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Spanish Europeanism resist politicization

Spain is currently the only EU member state with a left-wing coalition government formed by a socialist party, the PSOE (Socialists & Democrats), and a [radical left](#) movement, *Sumar*.¹ The position of the coalition and most of the opposition parties regarding the EU reflects that of Spanish society, who have had a very positive perception of the EU over time, seeing it as a source of democracy, prosperity and stability.

The Spanish two-party system paid the price of the financial crisis (2008), not the European institutions. The result was a more fragmented political system which saw the emergence of new parties. Some political forces from the radical left voiced their discontent with the economic measures adopted at that time, although it was not a form of Euroscepticism, rather a [defence of a different integration project](#).² Nowadays, this fragmented scene has consolidated but the newcomers share a sound pro-Europeanism, each one with its nuances. The only party that has presented a clear Eurosceptic vision is the radical right party *Vox* (European Conservatives and Reformists) even if it does not advocate for leaving the EU, but rather for preventing a federalised trend and retaining the supremacy of national sovereignty.

However, this fragmentation has come with greater polarisation in internal affairs. At EU level, this did not imply questioning Spain's membership of the bloc but an increasing politicisation of the EU institutions for domestic partisan confrontation, to the point that opposition parties and the government have transferred their political battle to the European institutions. In other words, as a result of solid Spanish pro-Europeanism, [the political forces use the EU as a source of legitimacy to confront one another](#). Therefore, European affairs are still regarded through national lenses and the national dimension ends up dragging Spanish political parties to their national reality.

1. *Sumar* is a type of political movement that includes parties to the left of the Socialists, Greens, post-communist and progressive regional parties, whose MEPs will join the Greens, the European Free Alliance and the European United Left/Nordic Green Left.
2. As an example, the electoral programme of *Podemos* in 2015 defended a deeper Common Security and Defence Policy.

When national becomes European

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Three main issues have impacted Spain's recent political context. First, the breakdown of the two-party system in place since the restoration of democracy: the last legislative term was the first to see a coalition government and, as a result of the general elections in 2023, it is also the first time that the government has not been led by the party that came first at the polls. Second, an increasing polarisation of the internal political debate, which has led to a politicisation of European affairs. And third, the prominence of regional parties in the national debate and their involvement in the governability of the country, with a special mention for the Catalan situation. The three issues are interrelated: the breakdown of the political system allowed for new and regional political parties to carry more weight in the governance of the country, which increased the polarisation. A polarised society favoured the breakthrough of non-mainstream political options. And the Catalan situation worked as a catalyst where polarisation spiked, and new political parties could grow.

These three main issues have led to Spain being in a state of permanent political campaign. Since 2014, Spain has had five national elections. In 2019, Spaniards voted in national elections in April, just a few months before the European elections. The Socialists came first in this parliamentary election and they wanted to exhaust all possibilities of forming a solo government. Thus, they refused to form a government immediately after the national elections and made the elections to the European Parliament a second round. As a result, the national dynamic prevailed over the European dimension of the elections.

This same logic will play out for the European elections of 2024. The Socialist party came in second in the latest snap national election, held in July 2023, but managed to stay in power after securing a coalition government with *Sumar* and the support of different regional parties, mostly from Catalonia and the Basque Country. The Popular Party (PP), which had come in first place but failed to build a majority, has continuously harassed the government thereafter.

Since then, and before the European elections in June, three regions in Spain – Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia – have held elections. Although they have been used to draw conclusions in national terms, regional parties and dynamics played the leading roles. This scenario implies that the political debate will focus on how those regional elections might impact the national scenario (especially those in Catalonia, where the Socialists won). The same will apply to the European elections, which will also be viewed through a national lens. The prime minister publicly raising the possibility of resigning recently, denouncing a campaign against his wife on the part of the radical right, has heightened the partisan confrontation.

However, despite the increasing pressure to read the June 9th elections in national terms, there are some issues that have a European dimension and will be treated as such during the election campaign.

What are these elections about? Topics and faces

In its electoral programme for the general elections in 2023, the *Partido Popular* (PP) had more in common with the PSOE and *Sumar* regarding EU affairs than with the radical right party Vox. Vox has the strongest Eurosceptic views, putting the emphasis on the need to defend the union from illegal migration, to preserve the national identity from a bureaucratic Brussels and to push back against the green agenda. In order to confront two different models of understanding the EU, the government parties have chosen their lead candidates accordingly.

The Socialists will play their cards on the green agenda. In the political cycle (2019-2024), the Spanish government has been especially vocal and ambitious regarding green issues. This has been driven by current Deputy Prime Minister for the Ecological Transition Teresa Ribera, the leading candidate on the Socialist list. She arguably aspires to the climate change portfolio in the European Commission, so it is expected that she will try to put the fight against climate change in the centre of the agenda, thus confronting Vox and the PP on those issues. The lead candidate from *Sumar* is the former director of the Spanish Commission for Refugees. The PP, Vox and *Ciudadanos* have presented lead candidates who were already MEPs and *Podemos* is fielding former Minister for Equality Irene Montero.

In any case, although the political forces may raise topics such as the green agenda or migration, they are not among the main priorities for *Spaniards*. When asked about which issues should dominate the European campaign, Spain is among the member states which most highlight the fight against poverty and social exclusion or public health.

In previous elections the main political parties have hosted lead candidates during the campaigns, and they are expected to do the same for these elections. The PP will try to play host to Ursula von der Leyen, although her appointment will depend on the prime minister (from the PSOE). If Von der Leyen wishes to run for a second term with the support of the grand coalition, she will need the backing of the Spanish prime minister, who is one of the strongest socialist leaders in the European Union. In this regard, he may offer his support in exchange for an important portfolio for the Spanish commissioner and has already warned against the cooperation of Von der Leyen with radical right parties.

On the other hand, the Socialists' lead candidate, Luxembourg's Nicolas Schmit, will have a hard time featuring in Spain during the elections campaign as he is not well-known. *Sumar* and *Podemos*, who are competing for the electorate on the left of the socialists, could also use the lead candidates to gain visibility. However, the possibilities that lead candidates' appearances will change public opinion are limited: only 28% of Spaniards identify Ursula von der Leyen as the president of the European Commission.

Regardless of the topics and who shows up in the campaign, political parties will continue to use national issues that have been salient in the domestic

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agenda to agitate it. The European elections are seen as the next political contest in the partisan confrontation. It is worth noting that European debates that are dominating the discussions, such as enlargement or the war in Ukraine, remain absent from the campaign or merely a side issue.

European elections, national consequences?

According to the polls, the PP will come first, followed by the PSOE and Vox in second and third place, respectively. The PP will claim that these results are a sign of rejection of the current government on the part of public opinion. However, the possibility of second place for the PSOE in the European elections having deeper consequences for the national scenario depended on the previous regional elections: Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia. The fact that the PP was the clear winner only in Galicia, while the Socialists improved their results in the Basque Country and came first in the Catalan contest, reduces the potential consequences of the European elections in the national arena.

The biggest consequences may appear in the space of the radical left. The emergence of *Sumar* before the general elections in 2023 has not served as a unifying force for the radical left and there has been growing discontent among the small parties that make up this platform regarding the position of each party on the list for the European elections. Depending on how many seats *Sumar* wins, its role as unifier of the left may be undermined. And the wound could be more serious if *Podemos*, who used to dominate the radical left space, manages to obtain certain gains vis-à-vis *Sumar*. *Podemos* has presented the former minister for equality, who has a strong political profile, in a bid to regain ground at the expense of *Sumar*. In any case, both *Sumar* and *Podemos* are expected to obtain poor results as a consequence of their infighting, which is being punished by the discontent of their potential electorate. This power struggle and the comparative results may also have consequences for the Socialist party, which needs a partner to maintain a stable government and remain in power.

Greater awareness of the importance of European affairs, but not enough

Even if the PP comes in the first place, the consequences for the EU will be limited. Spain will continue to be an active member state, advocating for more integration and joint action. In fact, Prime Minister Sánchez has been a reliable partner of President Von der Leyen during the current political cycle. Therefore, after the European elections, the Spanish prime minister will participate in the negotiations over the top jobs both using national influence and balancing ideological and geographical features. The elections results will not matter so much.

Spain has regained a stronger position in the European debate after decades of [punching below its weight](#), as can be seen by its role in [the creation of the NextGenerationEU funds](#) or [securing the “Iberian exception” gas price cap](#). Without further elections scheduled after June 9th, the Spanish government will try to consolidate its influence in the European arena.

Finally, even if European elections continue to be heavily influenced by what happens in the national arena and the domestic political debate still manages to overshadow the European one, the national political contest has slowly politicised European affairs. This means that Spaniards are becoming increasingly aware of European debates, as they are taking up greater space in the public debate in the media and national institutions. The latest [Eurobarometer](#) poll shows that, compared with other Europeans, a high proportion of Spaniards understand that the international context makes voting more important and there has been a remarkable increase in the interest and importance that Spaniards assign to European elections. It is, however, still at a lower level than the European average.

