

Spanish general election preview: The PSOE

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 first article of the series, [Paul Kennedy](#) assesses the PSOE’s campaign.



During the [PSOE’s](#) last term in office between 2008 and 2011, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero infamously displayed a marked reluctance to use the word ‘crisis’ when referring to the country’s rapidly worsening economic situation. By the time that he belatedly acknowledged the gravity of Spain’s plight, Zapatero had become a liability to his party and it would be no exaggeration to suggest that the PSOE itself has been in crisis ever since.

In office longer than any other political party since the transition from dictatorship to democracy – twenty-one years – the PSOE has struggled to formulate a convincing narrative which goes beyond reminding voters of its many undoubted achievements under both Felipe González, most particularly the development of a welfare state underpinned by historic economic modernisation, and Zapatero, whose period in office (prior to the economic downturn of 2008) witnessed the introduction of wide-ranging progressive social legislation which characterised Spain as one of the continent’s most advanced countries.

As part of a European social democratic party family which currently appears to be unable to advance a narrative capable of obtaining the support of sceptical electorates more attracted to the austerity-based prescriptions of the centre-right, the PSOE is hardly unique. The party’s predicament is nevertheless singularly discouraging as it has struggled to come to terms with challenges which did not even exist when Spaniards last went to the polls four years ago. Spain’s political arena has been transformed by the breakthrough of [Podemos](#), to the party’s left, and [Ciudadanos](#), to the centre-right of the PSOE.

Although neither of the newcomers may be capable of dislodging the PSOE from its position as the second largest party in terms of votes and parliamentary seats, an eloquent indication of the degree to which the PSOE’s fortunes have declined is the fact that not only is the party incapable of improving on the historically low result obtained at the 2011 general election – just 28.7 per cent of the vote and 110 seats – but, rather, it is likely to do significantly worse. Should the PSOE lose more than twenty seats, the current leader, Pedro Sánchez, who only took up his post in July 2014, may well find his position untenable.



PSOE president Pedro Sanchez. He might be waving goodbye to party leadership, should the bad projections for PSOE materialize. Credits: [PSPV-PSOE](#)

This failure to progress under Sánchez’s leadership has been particularly galling given the [PP](#) government’s patent shortcomings: despite some progress in reducing unemployment, the rate remains above 20 per cent of the workforce, including just under half of the under-25s. Whereas the PP claims that Spain is currently creating half of all new jobs in the European Union, the vast majority of these are on insecure, temporary contracts, and the last four

years has witnessed a sharp rise in the number of young, highly qualified Spaniards forced to find employment abroad.

Moreover, there is the issue of corruption, which led to the resignation of the Health Minister, Ana Mato, in November 2014; even more devastating for the government's credibility has been the involvement of the former party treasurer, Luis Bárcenas, in a slush fund which has allegedly benefited a number of party figures, up to and including Rajoy himself. Bárcenas is due to stand trial once the general election is safely out of the way.

The opportunity for the PSOE to make political capital out of these corruption allegations has nevertheless been neutralised by the party's own involvement in alleged corruption, most notably in the party's Andalusian stronghold, where PSOE politicians have been accused of embezzlement relating to payments made to companies laying off employees in the region. Andalusia remains a key region for the PSOE at the 2015 general election, along with Extremadura and Asturias. Should a poor result lead to Pedro Sánchez's resignation as PSOE general secretary, it is likely that Susana Díaz, President of the Andalusian regional government since September 2013, will be touted to replace him.

All opinion polls in the run-up to the general election indicate that the PP will remain the largest party, albeit obtaining significantly less support than the 44.6 per cent of the vote obtained in 2011, when Rajoy's party won 186 seats, and the PP would be relieved to break through the 30 per cent barrier on 20 December. The combined vote of the PP and PSOE would therefore account for just over half of the total vote, constituting a historic shift in Spain's political system.

Losing more electoral support than any other party, the PP has nevertheless remained clearly ahead of all its rivals throughout most of its period in office. It is worth pointing out, however, that the last survey published by the government's official polling organisation, CIS, before the general election indicated that 41 per cent of the electorate remained undecided as to which party to vote for. Given the volatility of the PSOE's electorate over recent decades compared to the more consistent support for the PP, it would appear that the final choice of 'late deciders' would more likely benefit the PP rather than the PSOE.

Alternatively, with the much-heralded end of Spain's two-party system leading to a contest in which each of the four parties appears capable of obtaining more than 20 per cent of the vote, the election night surprise may be provided by Ciudadanos and Podemos. Whatever the result, the PSOE is faced with the tough challenge of convincing the electorate of its continuing relevance at a time when many voters appear to be looking elsewhere for answers.

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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.

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