

The PP may win Spain's election, but Mariano Rajoy's future is far from secure

*Spain will hold a general election on 20 December, with opinion polls indicating a tight contest between four parties for the largest share of the vote – the governing People's Party (PP), who have a small lead in most polls, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), Ciudadanos (C's), and Podemos. To mark the election, EUROPP is running a series of articles examining each of the four parties and their campaigns ahead of the vote. In the second article of the series, **Javier Astudillo** and **Marta Romero** assess the campaign run by the People's Party, noting that while they are likely to retain control over the next government, Mariano Rajoy may not survive as Prime Minister if the PP are forced to rely on the support of other parties.*



The incumbent Spanish **People's Party** (PP), led by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, will contest the election after being in government with an absolute majority, in addition to controlling until recently most regional governments and main cities. In 2011 almost 11 million citizens (44.6 per cent of the vote) trusted the party to take Spain out of a deep economic crisis that had broken out under that the last Socialist Party government led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2008-2011).



During the first part of their mandate, the government implemented a highly contested economic adjustment package that belied some of their electoral promises (such as raising taxes), and was forced to request from the EU a rescue plan to clean up the Spanish banking system. In the later period in government, the PP reversed some of their most unpopular and conservative policies. Some tax cuts were introduced, and a controversial bill to restrict abortion was dropped. The economy has finally showed signs of recovery, and is presently growing at a rate of 3.4 per cent, the highest in the euro area. Unemployment has also fallen sharply from its peak of 26 per cent in early 2013 to 22.5 per cent in mid-2015.

But the PP faces several stumbling blocks in renewing its support from Spanish citizens. Unemployment remains troublingly high, and most of the new jobs created are highly precarious. Social inequality and child poverty have also skyrocketed. In addition, a wave of corruption scandals involving some leading figures within the ruling party, and the dismay generated by the answer to these scandals given by Rajoy as party leader, have also eroded the PP's popularity. Finally, to make matters worse, in Catalonia, one of the richest regions of the country, separatist sentiment has increased markedly, led by the radicalisation of the Catalan regional government. Again, inaction has characterised Rajoy's response.

The consequences of the PP's policies and governance for Rajoy's approval rating and the electoral prospects of his party are undoubtedly disturbing. Opinion polls show that the 60-year-old Spanish Prime Minister has the lowest approval rating among all the main party leaders. Pollsters also suggest that the PP's electoral share will plunge around 15 percentage points, a punishment similar to one suffered by the Spanish Socialist Party in the previous elections of 2011.

The good news for the Spanish conservatives is that this time the main opposition party, the PSOE, is not benefiting at all from the incumbent's electoral troubles. Despite the replacement of the PSOE's 'old guard' by the party's 42-year-old leader Pedro Sánchez, the Spanish Socialists are also losing votes on their right flank to the new centrist party Ciudadanos (C's), as well as on their left side, to the new anti-austerity party Podemos.

In terms of electoral competition, and contrary to the bilateral confrontation faced by the PSOE, the Spanish

conservatives only compete at the centre of the ideological scale, where most Spaniards place themselves. In stark contrast to other countries with strong far right parties, such as France and Greece, a newly created far right party, Vox, which split from hardliners within the PP, has so far failed to make significant inroads among Spanish conservative voters.

On the other hand, Ciudadanos, which originally emerged in Catalonia as a single-issue party (the defence of the Spanish-speaking community), has successfully extended its appeal to the rest of the country. In local and regional elections during 2015 the party has made important inroads in the electoral strongholds of the Spanish conservatives, such as Madrid, Valencia and Castile-Leon. Led by Albert Rivera, they present themselves as a credible alternative for those centrist voters who are disappointed with the PP's policies, corruption scandals, and lacklustre leadership, but who have not forgiven the Socialists for the record of the Zapatero government.

The PP's main electoral goal is to end the race with the highest number of votes, with a share of around 30 per cent, and secure an electoral advantage of at least 6 per cent over whichever party finishes second. This would make it highly difficult for the rest of the parties to build an ideologically compatible coalition that, as in Portugal, could displace the PP from power.

To this end, Rajoy's campaign has focused on two key elements. On the one hand, the PP has framed their electoral campaign as being a competition on a [valence issue](#), namely experience. They have been particularly keen to emphasise that their economic policies and social cuts were not only a result of the economic mismanagement of the last PSOE government, but that the PP's actions have brought about the current economic recovery.

Their message is clear: the consolidation of the economic recovery is at risk if a "coalition of losing parties" displaces them from government. The PP have also downplayed ideological issues that may polarise the Spanish electorate into two camps. Without competitors on their right flank, the PP can afford to avoid issues cherished by its more conservative supporters, such as a stronger defence of the unity of the country against the separatist challenge.

On the other hand, given Rajoy's age and poor approval rating, the PP has sought to 'depersonalise' its electoral campaign. In contrast to the usual electoral strategies adopted by most parties in Europe, voters are constantly reminded by the PP that they vote for a team, not a man, to lead the country. At the same time, the 43-year-old Deputy Prime Minister, Soraya Saenz de Santamaría, has been pushed centre stage, even replacing Rajoy in several debates.

Despite the challenge from the PSOE, Ciudadanos and Podemos, it remains highly likely that the PP will maintain control over the next government. What is not clear is whether they will be able to form a minority government or will be forced to rely on a coalition with Ciudadanos – which would be the first coalition at the national level since Spain's transition to democracy. The ability of Rajoy to hold on to the office of Prime Minister could well come under pressure if this occurs. Ciudadanos insisted on the removal of PP candidates as a condition for support after the regional elections earlier this year and Rajoy's removal may offer a chance to signal a general renewal of Spanish politics and a break with the policies of the previous government.

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