

In Spain's Election, Left and Right Answer for the Company They Keep

Before voting Sunday, a focus on the leading parties' allies has dominated the campaign — and obscured debate about more fundamental issues.



By Jason Horowitz

Reporting from Barcelona, Spain

July 21, 2023

The war in Ukraine is raging. Scorching temperatures are prompting a reckoning with climate change. Economic insecurity abounds. But the Spanish election may pivot on the question of bad company.

As Spaniards prepare to vote in national elections on Sunday, experts say that voters are being asked to decide who — the center-left government or the favored center-right opposition — has the more unsavory, less acceptable and dangerously extremist friends.

Polls suggest that Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, the Socialist leader, will be ousted by conservatives who have made hay of his reliance on allies who have tried to secede from Spain. They include northern Spain's Catalanian independence movement and political descendants of the Basque secessionist group ETA, who infuriated voters before local elections in May when they fielded 44 convicted terrorists as candidates, including seven found guilty of murder.

Mr. Sánchez's Socialists have, for their part, raised alarm about their conservative opponents' extremist allies in the Vox party. Vox could become the first far-right party to enter government since the Franco dictatorship if, as expected, the leading conservative party wins and needs its support.



Mr. Sánchez at a rally in Madrid. “This election is about the partners,” one expert said. Juan Medina/Reuters

The hyper-focus on political bedfellows has obscured a debate about critical issues in Spain such as housing, the economy and employment, as well as the prime minister’s actual record, which includes winning from the European Union a price cap on gas for electricity.

“This election is about the partners,” said Pablo Simón, a political scientist at Madrid’s Carlos III University. “The partners of the right and the partners of the left.”

Neither the conservative Popular Party nor Mr. Sánchez’s Socialists have gone up or down radically in support since the last elections, in 2019, and neither are expected to win an absolute majority of Spain’s 350-seat Congress.

Instead, the Populist Party and its potential nationalist partners in Vox have used the prime minister’s allies to create a picture of what they call “Sánchezismo.” They define it as the prime minister’s self-interested, arrogant and unprincipled impulse to break any promise and make any alliance to stay in power.

The main beef is his alliance with pro-independence Catalans. During Spain’s last national election, Mr. Sánchez promised to arrest the leading Catalan secessionists. But soon after, with his government’s survival depending on their support, he began negotiating their pardons instead.

“He succumbed to political pressure and the need to govern the country,” said Gabriel Rufián, a member of Parliament with Esquerra Republicana, a pro-Catalan independence party.

Conservatives also frequently recall that Mr. Sánchez once claimed he would not be able to sleep through the night if the far-left Podemos party entered his government. But Mr. Sánchez needed the party, so it did.

Since then, Podemos has collapsed and, experts say, its mistakes and overreaches have turned moderate and swing voters to the conservatives. Mr. Sánchez is hoping that a new left-wing umbrella group, Sumar, can make up for the losses, and get him to a threshold where he can again turn to his secessionist allies for support in Parliament.



A rally for Sumar in Barcelona. Mr. Sánchez is hoping the new left-wing umbrella group can lift his chances. Maria Contreras Coll for The New York Times

In an interview on National Spanish Radio on Sunday, Mr. Sánchez said he would, if necessary, seek support from both independence parties again.

“Of course,” Mr. Sánchez said. “To carry out a labor reform, I would look for votes, even under the stones. What I will never do is what the PP and Vox have done, which is to cut rights and freedoms, denying sexist violence. I will make deals with whomever I have to, in order to move forward.”

Supporters of Mr. Sánchez point out that the negotiations and pardons have greatly reduced tensions with Catalan's separatist movement, but conservative voters say that the near-secession still leaves a bad taste in their mouth.

Even more so, they say they are disgusted by Mr. Sánchez's dependence on the votes of EH Bildu, the descendants of the political wing of ETA, which killed more than 850 people as it, too, sought to carve out an independent country from Spain.

That Basque terrorist group disbanded more than a decade ago, and Spain's judiciary has deemed Bildu a legitimate and democratic political group. But for many Spaniards it remains tainted by the bloody legacy of the past and concern for the country's cohesion in the future.

Even Mr. Sánchez's key allies recognized that the right benefited by dictating the terms of the election as a referendum on Bildu.

"Their whole campaign is constructed on this," said Ernest Urtasun, a member of European Parliament and the spokesman for the left-wing Sumar party. "It mobilizes a lot of the electorate on the right and it demobilizes the electorate of the left."

But he said the race was still fluid in its last days and claimed that internal polling showed them inching up. The more the left could stick to social and economic issues, and not its allies, he said, the better its chances.

If Mr. Sánchez does require their votes in Parliament to govern, the leaders of the independence movements have made it clear their support will not come for free.

There will be an additional "price," including continued negotiations toward an eventual referendum for Catalanian independence, Mr. Rufián said. He argued that the right wing, and especially Vox, always had a wedge issue to distract voters from real problems and this time it was the Catalans and the Basques.

"We can't be held responsible" for the talking points of the right, Mr. Rufián said.

Mr. Rufián said Mr. Sánchez had warned him that Spain was not yet ready to pardon the secessionists and that his coalition would suffer politically if they were granted, but under pressure the prime minister reversed course anyway.

"I think it's good for democracy that political prisoners are not in jail," he said of the pardons Mr. Sánchez granted. "If there is a penalty for that, I accept that."

But the pardons and the alliances have made it easier for conservative candidates to convince Spain's voters to judge Mr. Sánchez by the company he keeps.

Alberto Núñez Feijóo, the leader of the Popular Party, has called Mr. Sánchez the "great electoral hope" for "those who used to go around wearing ski masks," a clear

reference to the ETA terrorists. Left-wing leaders have noted that Mr. Feijóo appears to have had dubious personal friends of his own, drawing renewed attention to pictures taken of him hanging out on a yacht with a convicted cocaine trafficker.

“Sánchez has a really pathological anxiety for power,” said Aurora Rodil Martínez, the Vox deputy mayor of Elche, who, in a potential preview of things to come, serves with a mayor from the Popular Party. “I think his personality is focused on himself and therefore he has no shame handing himself over to the extreme left, to the heirs of ETA.”

She said his allies in the Catalan independence movement “want to separate themselves from Spain and deny our nation.” Mr. Sánchez, she added, “has got down on his knees” for his far-left allies in Podemos and needed the support of Bildu, “terrorists guilty of bloody crimes.”

All of that, experts say, amounted to a distraction from the country’s real challenges.

“We are discussing about the partners,” said Mr. Simón, the political scientist, adding, “it’s a terrible thing because we are not discussing about policies.”



A poster of the Vox leader, Santiago Abascal. Maria Contreras Coll for The New York Times