

# The resignation of Pedro Sánchez has left Spain's PSOE in crisis

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*The leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), Pedro Sánchez, resigned on 1 October. **Paul Kennedy** assesses what lies next for the party, which has experienced a prolonged period of decline since it last won power in the 2008 Spanish general election.*



The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), which has spent more time in office than any other political party since Franco's death, finds itself facing its worst crisis in decades following the resignation of its leader, Pedro Sánchez. With no political party capable of attracting sufficient parliamentary support to form a government following general elections in December 2015 and June 2016, parties have until the end of October to strike a deal which will circumvent another election in December.

Despite obtaining just 85 seats at the June general election – the PSOE's lowest ever total – Sánchez indicated that his party would continue to vote against Rajoy in any further vote of investiture, thereby denying Rajoy the simple majority required to form a government. Sánchez's stance was in line with a resolution approved by the party's ruling body, the Federal Committee, days after the December 2015 general election which mandated the party to 'vote against Rajoy's investiture and against a new PP government.'



Earlier in the week, Sánchez's waning authority was highlighted when half the members of the party's smaller Executive Committee tendered their resignation, due to their belief that a party with so few seats was not in a position to form a government, much less seek to do so with the support of Pablo Iglesias's Podemos, and, conceivably, regionalist parties advocating independence from Spain. They found such a prospect alarming in the extreme. In response, Sánchez proposed to reinforce his position by appealing to party members by seeking re-election at a leadership primary in October, to be followed by an Extraordinary Congress in November.

That Sánchez overestimated the strength of his position in what was effectively a vote of confidence was underlined by the fact that his proposal obtained the support of just 107 members of the Federal Committee, with 132 voting against. Chaotic scenes accompanied the vote, with each side accusing the other of intimidatory behaviour. His position rendered untenable, Sánchez immediately resigned and the party was placed under the control of a

caretaker leadership headed by Javier Fernández, President of the northern region of Asturias.

Sánchez's resignation marks just the latest stage in the PSOE's protracted decline. When it last won office at the 2008 general election, the PSOE obtained over eleven million votes, more than at any time in its 130-year existence. By the time that it went down to its third successive general election defeat at the June 2016 general election, the party had won less than half this amount.

Although the PSOE has avoided the fate of its Greek sister party, [Pasok](#), which has endured an eroding of support at the hands of the radical-left Syriza, it has struggled to cope with the emergence of Podemos since 2014. Hitherto all-conquering on the left of the political spectrum, the PSOE has good reason to be concerned about the implications of being overtaken. Whilst – up until now – the PSOE has been able to avert this much-feared *sorpasso*, the party leadership is conscious that some, perhaps more gradual, form of *Pasokisation* awaits it over the coming years unless it is able to address its crisis of identity and re-establish itself as a credible party of government. Like its social democratic sister parties, the PSOE has struggled to renew itself within a political environment which favours centre-right and populist alternatives during a period of pervasive insecurity.

Sánchez was ultimately ineffective with respect to gaining on a PP which was experiencing its own difficulties under the uninspired leadership of Mariano Rajoy. Having obtained its largest overall majority to date in 2011, winning 186 out of 350 parliamentary seats, the PP slumped to just 123 seats in December 2015, before winning an additional 14 seats six months later. At the 2015 and 2016 elections, the PSOE obtained, respectively, 33 and 52 fewer seats than the PP. Moreover, by the June 2016 general election, Podemos had come within 14 seats of the PSOE.

The events of recent days have not proved helpful in reviving the PSOE's fortunes. Although it can be argued that Podemos has appeared over recent months to be reaching its electoral ceiling, barely improving on its total number of seats between December 2015 and June 2016, the PSOE's current travails have reinforced the impression that Iglesias's party might yet be capable of overhauling the PSOE when Spain next goes to the polls. Such a prospect helps to explain why Sánchez's opponents within the party felt compelled to move against him. Given that a general election before the end of the year would also likely benefit the PP, PSOE strategists might understandably prefer the lesser evil of a comparatively weak minority PP government to one which obtains a more convincing mandate at the polls.

Leaderless, and with its image and credibility reaching a nadir, the PSOE remains deeply divided, with rank-and-file members largely having backed Sánchez's stance and resented the manner in which he was dispatched. Although the issue of leadership is currently in the spotlight, the truth is that the party's problems go well beyond the question of whether Susana Díaz, President of the Andalusian region and Sánchez's most likely successor or another candidate will lead the party. Whether, after the events of this week, the PSOE can still display the resilience for which it has been renowned throughout its near 140-year history remains to be seen. Both Rajoy and Iglesias must be rubbing their hands.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Pedro Sánchez speaking in Mérida. Credits: [PSOE Extremadura](#) (CC BY 2.0)*

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