

# What the Castilla-León elections told us about the trajectory of Spanish politics

*The far-right party Vox is seeking its first share of power in a Spanish region following elections in Castilla y León on 13 February. Paul Kennedy and David Cutts assess what the elections told us about the current state of play in Spanish politics.*

Pablo Casado, leader of Spain's centre-right People's Party (PP), thought he had it all "*atado y bien atado*" (sewn up): call elections a year early in the conservative Castilla-León region and obtain an overall majority; remind the far-right Vox that there was only one player in town whilst simultaneously putting his chief rival for the leadership, the populist – and popular – Isabel Ayuso, President of the Madrid region, in her place. Casado would then aim to replicate the Castilla-León triumph in elections brought forward to the spring of 2022 in Andalucía and thereby prepare the ground for him to lead his party to victory at the general election likely to be held the following year, in the process blurring the memory of the PP's two general election defeats under his leadership in 2019.

The aftermath of the Castilla-León election indicates a more challenging situation: obtaining thirty-one seats, just two more than in 2019, the PP's pathway to an overall majority now lies through a coalition with Vox, which was swift to demand the vice-presidency of the region as the opening price for its support. Casado's lack of enthusiasm to strike a deal with Vox has not been shared by his lieutenant in the region, the acting President, Alfonso Fernández Mañueco, who announced he was prepared to talk to all parties, including Vox.

Casado's hesitancy was understandable as Vox wasted no time in indicating the cost of its support: a number of ministerial posts in addition to the vice-presidency. Significantly, although the PP has depended on support from Vox to keep the centre-left PSOE out of office in several regions, most notably, Andalucía, Castilla-León would mark the first occasion in which Vox would actually enter government. The far-right would be back in office – albeit only at the regional level – for the first time since the death of Franco in 1975.

Also featuring prominently in Vox's demands was a pledge that the incoming administration would reject legislation put in place by the PSOE at the national level providing restitution for victims of Franco's dictatorship – the so-called *historic memory* legislation – as well as opposition to legislation aimed at combating domestic violence. Although Vox's result was noteworthy, party strategists may nevertheless have been disappointed at the party's ceiling being around 18 per cent, mimicking their current national polling, but perhaps lower than expectations, given Castilla-León's traditional conservative leanings.

Vox's breakthrough – it won 13 of the region's 81 seats, compared to just a single seat in 2019 – wasn't the only standout from the elections. Regional parties seeking to place the depopulation of Spain's rural areas more firmly on the national agenda obtained seven seats, compared to a single seat in 2019, offering the PP an alternative alliance, albeit three seats short of an overall majority (41 seats). *Ciudadanos*, which had been in government with the PP until the regional election was called, fell from twelve seats to a single seat, whilst Yolanda Díaz's *Unidas Podemos* – the junior partner in Pedro Sánchez's coalition government – lost one of its two seats.

The PSOE also lost seven of its thirty-five seats and saw its vote fall by nearly five percentage points. Yet Sánchez will have been relieved that his party obtained 30% of the vote, just 1.5 percentage points lower than the PP (16,500 fewer votes), an indication that the PSOE retained substantial support in a region viewed as being not particularly favourable towards the party a year before the next general election. It received the highest number of votes in León, Valladolid, Palencia and Burgos, whilst the PP was strongest in Zamora, Salamanca, Segovia and Ávila. The regional SY party won three of Soria's five seats.

Looking forward, Pablo Casado has hardly strengthened his leadership of the PP, whilst Isabel Ayuso continues to give the impression that she is more adept at neutralising the threat posed by Vox, albeit at the cost of abandoning the party's traditional centre-right terrain for a more overtly populist stance. The holding of early elections in Andalucía is, in the light of what happened in Castilla-León, not without risk. Hitherto the PP's chief rival on the centre-right, *Ciudadanos*, is now in its death throes. Whilst the PP hoped that its demise would boost its own prospects, the slow death of *Ciudadanos* has coincided with the PP losing a sizeable amount of its right flank to Vox, thereby neutralising any significant growth.

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Electorally, the risks are high for the PP. Moving significantly to the right in an attempt to reclaim switchers to Vox risks opening up the centre-ground to PSOE, allowing Sánchez to build a coalition of traditional left leaning supporters and weaker moderates whose support would be driven by negative sentiments toward a PP-Vox coalition arrangement rather than overtly positive partisan feelings for the 'left coalition'. Yet retaining 'clear blue water' from Vox and the PP risks implosion through a head-to-head battle on the right for their traditional support. The PP would lay itself open to attack on all fronts, which strategically could undermine their core message and wider appeal. For the PP, the Castilla-León election has brought matters to a head. What it decides could inadvertently determine the long-term future of Casado and signify the battle lines for the forthcoming general election.

Despite losing ground in Castilla-León, the PSOE has more reason to be sanguine and will quite likely welcome early elections in its traditional stronghold of Andalucía. PSOE support seemingly remains more resistant to the overtures of the populist right than its sister social democratic parties elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, its 'left coalition' partner, *Unidas Podemos*, failed to make an impact, despite the fact that its leader, Yolanda Díaz, has established herself as Spain's most popular political figure over recent months as she has put in place a significant labour reform as the coalition government's Labour Minister.

In truth Castilla-León is far from a *Unidas Podemos* stronghold but there remains little evidence that left-leaning voters are rewarding *Unidas Podemos* for popular policies at the expense of the PSOE. And with the pandemic hopefully receding, the country receiving significant amounts of financial support from the EU to aid the recovery from Covid-19, and a more employee-friendly labour reform on the statute book, the PSOE has reason to feel quietly confident in the run-up to the general election likely to be held in 2023.

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