

What the Collapse of Spain's Far Right Means Going Forward

About the only thing clear from Spain's muddled election results was that Spaniards were turning away from the political extremes.



By Jason Horowitz

Reporting from Madrid and Barcelona

July 24, 2023

Europe's liberal and moderate establishment breathed easier on Monday after Spain's nationalist Vox party faltered in Sunday's elections, stalling for now a surge from far-right parties around the continent that seemed on the brink of washing over even the progressive bastion of Spain.

"A relief for Europe," read a front-page headline in the liberal La Repubblica in Italy, where the hard-right leader Giorgia Meloni became prime minister last year and predicted "the hour of the patriots has arrived" in a video message to her Vox allies this month.

But instead of Vox becoming the first hard-right party to enter government in Spain since the end of the Franco dictatorship nearly 50 years ago, as many polls had predicted, it sank. The party's poor returns at the polls also took down the underperforming center-right conservatives who had depended on Vox's support to form a government.

As a result, no single party or coalition immediately gained enough parliamentary seats to govern, thrusting Spain into a familiar political muddle and giving new life to Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who only days ago seemed moribund. Suddenly, Mr. Sánchez appeared best positioned to cobble together another progressive government in the coming weeks to avoid new elections.

"This democracy will find the governability formula," he told the leaders of his Spanish Socialist Workers' Party on Monday, according to El País.

What is clear for now is that Spanish voters rebuked the Vox party, which lost nearly half its seats in Parliament, signaling a clear desire to turn away from the extremes and back toward the political center.

Pro-European politicians took the result as an encouraging sign that next year's European elections would also be won in the center, dealing a setback to the far-right forces that have made gains in Sweden, Finland, Germany, France and Italy, as well as in the United States.

Vox's campaign parroted nearly uniform hard-right, nationalist views espoused in other nations, with opposition to migration and L.G.B.T.Q. rights, promotion of traditional Christian values and the assertion of nationalism over meddling from the European Union.

But many of those issues failed to draw Spanish voters, or even scared them, and the country's election results went contrary to Europe's political winds.

Instead, the results made clear that the rise of Vox had more to do with the nationalist response to a 2017 explosion of secessionist fervor in Spain's Catalonia region. Mr. Sánchez managed to defuse that issue during his five years in office by delivering pardons and weakening penalties for the secessionists.



Pedro Sánchez, Spain's Socialist leader and prime minister, in Madrid, on Sunday. Nacho Doce/Reuters

For that he paid a political price among Spaniards angered by the Catalans, but as long as the issue seemed on the back burner, so did Vox. Ultimately, the party's message had far fewer takers in this election than it did in 2019.

"Catalonia has been one of the main drivers of the rise of Vox," said Juan Rodríguez Teruel, a political scientist at the University of Valencia.

But Sunday's results also showed that the Catalan issue was not quite dead yet. On Monday, it became clear that the small independence parties of that region may very well hold the key to unlocking a new government for Mr. Sánchez, just as they did in the last vote.

Critically, those parties include the pro-independence allies of Carles Puigdemont, the former regional president of Catalonia who led the failed secessionist movement and is still on the run, living in self-imposed exile in Belgium.

“Puigdemont could make Sánchez president,” read a headline in the daily Spanish newspaper El Mundo.

A complicated cat-and-mouse game was immediately underway on Monday, with Spanish prosecutors issuing a new arrest warrant for Mr. Puigdemont.

“One day you are decisive in order to form a Spanish government, the next day Spain orders your arrest,” he tweeted on Monday.

Gabriel Rufián, a member of Parliament with the Republican Left of Catalonia, a pro-Catalan independence party, said in a pre-election interview that Mr. Sánchez had no choice but to deal with the secessionists.

“Four years ago in the electoral campaign, Sánchez promised to search for Puigdemont in Waterloo and arrest him. He could not. It was absurd,” he said. “Months later he sat down at the negotiating table with us. It was because of political pressure, because he needed to govern his country.”

On Sunday night, after the vote, he boiled his message down simply to “Either Catalonia or Vox.” But his party lost support, too, in Spaniards’ turn to the center.

What a revival the Catalonia issue would mean now for Spain, the secessionists and Vox remains to be seen.

Vox was established a decade ago when its leader, Santiago Abascal, split from the Popular Party, long a big center-right tent that included monarchists, libertarian supporters of same-sex marriage, ultraconservative Catholics and Spaniards who detested the independence movements of the north.

The party believed in a unified Spain; however, overt expressions of that view — even waving the national flag — in the decades after the Franco regime were considered taboo signs of nationalism.

But spurred by Catalonia’s push for independence, Vox was more than willing to cross that line. A surge of Spaniards followed it.

The nationalists in Vox — who called for the Catalan movement to be put down by any means necessary — soaked up support. By the 2019 elections, they had grown to the third largest party in the country.

In a short speech Sunday night after his party’s drubbing, a downcast Mr. Abascal acknowledged that Mr. Sánchez now had the support to block a new government, and

could also be sworn in again with the support of the far-left and the separatist parties, or what he called “the support of communism, coup separatism and terrorism.”

“We’re going to resist,” he insisted, saying that his party was prepared to be in the opposition or “repeat elections.”

But analysts said new elections would likely only weaken Vox further. The leverage had shifted back to Catalonia, and more specifically to the more hard-line Together for Catalonia party, founded by Mr. Puigdemont.

“We will not make Sánchez president in exchange for nothing,” Míriam Nogueras, a leader of the Together for Catalonia party, said at her headquarters Sunday night.

Others in her party, who were pardoned by Mr. Sánchez, have suggested that further amnesties and a referendum on independence may be the price they demand.

But left-wing politicians and locals wary of Vox worried that increased tension with Catalonia was exactly what the far right needed for a resurgence.

“We want dialogue with Catalonia. We want an agreement. Go out and vote for dialogue, for an agreement, for a better Catalonia,” Yolanda Díaz, the leader of the hard-left Sumar party, which won 31 seats, told a rally in Barcelona on Friday night.



Yolanda Díaz at a Sumar rally in Barcelona on Friday. Maria Contreras Coll for The New York Times

On Monday, her party reached out to Mr. Puigdemont and the Together for Catalonia party to convince them to back the government.

On the eve of Sunday's election in Barcelona, along a main thoroughfare that was blanketed in Catalan flags during the 2017 protests, there was only one visible

"The situation in Spain and the eruption of the extreme right is a consequence of what happened here in Catalonia," said Joaquim Hernandez, 64.

"By not having the referendum, you keep the tension and the confrontation that benefits the independence parties and Vox," he said, "because Catalonia is unfortunately an argument that the nationalists use to win votes."

Rachel Chaundler contributed reporting from Madrid.