

OF POLLS, (DE)MOBILISATION AND RESULTS OF THE 26-J ELECTIONS

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The conservative Popular Party (PP) has won the Spanish elections again with almost 8 million votes (32.7%) and 137 seats in Parliament, adding 670,000 votes and 14 seats since the previous election in December 2015. The PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party), Unidos Podemos (UP, meaning United We Can in Spanish, is the joint electoral list formed by Podemos and Izquierda Unida) and Ciudadanos have lost support while the abstention has risen. The scenarios to form a majority government have not changed much, although the Popular Party has improved its situation to the detriment of the left.

Abstention rates reached their highest ever level during these general elections since the return of democracy in Spain. Having counted overseas votes, the abstention rate hit 33.4%, which represents an increase of 3% (1.3 million of the electorate) since the last election. While increased abstentions have been a trend observed in all “repeated” elections, the high level of competitiveness and the expectation of change could, at the same time, form a strong encouragement to voter participation. Why, then, did turnout end up being the lowest ever? What would the abstentionists have voted? I will come back to this.

Elections on 26th of June 2016: provisional results

	Votes		%voters		Seats	
	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015
PP	7,906,185	+668,590	32.7	+4.3	137	+14
PSOE	5,424,709	-120,706	22.5	+0.7	85	-5
Unidos Podemos	5,049,734	-1,123,642	20.9	-3.2	71	=
Ciudadanos	3,123,769	-390,759	12.9	-0.9	32	-8
ERC	629,294	+27,512			9	=
CDC	481,839	-85,424			8	=
PNV	286,215	-16,101			5	-1
EH-Bildu	184,092	-31,404			2	=
CC	78,080	-3,837			1	=
PACMA	284,848	+64,479			0	

Source: Spanish Home Ministry

The PP has focused their campaign on “restraint against extremism” giving information that, in their opinion, indicates the success of their policies on economic recovery. Initially they were pursuing a “low profile” campaign, but halfway through they increased the tension and started to call for a “useful vote” warning intensively against the possibility of a left wing government led by Unidos Podemos whose effects they presented as catastrophic. The PP asked for the vote in a call for modernisation and continuity of their government action and being in favour of a coalition with the Socialist Party in order to face the radicals and “extremists”. Together with the mobilising effort of the party, the dangers of Unidos Podemos and the benefits of PP were presented in the national media, especially TVE (Spanish public television station), and private media companies aligned with the Popular Party. On the whole, PP has obtained good results with this strategy. They have not only maintained their majority but also recouped voters who in the previous elections voted for Ciudadanos or simply did not vote. The corruption cases held against some of these members, although they involved the whole party as well as many of its members, have been taken as individual cases and have been regarded as the lesser evil compared to the greater evil of a hypothetical government led by Unidos Podemos. All in all, the Popular Party improved its position with regard to the other parties and at the same time reinforced the position of Mariano Rajoy both externally and internally.

Socialist party PSOE (21.8%) placed second in the election and represents the most supported party on the left. They experienced a slight decline losing 120,000 votes and 5 seats in pParliament since the last election, although the abstention rate has brought their percentage slightly higher (+0.7%). Thus they find themselves in the position they aimed for with their campaign: the opposition leaders and damaging the influence of Unidos Podemos. Nevertheless, there has not been a swing of voters from Unidos Podemos to the Socialists, at least not significantly. Together with the attacks from PP, the criticism of the UP on the campaign the Socialists have followed has done well in weakening the coalition but at the same time has made it almost impossible for them to propose a credible alternative government, without being able to indicate who they try to form a government with. In this multi-party context, the Socialist Party did not come on the scene as a potential referent of government, which is the greatest incentive to mobilise voters. And this is the reason why it has not been the receiver of the important amount of votes UP lost. This does not prevent that some of the voters from Podemos or IU have swung to the Socialist after the disagreement the left parties had in the previous elections, and also that some of the people who voted for the Socialist in the previous elections have decided to abstain from voting this time, not being happy with the politics of the Socialist and who can not see themselves represented by Podemos. The Socialist Party voluntary restraint policy has been demonstrated both by internal divisions and external pressures. These results do not weaken nor strengthen Pedro Sánchez, indicating that this complex situation in which Spain finds itself might continue. In this context, the voices calling for a “grand coalition” or remaining in opposition, are greater than those calling for a Sánchez administration to form an alternative government to PP.

Ciudadanos received 12.9% of the votes and has lost almost 400,000 votes with respect to the last elections. The last minute useful vote the PP called for seems to be the origin of their loss. Nevertheless, the hypothesis of a loss of support due to Ciudadanos' inability to find a more concrete way to present itself as a centre party should not be ruled out. Developing their campaign against the corruption and immobilisation on the one hand, and the popular extremism of UP on the other, they present their centric position as positive for reaching agreements and a regeneration of democracy. They did not consider forming a government in which UP is present, nor support a government led by Mariano Rajoy, nor would they abstain in order to make it easier for the PP to form a government. Yet they were not able to avoid a loss of 12% of their electorate, the majority of which seem to have come (or returned) to the PP. The results are a clear call to Ciudadanos but the leadership of Albert Rivera seems uncontested. He is in favour of a grand coalition with PP and the Socialist Party, even though his support there would be superfluous with the risk of being marginalised. The results have weakened their options of calling the shots against the two bigger parties, being subject to a possible offer from PP and the Socialist Party to unite in a greater majority or being asked to abstain.

Unidos Podemos has suffered the most as a result this election. They have lost 1.2 million votes compared to what they achieved separately last December (Podemos and IU). That is the million-dollar question in these elections. Why have they lost these votes? Where have these votes gone? Internal and external factors have to be taken into account regarding this matter. Internally, the question that first arises is whether the coalition has worked for them. At the beginning, sympathisers and members in both parties strongly supported the coalition and the polls indicated a clear rise. However, unfolding the results shows a certain relationship between the greater losses of UP and the better results of IU in December.

A relationship can also be observed between the greatest regressions of UP and the best results of Podemos in December. That is, in theory, the loss of votes for UP seem to come from former voters of both Podemos and IU. Therefore, the indifference of so many former voters from Podemos and IU might have come from their political approach during the campaign and how they have managed the coalition rather than the formation of the coalition itself. Podemos, which includes people of diverse sensitivities inside, is still relatively young as a political party and less attached to their electorate, therefore, more exposed to electoral volatility than the traditional parties.

The coalition with IU adds a new element of complexity. In this election the loss of votes has been centered on the “new” parties. So, has Podemos rushed too much in order to control their internal complexity? Or has it rushed, pushed by the dynamics of the competition? Their strategy, which consisted of attracting votes from areas that traditionally have voted for other parties, was not well understood by either their electorate or people beyond that. And not only have they not been successful in attracting new voters but they have also lost 17% of what they had. It seems that the option the majority of people in that group chose was to abstain while the others might have gone (back) to PSOE.

However, external factors have also contributed to this situation. The general opinion shaped by the media is always a very important factor in elections, and it is usually more effective and much more consistent when there is consonance between the media companies. In these elections, UP has developed their campaign and pre-campaign not only in a context of hostility from the other three major parties, but also in a climate of general opinion in which the main national media companies have “under represented” UP and Pablo Iglesias’ leadership prominently highlighting the negative aspects of their political and electoral proposal. In any case, in order to highlight the negative aspects of an option, there must be some negative aspects in the first place, and UP would be wrong not to take this into account.

In an upcoming commentary, I will focus on the government agreements that must follow the results of these elections.