

Humiliation in Andalusia: The beginning of the end for the left coalition in Spain?

On 19 June, Spain's People's Party won a majority of seats in regional elections in Andalusia. As **Paul Kennedy** and **David Cutts** explain, the result represents a major blow for Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and could mark the beginning of the end for the country's left-wing coalition.

Joy abounds for Juanma Moreno, the People's Party (PP) regional leader in Andalusia, as the centre-right party emerged as the largest party in Spain's most populous region for the first time in history. Obtaining over 43 per cent of the vote, doubling its result from four years ago, the PP stormed to an historic 58 seats and, crucially, a comfortable majority in the regional parliament. The spectre of reliance on the populist-right Vox has been exorcised.

The personalisation of the PP campaign around Moreno was significant, with emphasis being placed on his openness to dialogue and his moderation – he was even photographed, Alan Partridge-like, at an owl sanctuary. Such was the extent of the focus on Moreno rather than the PP that the party even issued a video online instructing those wishing to vote for 'Juanma' to do so by submitting the voting slip containing the list of the PP's candidates.

The downplaying of the PP brand was also apparent in the paucity of PP symbols and banners at campaign events at which Andalusian and Spanish flags predominated. This strategy was shrewd in a region which had maintained a previously apparently unshakable loyalty to the Socialist PSOE, enabling the PP to coalesce voters across the political spectrum. The ill-fated *Ciudadanos* (C's) collapsed without trace, bolstering the PP's advance across the region's eight provinces. And those fearful of Vox headed Moreno's call to wish to rule only in a "pact and alliance with the Andalusians".

For the new national PP leader, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, it was a vindication of the party's moderate shift and tactically adept move to circumvent opposition on its right flank from Vox whilst offensively targeting disillusioned supporters of the coalition government in Madrid. Consequently, the much-heralded Vox breakthrough failed to materialise.

Compared to four years earlier, 13.5 per cent of the vote represents a modest improvement. However, given that Santiago Abascal's party secured 20 per cent of the vote in Andalusia at the December 2019 general election, the result was patently below expectations. The 'Feijóo strategy', underpinned by a campaign focusing on a popular regional leader, proved effective at denying Vox any real opportunity for growth.

Table 1: PSOE share of the vote in elections in Andalusia and in each province (2008-22)

	2022	2018	2015	2012	2008
Almeria	22.1	25.9	32.8	35.2	39.1
Cadiz	21.0	23.8	31.6	35.6	47.8
Cordoba	23.5	29.2	36.0	38.9	46.6
Granada	25.4	26.9	34.6	39.4	46.1
Huelva	27.4	31.6	41.0	43.4	52.0
Jaén	27.1	35.4	42.7	44.5	53.4
Malaga	20.7	24.2	30.1	35.2	43.2
Sevilla	26.6	30.0	38.1	43.3	54.4
Andalusia	24.1	28.0	35.4	39.5	48.4

Source: Compiled by the authors.

But while the PP basked in controlling each of the eight provinces which make up the traditional socialist fiefdom of Andalusia for the first time, the left confronted an unparalleled disaster. The PSOE secured 30 seats, its lowest ever total, albeit only 3 fewer than its previous nadir in 2018. However, as Table 1 shows, this unmitigated fall from grace has been a long time coming.

Across the Andalusia region, the PSOE vote has halved since 2008 to just over 24 per cent in 2022. In the three stronghold provinces of Seville, Jaén and Huelva, the PSOE recorded more than 50 per cent of the vote in 2008, yet its vote now hovers around 27 per cent. The PSOE vote has steadily declined in all eight provinces across the past five elections. And it has declined most in the provinces in which it was previously strongest.

There are now no PSOE heartlands in Andalusia. Indeed, the aggregate picture suggests a shift in the political positioning of Andalusian voters over time which may explain these long-term regional trends away from the party. More worrying for the PSOE would be any systemic evidence of haemorrhaging of its core vote to the right. In countries like the United Kingdom, the populist right served as a fleeting stopover on the journey to a final Conservative destination.

Vox's strong performance at the November 2019 national election may have triggered this process, making it easier for the PP to convert these voters in 2022, particularly if keeping the PSOE out of office was uppermost in their minds. At present it is too early to say whether this gradual conversion from the PSOE to the PP is occurring, but the general rightwards trend hints at a weakening of the PSOE's dominance.

PSOE loyalists may nevertheless point to mitigating regional circumstances. The legacy of PSOE corruption in the region may still be prominent in some voters' minds. Turnout failed to match previous elections and there remains little doubt that this adversely affected the party. But the turnout figures were little different from four years ago when the PSOE vote was roughly four percentage points higher.

Espadas, the PSOE regional leader, was particularly uninspiring and was not well-known outside Seville. Spiralling inflation and the cost-of-living crisis in what remains a relatively poor region of Spain may explain the transfer of votes from the PSOE to the PP. Others may have simply wished to scupper Vox's prospects at all costs.

The PSOE also received little support from its coalition partners. The election was an unbridled disaster for the populist left. In-fighting and a lack of cohesion led to the two electoral alliances – *Por Andalucía* and *Adelante Andalucía* – fighting on similar ground, consequently splitting the left vote with obvious negative implications for capturing seats across several provinces. The outcome saw the populist left win seven seats, ten fewer than in 2018, and half the number obtained by Vox, despite winning only 1.2 percentage points less than the populist right party.

Irrespective of these regional factors the Andalusia election constitutes a major headache for Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. The region is often regarded as a salient barometer of public mood and in a national election makes up a sizeable proportion of the party's seats. Moreover, the result puts into perspective the broader problems facing the coalition government.

It is now evident that the PP appears more electable under Feijóo than Casado. Moving the PP towards the centre-ground while simultaneously allowing the more overtly right-wing Isabel Ayuso, the PP president of the Madrid region, to 'push the envelope' against Vox, has so far proved a masterstroke, allowing the PP free rein to capture centre-ground voters without losing its right flank to Vox. Increasingly, C's demise seems gift-wrapped for the PP, which is hoovering up its voters with aplomb.

The current economic difficulties facing Spain also play into the hands of the PP, which can continue to disparage the coalition government's economic credentials, whilst reminding voters of the presence of populist left ministers, not to mention its dependence on regionalist and pro-independence parties to pass legislation.

The Andalusia election also evidenced problems on the PSOE's left flank. With a post-Pablo Iglesias Podemos faltering and his chosen successor, Yolanda Díaz, dithering, the left looks fragmented and rudderless. The PSOE will argue that Sánchez was not on the ballot paper in Andalusia and that the prospect of voting PP and getting Vox is far more real in a national election than in this region. This may be so, but the problems are mounting for Sánchez. With just over a year to the next national election, the humiliation in Andalusia could mark the beginning of the end of the first left coalition in Spain.

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