

Is Spain's Popular Party caught between a silent revolution and a silent counter-revolution?

*Beginning in 2015, Spain's Popular Party has experienced a dramatic fall in support. As part of a series on Europe's mainstream right, **Sonia Alonso Sáenz de Oger** and **Bonnie N. Field** examine the roots of the party's decline.*

Mainstream right parties in Western Europe are finally getting some much needed attention in academic circles, particularly with the new volume, [Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis](#), edited by Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. The book's main argument is that the mainstream right in Western Europe is under pressure from two primary challenges. In Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser's [words](#):

Of all the frames on offer, the one that most helpfully reduces but also communicates the complexity is Ronald Inglehart's notion of the *silent revolution* – a generational shift toward post-material, progressive and liberal values, which in turn produced a backlash (often but not exclusively centring on antipathy towards migration and multiculturalism) labelled the *silent counter-revolution* by Piero Ignazi.

Our [contribution](#) to the book examines the development and decline of the Popular Party (PP) in Spain. The PP made a singular journey from a right-wing party tainted by its Francoist origins to a successful governing party that was hegemonic on the right until 2015. Yet, since then, its dominance on the right has disappeared. We argue that the twin revolutions are useful for understanding Spain. However, a look at the favourable [opportunity structure](#) for new parties is necessary to understand the evolution and fate of Spain's mainstream right.

The PP's electoral trajectory

The origins of the PP lie in a segment of the Francoist political elite, who launched the right-wing Popular Alliance during the 1970s' transition to democracy. The party struggled to gain credibility as a mainstream right party until the late 1980s, when it was re-founded as the Popular Party.

While many mainstream right parties in Europe competed with radical right parties in the 1980s and 1990s, the PP maintained hegemony on the right for the 25 years between 1990 and 2015. During that time, the PP won on average 40 per cent of the vote. It first governed under Prime Minister José María Aznar (1996-2004), and returned to office under Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy between 2011 and 2018.

The PP first confronted a serious challenger from the centre-right Citizens (Cs), which entered parliament in 2015. Then, the radical right Vox broke through electorally beginning in 2018. Vox can be considered a split from the PP, both because of its initial voter base and because several of its founding leaders had been members of the PP. Today, the PP is seriously weakened. It won only 21 per cent of the vote in the last parliamentary elections in 2019, compared to Vox's 15 per cent. It is thus sandwiched ideologically between Cs – a party that has haemorrhaged support – and Vox.

The silent revolution comes to Spain

Spain certainly experienced the societal changes that Inglehart predicted. Having lagged behind its Western European neighbours in economic and social modernisation, the transformation of Spain between 1978 and 2019 was dramatic. For example, attitudes towards homosexuality, abortion, divorce, and gender equality have been comparatively tolerant and progressive since the early days of democracy in the 1980s. And they have become even more so since then, as European and Spanish survey data consistently show.

Yet these changes were not an obstacle to the PP becoming hegemonic on the right for a quarter of a century. On the contrary, the PP successfully moderated its programmatic offer to adapt it to the changing Spanish society. By the early 1990s, the PP had become a catch-all party. The profile of its electorate changed accordingly. When the party won a majority of seats in parliament for the first time in 2000, the socio-demographic profile of its electorate was a close approximation of the Spanish electorate at large.

That year represents the culmination of the PP's moderating process – 58 per cent of PP voters were centrists, while 30 per cent were on the right and 7 per cent on the far right. More importantly for our argument, the PP captured centrist voters without losing far right voters: 95 per cent of far right voters voted for the PP, as well as 68 per cent of centrist voters.

However, midway through the 2000s, Spain's two main parties moved further apart on post-materialist and centre-periphery (particularly national identity) issues. The Socialists became more socially liberal and pro-periphery. The PP did the reverse. It emphasised Spanish nationalism, particularly confronting Spain's peripheral nationalists such as the Catalan and Basque nationalists, and conservative moral values.

Did a silent counter-revolution drive the PP's decline?

We argue that the PP's decline is not a straightforward story driven by the challenge of the silent counter-revolution. For example, when anti-immigrant attitudes increased in the late 1990s and early 2000s, no radical right party made inroads. And, comparatively, Spaniards' attitudes towards immigrants were and are highly tolerant.

Instead, the PP's decline (and political fragmentation overall) is related to a favourable opportunity structure for the rise of new parties. This first benefited Cs in 2015 then Vox beginning in 2018. The Great Recession and the accompanying austerity measures between 2008 and 2013 hit Spain particularly hard. A series of severe corruption scandals also wracked the country. One of the most significant, the [Gürtel case](#), dominated headlines beginning in 2013. It implicated the PP in influence trafficking and illegal party financing. Years later, in 2018, Spain's high court would sanction the party, triggering a successful vote of no confidence against the PP government of Mariano Rajoy.

Additionally, Catalan nationalists began calling for a referendum on independence from Spain, particularly after 2012. The independence drive came to a head in 2017 when the Catalan government held a referendum in defiance of a court ruling. Subsequently, the Catalan parliament declared independence and, in turn, the Spanish government suspended Catalonia's autonomy. This occurred with the PP in government, and while the PP and Cs fiercely competed with one another for hegemony in the Spanish national identity space.

It is in this context that the radical right Vox surged electorally, first winning representation in the region of Andalusia in 2018 and later in the Spanish parliament and most other regions in 2019. Vox champions staunch Spanish nationalism – going beyond its competitors on the right to advocate for the elimination of the decentralised state – highly conservative values and nativism. The PP lost the socio-demographic and ideologically diverse electorate that once stood it in good stead.

The PP's response to the rise of the radical right

The PP now confronts dilemmas similar to those of many of its European counterparts. It faces a liberalised society (silent revolution) and competition from a radical right party that in particular stresses Spanish national identity in opposition to Spain's own minority national identities, highly conservative values, and nativism (silent counter-revolution).

The PP's initial response to Vox was to move rightward and accept it as a potential then actual ally. Despite electoral decline in 2018 and 2019, the PP took the lead to forge a regional government with Cs in Castile and Leon, and to broker agreements in Andalusia, Madrid and Murcia that allowed it to lead minority coalition governments with Cs, with the external support of Vox.

What lies ahead? It is unlikely there is space on the political right – and in the Spanish national identity space – for three right parties, especially given the majoritarian tendencies of Spain's electoral system. The PP's strong organisational structure and history of adaptability suggest that it will not be the one to disappear. With Cs' dwindling electoral support, Vox is now the PP's main competitor on the right.

For more information, see the authors' contribution to [Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis](#), edited by Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

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