

Spanish Prime Minister Calls Snap Election for July

Pedro Sánchez, who leads a fragile coalition government, made the announcement after his liberal party lost ground to conservatives in regional and local elections over the weekend.



By Emma Bubola and Jason Horowitz

May 29, 2023

Spain's prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, said Monday that he would dissolve Parliament and called a snap election for July after his liberal party suffered bruising defeats in regional and local elections over the weekend.

“Although yesterday's elections had a local and regional scope, the meaning of the vote conveys a message that goes beyond that,” Mr. Sánchez said, speaking in front of Spain's presidential palace. “I take personal responsibility for the results.”

The announcement by Mr. Sánchez, who is popular in the European Union for his progressive policies but has been increasingly a weight on his party's fortunes, brings to a premature end the country's first coalition government since the return of democracy in the 1970s.

But that coalition, formed in 2020 after a monthslong political limbo, was from the start a hodgepodge of leftist parties and deeply polarizing Catalan and Basque separatists. Its abiding fragility came to the fore with the local election results.

Mr. Sánchez's Socialist Workers' Party was crushed by the conservative Popular Party. But in a sign of the shifting political winds, the far-right Vox party — still taboo to many moderates — also performed well, and now is represented in all the country's regional parliaments.

“Kicking out Pedro Sánchez to repeal each and every one of his policies,” will be the party's focus, Santiago Abascal, Vox's leader, said at a news conference on Monday.



Supporters of the conservative Popular Party celebrated election results on Sunday at party headquarters in Madrid. Javier Soriano/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

During this spring's nasty campaign, Mr. Sánchez sought to highlight the achievements of his party. Mr. Sánchez has overseen an economic growth rate above the European Union average and the country's deepest drop in unemployment since 2008, and given Spaniards relatively low power prices despite the energy crisis that has swept the continent, thanks to a price cap won from Brussels.

But conservatives found fertile ground in Mr. Sánchez's dependence on his coalition's separatists and far-left forces, and they attacked vigorously.

"That has given ammunition to the right wing to say Sánchez is in the hands of radical people," said Ignacio Jurado, a professor of political science at the Carlos III University in Madrid.

Mr. Sánchez's decision to move up the national elections to July 23 from their planned date at the end of the year was an effort to staunch the political bleeding as his government hemorrhages popularity. While moving up the elections won't solve Mr. Sánchez's problems, Mr. Jurado said, "it will be better."

But even if an accelerated timetable limits damage to Mr. Sánchez's political career, he seems significantly diminished from when he bound onto the international stage five years ago.

Mr. Sánchez, young, tall and photogenic, unexpectedly took power in June 2018 after he called for a no-confidence vote that brought down the conservative government amid a

slush-fund scandal in the conservative Popular Party.

He then formed a government with the support of the leftist Unidas Podemos and the separatist parties, who harbored hopes of breaking away from Madrid, and immediately became a source of hope for liberals desperate for an international standard-bearer during a season of populist and hard-right victories across the Continent.



Mr. Sánchez, seated at bottom left, at the Parliament in Madrid in March. He has been in power since 2018. J J Guillen/EPA, via Shutterstock

But signs of the volatility of his coalition showed in early 2019, when Catalan lawmakers withdrew their support. Mr. Sánchez called an election and stayed on as a caretaker, but Spain endured months of political uncertainty until his re-formed coalition's victory in January 2020.

In the ensuing years, the Covid pandemic hit Spain hard but Mr. Sánchez earned kudos from Brussels for his stewardship of relief funds, the Spanish economy improved and he sought a larger footprint in Brussels.

“We won't be passive actors in the European debate,” Mr. Sánchez said at a business leader event in 2019. “We will be at the vanguard.”

But all along, the cracks in his coalition became more visible, and Spanish voters noticed. They also seemed to have tired of Mr. Sánchez himself, who as conservatives sought to nationalize the local races, making them a referendum on Madrid, became a drag on his party's candidates even in apparent strongholds like Seville, where the

popular mayor lost.

The conservative Popular Party, in fact, made substantial gains in regional and local elections held across Spain on Sunday.

“Spain was dyed blue,” Cuca Gamarra, the secretary of the Popular Party, wrote on Twitter, referring to the party’s color, describing a “strong, clear and resounding result.”

But now the conservatives have to forge a difficult coalition of their own. To govern the cities and regions, the Popular Party now has to enter into negotiations with the far-right Vox party, which has released videos of its leader on horseback calling for the “reconquest” of Spain and has called for the walling off of North African enclaves. Vox, which won elections to form part of a regional government in Northwest Spain in March, has now doubled its votes compared with local elections in 2019.



Supporters of the far-right Vox party at an anti-government protest in Madrid in November. The party has doubled its votes in regional elections since 2019. Pierre-Philippe Marcou/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

But Vox remains anathema to many of Spain’s moderate voters, and the Popular Party will most likely need their support to win the national elections in July.

Experts say that Mr. Sánchez will seek to exploit that uncomfortable alliance in much the same way that the Popular Party used his own coalition partners against him.

The Popular Party performed strongly against the Socialist Workers’ Party in the

regions of Valencia, Aragón and the Balearic Islands. Unidas Podemos, Mr. Sánchez' coalition partner, was also battered in Sunday's election, and lost all 10 of its representatives in the Madrid regional parliament.

The election will take place shortly after Spain will assume the presidency of the Council of the European Union, raising the possibility that the country might change its prime minister during its term.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: Spain's Leader Calls Snap Election After Regional Losses for His Party