

Spain: The endless election sequence

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INTRODUCTION

The eighth Spanish European Parliament Election (EPE) marked the end of an electoral sequence that began one month before (on 26 April 2019), with the General Election in which the incumbent Socialist Party (PSOE) won a plurality of seats. However, at the time of the EPE, a parliamentary agreement to form a new national government had not yet been reached, since most parties were eager to postpone this decision until after the election. On top of that, during the EPE campaign, Catalan politicians who had organised an independence referendum in October 2017 and ran as candidates in the General and European Parliament (EP) elections were held in prison while being prosecuted. All these issues contributed to the nationalisation of the contents of the electoral campaign leading up to the EP elections.

Perhaps the most relevant fact regarding the 2019 EPE is that, for the first time since the first Spanish EPE in 1987, they were held on the same date as regional elections (in twelve out of seventeen regions) and as local elections in all Spanish municipalities. Electoral fatigue caused by the succession of elections in a short period of time might have deterred participation. However, in comparison to the 2014 EPE, participation increased more than 20 percentage points, suggesting a “contagion effect” driven by high levels of mobilisation in local and regional elections. During the campaign, polls forecasted close races in many municipalities and regions. Uncertainty about the results of these elections probably contributed to increasing EPE participation levels even further.

THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

The pre-campaign period was dominated by two topics. First of all, in the aftermath of the General Election, most parties and pundits focused on interpreting the consequences of those national election results, paying special attention to the coalition agreements that the winning party (PSOE) might reach to form a new cabinet. The media also paid significant attention to the failure of the mainstream right-wing party Partido Popular (PP), which lost half of its seats in parliament. This led to an unusual and substantial fragmentation of the right-wing vote that was divided between PP, the new extreme-right contender VOX (which obtained a total of twenty-four seats in parliament), and Ciudadanos (a centre-right party).

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Secondly, four weeks before the EPE the media also drew significant attention to the fact that Catalan politicians, who were either in prison or abroad to avoid prosecution, were running as EPE candidates in the *Ahora Republicas* and *Lliures per Europa* coalitions. Initially, the National Election Board banned the candidates who were abroad, such as former Catalan President Carles Puigdemont, from running. However, after an appeal by these politicians the Courts ruled that they could run. In any case, at the time of writing it is still unclear whether these politicians can effectively become members of the European Parliament (EP), since that requires them to travel to Spain, where they might be arrested.

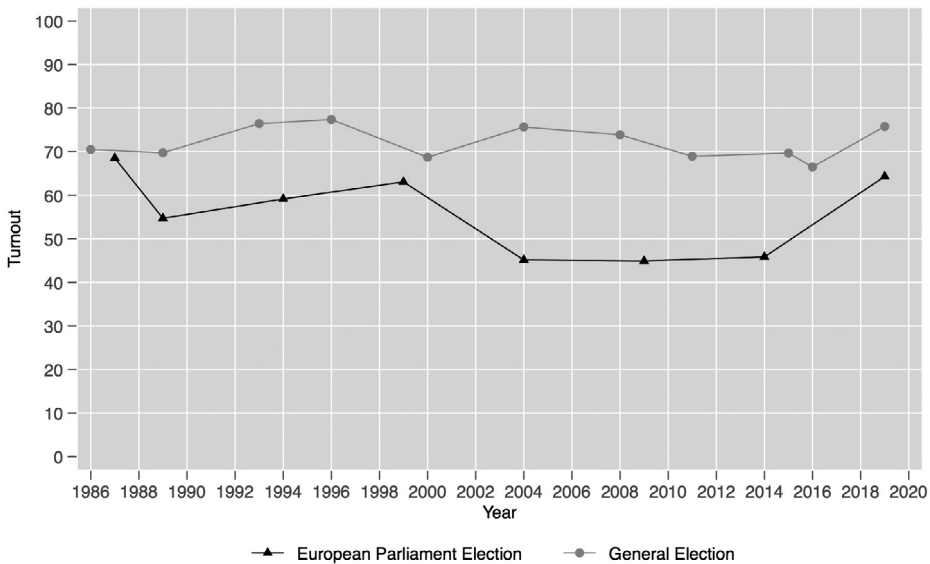
In Spain, as in many other countries, it is common for EPE campaigns to focus on national issues (Font and Torcal, 2012). The 2019 election was no exception to this trend, which was reinforced by the coincidence of these elections with regional and local elections. Uncertainty about the results in some important municipalities such as Madrid or Barcelona draw disproportionate attention to these contests, to the detriment of the EPE. For example, PP leader Pablo Casado characterised the local, regional and EP elections as a second-round of the General Election, which provided a chance for PP to improve on the bad results obtained in that election. Moreover, PP and *Ciudadanos*, which ended up in second and third place in the General Election but gained a very similar share of votes (16.7% and 15.%, respectively), saw the EP elections as an opportunity to determine which of these two parties would lead the conservative opposition against the new PSOE government.

In any event, the Spanish media also characterised the EPE as a plebiscite on the future of European integration, due to the threat posed by the potential upsurge of Eurosceptic parties. In this context, and for the first time ever, the nine EPE candidates of the main parties and coalitions (see Table 1) participated in a debate broadcasted by Spanish public television in prime time. However, while the candidates debated on topics related to the EU such as the relevance of EU immigration policies, or the challenges posed by climate change, the discussion was clearly dominated by domestic issues, most prominently the situation in Catalonia and the heightened polarisation around potential solutions to this problem.

With the exception of VOX, the election manifestos of the main parties (PSOE, PP, *Ciudadanos*, *Unidas Podemos*) share a positive outlook of the process of European integration and propose new policies that would strengthen the EU, such as greater coordination in fiscal matters and on immigration policies. In fact, while each party emphasises different issues, the policy proposals of all of them are more similar among themselves than their manifestos and agendas at the national-level would suggest (Abellán, 2019). The new extreme right-wing party VOX represents an exception to this general trend. VOX advocates the protection of national sovereignty and the return to the (pre-Maastricht) origins of the integration process. We can, therefore, characterise VOX as a soft Eurosceptic party, since it does not have a principled objection to EU membership, but clearly opposes further integration and, in some policy areas, defends the devolution of competences to national institutions (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002).

RESULTS

Figure 1 summarises the turnout rates in European and national elections in Spain for the 1986-2019 period. The 2019 EPE saw a significant spike in participation, which increased from 45.8% in 2014 to 64.3% in 2019. The coincidence of the EPE with regional and local elections undoubtedly contributed to this upward shift. However, participation was still slightly lower than that of the 1987 EPE, which was also held on the same date as local and regional elections. One must note, though, that 1987 was also the first time Spaniards voted in an EP election, which might have also contributed to high turnout rates. In any case, participation in the 2019 EPE was also lower than in the preceding national election held just one month earlier, confirming the “second order” character of these elections in Spain (Reif and Schmitt, 1980).



Source: Own elaboration on data from the Ministerio del Interior

Table 1 summarises the results of the 2019 EPE in Spain. The clear winner of this election was the socialist party (PSOE), which was able to capitalise on its recent victory in the General Election and obtained a total of twenty seats and 3.7 million more votes than in the preceding EPE. In fact, its support (32.6%) was even higher than in the last national election, where 28.7% of voters supported the socialists. Conversely, the PP lost a lot of ground in this election. In comparison to the 2014 EPE, the support of PP was 6 percentage points lower and the party lost four seats in the EP. However, the PP managed to obtain a higher share of the vote than in the preceding national election.

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Spain

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)
Socialist Party (PSOE)	S&D	7,359,617	32.6
Popular Party (PP)	EPP	4,510,193	20.0
Ciudadanos	ALDE	2,726,642	12.1
Podemos-IU *	GUE/NGL & G-EFA	2,252,378	10.0
VOX	NI	1,388,681	6.1
Republics now**	G-EFA	1,257,484	5.6
Together	NI	1,025,411	4.5
Coalition for a solidary Europe (CEUS)	ALDE	633,265	2.8
Compromise for Europe (CPE)***		296,091	1.3
PACMA		294,657	1.3
Coalition for Europe (CEU)	ALDE		
Union for Progress and Democracy (UPyD)	ALDE		
Others		859,479	3.8
Total		22,603,898	100
Turnout (%)			64.3
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			none

Note: * To calculate vote and seats change we consider the change with respect to the coalitions “La Izquierda Plural” and Podemos in the 2014 EPE.

** To calculate vote and seats change we consider the change with respect to the coalitions “Left for the right to decide” (EDPP) and “The People Decide” (LPD) in the 2014 EPE elections.

***To calculate vote and seats change we consider the change with respect to the coalition “Primavera Europea” in the 2014 EPE

	SEATS	SEATS IN CASE OF BREXIT	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014 IN CASE OF BREXIT
	20		+9.5	+6	
	12		-6.1	-4	
	7		+8.9	+5	
	6		-8.0	-5	
	3		+4.6	+3	
	3		-0.5		
	2		+4.5	+2	
	1		+2.8	+1	
			-0.6	-1	
			+0.2		
			-5.4	-3	
			-6.5	-4	
					5

On the other hand, while the results of *Ciudadanos* clearly improved with respect to the preceding EPE, the party performed worse than in the last national election and failed in its attempt to become the dominant right-wing party in Spain. In the case of Podemos-IU the results were also negative, since they lost eight per cent of their vote share and five seats in the EP with respect to 2014. In the case of VOX, the extreme right-wing party will be represented in the EP for the first time with three seats. However, its vote share in the EPE (6.1%) decreased four percentage points with respect to the preceding national General Election (10.3%).

Besides these state-wide parties, the Spanish party system is characterised by the presence of strong regionally based-parties. Since the single-district nature of the EPE electoral system penalises small regionally-based parties, these parties usually run in coalition with parties from other regions. This is for example the case with the Republics Now coalition which, under the leadership of imprisoned Catalan leader Oriol Junqueras and in coalition with nationalist parties from other regions, gained three seats in the EP. Similarly, the “Coalition for a solidary Europe” led by Basque centre-right nationalists won two seats. Finally, the centre right coalition Together, led by former Catalan President Carles Puigdemont, won two seats.

CONCLUSION

The 2019 EPE marked the end of an election sequence in Spain and are a clear reflection of the electoral climate at the national level. The vote was highly fragmented in both the left and right-wing camps, although the two mainstream parties PSOE and PP ended up dominating each flank. There was a slight predominance of the left, combined with substantial support for nationalist parties (these parties received approximately 13% of the votes). The extreme right-wing party VOX fell short of expectations, but still managed to enter the EP for the first time.

Spanish voters still seem to lack a genuine taste for Europe (Molina, 2019). Unlike in Italy, the UK or France, and despite the recent changes in the Spanish party system towards multipartism, political parties seem unwilling to politicise the process of European integration from the supply side. On the demand side, Spanish citizens seem to lack a connection with the European dimension: a political sphere often perceived by citizens as too remote and detached from their daily problems. Once more, the campaign and the results of the 2019 EPE in Spain suggest the lower relevance of EP elections in Spanish political life.

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