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## SPANISH ELECTION SPURRED ON BY FEAR OF BREAKUP

### WINNER MUST RECKON WITH REGIONAL PARTIES

*Whoever wins the Spanish parliamentary elections on 28 April is headed for difficult coalition talks, as the left and the right are still deeply divided, despite the fragmentation of the party system. Small regional parties are likely to gain more weight than their size would suggest.*

The Spanish political field is more fragmented than it has been for a long time. As many as five parties are getting more than ten per cent support in the polls. This diversity is not what it appears, however, as the parties are strongly divided into right-wing and left-wing blocs. Neither bloc seems likely to gain an absolute majority, so the cabinet talks are set to be arduous and the new government weak. A coalition government would make things easier, but there is no tradition of that.

The Spanish party system was long dominated by the conservative People's Party (*Partido Popular*, PP) and the centre-left socialist party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE). The left was the first to splinter. The Citizens Party (*Ciutadans*, C's), which began as a social democratic party in Catalonia in 2006, drove a wedge between the

two major parties. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, the populist *Podemos* party (since renamed *Unidos Podemos*, UP) sprang up to the left of the PSOE, overtook the old left alliance and became a serious challenger to the socialists.

With the left in disarray, PP had no trouble governing the country. Their unpopular austerity policies and corruption charges had little effect on their staunchly conservative base. But everything changed when the situation in Catalonia escalated in 2017. Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy tried to block an illegal referendum, which led to violent encounters between Catalonians and the police. Rajoy subsequently left the problem to be resolved by the courts and ended up temporarily suspending Catalonia's autonomy in order to hold a new election in the region. Many conservatives were keen to pursue an

even harsher line of action, as there were fears that rebellious Catalans would break up Spain.

Rajoy's government fell in 2018 due to an interpellation, after the opposition managed to briefly close ranks due to corruption sentences regarding the conservative party. Rajoy stepped down and new party leader Pablo Casado cleared Rajoy supporters from the party's slate for the upcoming parliamentary election. Casado has profiled the conservatives in the same vein as Rajoy's predecessor José María Aznar – as a distinctly right-wing party.

The situation in Catalonia and the PP's internal divisions have provided an opportunity for the far-right populist party Vox, which was founded in 2014. It openly espouses Spanish nationalism and demands recentralization of power in Madrid. Vox has quickly bitten off a large chunk of the PP's right flank.

In addition to stoking fears of Spain breaking up, the party has attacked feminism, environmental ideas and European integration. It proposes, among other things, revoking the right to abortion and the law for same-sex marriage. Like other European right-wing populist parties, Vox is also against immigration, but in Spain this is a less divisive topic than the regional aspirations for autonomy and independence.

The PP's regime change and Vox's entry have shifted the entire political spectrum towards the right. The C's, positioned at the centre, have abandoned social democracy and the party now describe themselves as the "progressive liberal party". Voters already see the party as part of the right-wing bloc. Meanwhile, the PSOE has gained elbow room at the centre of the political spectrum. In their relatively restrained campaign the socialists want, among other things, to protect pensions against cutbacks and to streamline the complex and overlapping administration schemes between the regional and central governments. In practice, this would mean moving towards a federal model, where the role of regional governments would be more straightforward and undisputed.

Traditionally, in a two-sided party system, elections are decid-

ed by controlling the political centre. This is still the case, as opinion polls predict a socialist victory. However, the fragmentation of the parties makes it harder to form a government. As the two-sided system used to guarantee an absolute majority for one party, the winner has traditionally formed the government in Spain by itself – or with a few small supporting parties at the most. Since the fragmentation of the party system, every major political decision has necessitated separate negotiations with supporting parties. This has rendered decision-making cumbersome and inefficient. Holding the balance of power also gives small parties plenty of leverage for horse-trading. This was felt by the PSOE government this spring, when it failed to push through its budget proposal. After the defeat, the PSOE was forced to hold an early election.

As neither bloc is likely to gain an absolute majority in the election, the role of supporting parties in relation to their seats will be highly significant. In its campaign, the PSOE is courting the regional parties by promising to reform the political system to the benefit of the regions. In this setting, the right-wing parties have used their campaigns to stoke fears of Spain breaking up. However, even a co-

alition between the C's, the PP and Vox would still need the regional parties to form a stable government. Campaigning against regional governments and Spain's diverse national and cultural background may raise the price of support from the smaller parties very high indeed.

There is nothing to stop the winning party from appointing representatives from other parties to their cabinet, thus getting them to commit to the government's political agenda. However, it calls for a large helping of strategic vision to change deeply rooted political traditions, as well as the charisma to gain allies. Pedro Sanchez of the PSOE may be the only party leader who has not painted himself entirely into a corner within his own bloc, but the other party heads could use a conciliatory attitude as well. It is, for example, difficult to see how the C's and the UP could fit into the same coalition. That is why Sanchez will after winning the election most likely pursue a broad left-wing coalition that would include the PSOE, the UP, and the other small leftist parties, as well as regional parties from the Basque country, Catalonia, Galicia and the Canary Islands. With this composition, reforming the system of regional government will be a central issue for the next government.