185	33.03%	7,236,965	28.71%	10,866,566	44.63%
PSOE	5,424,709	22.66%	5,545,315	22.00%	7,003,511	28.76%
Podemos <sup>a</sup>	5,049,734	21.10%	6,139,494	24.35%	2,028,094	8.33%
Ciudadanos	3,123,769	13.05%	3,514,528	13.94%		
ERC-CATSÍ	629,294	2.63%	601,782	2.39%	256,985	1.06%
CDC <sup>b</sup>	481,839	2.01%	567,253	2.25%	1,015,691	4.17%
EAJ-PNV	286,215	1.20%	302,316	1.20%	324,317	1.33%
EH Bildu <sup>c</sup>	184,092	0.77%	219,125	0.87%	334,498	1.37%
CCa-PNC	78,080	0.33%	81,917	0.32%	143,881	0.59%
Others	592,757	2.48%	814,486	3.23%	2,041,882	8.39%
Spoiled or blank votes	178,521	0.75%	188,132	0.75%	333,461	1.37%
Valid votes	23,935,195		25,211,313		24,348,886	
Invalid votes	225,888	0.93%	227,219	0.89%	317,555	1.29%
Total	24,161,083		25,438,532		24,666,441	
Abstention	10,435,955	30.16%	11,073,316	30.33%	11,113,050	31.06%
Turn out <sup>d</sup>		69.84%		69.67%		68.94%

<sup>a</sup> In 2016, "Podemos" includes Podemos – Izquierda Unida – Equo (45 seats), En Comú Podem (12), Podemos – Compromís – Esquerra Unida del País Valencià (9), and Podemos – En Marea – Anova – Esquerra Unida (5). In 2015, it includes Podemos (42), En Comú Podem (12), En Marea – Podemos – Anova – Esquerra Unida (6) and Compromís – Podemos – És el moment (9). Although they did not all run on the same ticket in 2015, for comparison's sake, data for Unidad Popular (Popular Unity) (Izquierda Unida and Unidad Popular en Común) (2). In 2011, parties included are Izquierda Unida – Los Verdes (the Greens) – La Izquierda Plural (11), Equo (0), and Bloc–Iniciativa – Verdes – Equo – Coalició Compromís (1).

<sup>b</sup> In 2015, CDC (Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya – Democratic Convergence of Catalonia) includes data for Democràcia i Llibertat – Convergència – Demòcrates – Reagrupament, and in 2011, also for Convergència i Unió.

<sup>c</sup> In 2011, EH Bildu includes data for Amairu.

<sup>d</sup> In the June 2016 elections, 1,277,449 fewer ballots were cast.

differed from the voting intention polls, which underestimated the winning party, with PP winning over 33% of the votes, and gave a greater voting intention to the party alliance led by Podemos, which only received 21.10%. The errors in both pre-election polls produced a great deal of social dissatisfaction with surveys of this type.

Another new aspect of these two electoral processes is the rise in the importance of the role played by television. The strong presence of the leaders of the emerging parties on political discussion shows forced the leaders of the traditional parties to appear more on TV. This also resulted in a greater number of official debates during the two campaigns, in a democracy, like that in Spain, where these are not frequent. In fact, in 11 parliamentary elections in Spain to 20th December, there had only been three televised debates between the candidates for Prime Minister (President of the Government in Spanish).

#### 4. 20th December, 2015 and 26th June, 2016 election results

The following table shows the results of the two last elections on 20th December 2015 and 26th June 2016 compared to the last parliamentary election in which a government was formed, in November 2011 (See Table 1).

The PP received the most votes in both the 2015 and the 2016 elections, although a clear decline from their strength in 2011 is evident—the Party lost 63 seats between 2011 and 2015, and only recovered 14 of these in the 2016 election. This victory by a greater margin in June 2016 could have been influenced by the effect described by Blais and Bodet (2006), according to which people vote for the party that can defeat the most disliked option, in this case, Podemos; PP repeatedly used the strategy of the “useful vote” to drum up fear of the “anti-system” party during the year of the elections (ABC, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> If we consider all the parties that were on the same ticket as Podemos in these last elections of 2016.

Meanwhile, PSOE's freefall in both seats and votes continued, with the loss of 25 seats and over one and a half million votes since 2011, and the worst results in its history, 110 seats.

Podemos, which had surprised by winning 71 seats<sup>3</sup> the first time it took part in the Spanish elections in 2015, won a similar number of seats running with IU, but between them the two parties lost half a million votes on their joint ticket for the 2016 election, compared to 2015.

With respect to participation, it should be stated that despite remaining stable in the last three elections, in the 26th June election, voting was down by 1,277,449 votes.

#### 5. Pacts to form a government

In the 12 general elections during the current Spanish period of democracy, PSOE has only won an absolute majority on two occasions, and PP on another two. On the other 8 occasions the party that received the most votes has governed with the support of the Basque, Catalanian and, to a lesser extent, Canary Island nationalist parties.

After the 20th December 2015 election, when the most voted party (PP) turned down the opportunity to form a government, the second most-voted party, PSOE, managed to come to an agreement with Ciudadanos (together the two parties had won 130 seats out of the lower house's total of 350), despite not having any support from any other of the parties in parliament, and this is what led to the 2016 elections. Once again the results did not give any of the parliamentary parties a large enough majority to govern, which means that a third election cannot be ruled out, as was the case of Greece in 1989–1990 (Dimitras, 1990). This situation could confirm the traditional Downs hypothesis, repeated in Blais et al. (2006), to the effect that, in a highly fragmented party system, voters do not think about the forming of a government when they vote.

#### 6. Conclusions

The economic crisis in Spain and the austerity policies that have

been applied during this period of time have marked the results of the latest electoral processes. The traditional two-party system has given way to a multi-party system, but it is still early days to know whether we have reached a situation of stable equilibrium, or whether we are still in a transitional phase.

The volatility of electoral support makes it impossible to predict the future or even whether the new political parties will survive, not to mention some of those that are more traditional, such as PSOE. Support for PSOE, the party that has most been in government during the country's democratic era, has fallen from almost 44% at the beginning of the crisis in 2008, to 22.66% in 2016. This fear of not surviving in a more complex *status quo* makes it enormously difficult for a country to be governed where it has not been possible for a government to be formed during the 11 months since the elections of 20th December.

We must also add into the mix the main party that has always given support to the traditional parties, PP and PSOE, when they have formed a government without an absolute majority is the principal Catalanian nationalist party, which is demanding a referendum on the independence of Catalonia in return for its support. At the current time, of the four big national parties, only Podemos supports the need for a referendum.

To summarize, the results of the two parliamentary elections are throwing up more questions than answers. Finally, on October 30, 2016, the PP candidate, Mariano Rajoy, succeeded in being voted in as Prime Minister with support from Ciudadanos and the abstention of the PSOE. This abstention caused an internal split in the PSOE and ultimately led to the resignation of the party's Secretary

General, who was opposed to abstaining.

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