

How the next Spanish government might be formed after Spain's election

*Opinion polling suggests that it is unlikely any one party will gain a majority of seats in Spain's general election on 20 December. **Bonnie N. Field** assesses the potential scenarios that could emerge in the aftermath of the vote. She writes that if a party system comprised of three or four significant statewide parties results from the elections, as polls indicate, it would transform Spain's traditional dynamics of governance.*



On 20 December, Spain will vote in parliamentary elections for the twelfth time since its transition to democracy in the mid-1970s. These are no ordinary elections. Polls indicate that two new statewide parties will gain a strong foothold in Spain's central parliament, **Ciudadanos** (Citizens) and **Podemos** (We can), alongside the two parties that have alternated in power since the 1980s, the centre-left **Socialist Party** (PSOE) and the conservative **People's Party** (PP), among other minor parties.

With a large portion of the electorate still undecided, the most recent **Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas** poll indicates a severe decline in support for the incumbent PP, though it led with an estimated vote share of 28.6 per cent and 120 to 128 seats in the 350-seat Congress of Deputies. The PSOE (20.8 per cent, 77-89 seats), Ciudadanos (19 per cent, 63-66 seats) and Podemos (15.7 per cent, 45-49 seats) followed. Though different polls show slightly different outcomes, all signal a PP lead and a strong showing for the newcomers, with no party likely to win a majority of seats. Despite considerable uncertainties, the elections are likely to transform not only the party system but also the dynamics of governance.

Since its return to democracy, Spain has not had a coalition government. Six elections led to single-party minority governments, the other five to single-party majority governments. Spain is among the European countries that experience minority governments most often. After each election, the party that won the largest number of seats governed. Without a majority, governments, on the left and right, predominantly relied of the parliamentary support of a combination of small, regionally-based parties from Catalonia, the Basque Country, the Canary Islands, or Galicia, among others.

As demonstrated in my recent **book**, Spain's governments since the consolidation of democracy in the early 1980s have been very stable and highly successful at accomplishing their legislative agendas, whether they governed in majority or minority. Spain's minority governments have had strong governing capacity also when compared to their European counterparts. Spain's minority governments were effective in part because of parliamentary institutions that strengthen the government, partisan bargaining circumstances favourable to the government, and the alliances between the statewide governing party and the regionally-based parties.

The design of Spain's parliamentary institutions tips the balance more in favour of the government than do the parliamentary institutions in most European countries. The constructive vote of no confidence, strong governmental agenda-setting capabilities, and low effective voting thresholds for decision-making in parliament all strengthen the government's bargaining position, making governing in minority easier.

Spain's minority governments have also confronted favourable partisan bargaining circumstances, though with some variation. A party with a large plurality of seats led each minority government. The governments also either occupied the central policy position in parliament, meaning the governing party had the median legislator on the left-right and centre-periphery dimension of party competition, and/or faced potential allies in parliament that also needed political support to govern at the regional level, either because they governed in minority or in coalition with the statewide

party governing Spain.

Additionally, the often distinct yet frequently reconcilable goals of particular regionally-based parties and the statewide governing party eased interparty cooperation. In the context of a decentralised state with powerful regional governments, Spain's minority governments made policy concessions to regional parties in the central parliament where regional parties prioritised influencing policy – and where they had little-to-no interest in governing, and office concessions at the regional level where regional parties prioritised governing, in exchange for achieving their priority goal of governing Spain. The statewide governing parties had proximate regional-party allies on at least one dimension of party competition, facilitating cooperation on policy.

If a party system comprised of three or four significant statewide parties results from the upcoming parliamentary elections, as polls indicate, it would transform the dynamics of governance. A minority government or a majority coalition is possible. The parties and their leaders have been vague about potential post-election deals, expressing a willingness to cooperate with other parties in their own efforts to form a government as the lead party, but far less clear about their willingness to support alternative governing arrangements or alliances.

In this regard, Spain's government investiture rules are important. The candidate for prime minister is subject to an investiture vote in the Congress of Deputies. To be elected in a first-round vote, the candidate must receive absolute majority support (50 per cent + 1 of the members of parliament); however, in a second round, more *yes* than *no* votes suffices. Parties must decide whether to join/form a government coalition, or, if they stay out of government, whether to affirmatively support a government with a *yes*, actively oppose it with a *no*, or abstain, which lowers the threshold for government formation in the second round. This complicates interpreting the parties' statements about post-election agreements.

The PP, worried about a PSOE-Ciudadanos-Podemos alliance formed to prevent it from governing, stressed that the largest party should govern. Pedro Sánchez, leader of the PSOE, discarded a government agreement with the PP, but signalled a willingness to negotiate with all parties to try to form a government were the PSOE to win the elections. Albert Rivera, leader of Ciudadanos, a party likely to be critical in any governance deal, stated Ciudadanos would not govern with Podemos, or support the PSOE's or PP's project. He also [indicated](#) in a statement on 18 December, however, that he would not block the largest party from governing and he has not discarded other governing formulas. Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos, indicated a willingness to cooperate with other parties for it to govern, but eschewed discussion of alternative post-election scenarios.

While regionally-based parties may be involved in post-election governing agreements, if the election results confirm the polls, it will be the first time that governance hinges on deals between multiple statewide parties, all of which aspire to govern Spain.

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About the author

Bonnie N. Field – *Bentley University*

[Bonnie N. Field](#) is Associate Professor of Global Studies at Bentley University and the author of *Why Minority Governments Work: Multilevel Territorial Politics in Spain* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016).



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