

# Monday briefing: Spain's nail-biting election ends in hung parliament - what happens now?

**In today's newsletter: The country's conservative parties were meant to romp to victory in snap elections, but with 100% of the vote counted, neither the left or right blocs have secured a majority**

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Good morning.

A few days ago it seemed a foregone conclusion that a coalition of rightwing parties were going to win Spain's snap elections. A huge majority was not a guarantee, but most of the polls were in their favour. [Election night, however, told a different story.](#)

While the centre-right People's Party (PP) secured the largest number of votes, they have not met the threshold of 176 seats to gain an absolute majority in parliament, even with the support of the far-right Vox party. The two parties won 136 and 33 seats respectively, giving them a grand total of 169 seats.

The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) of prime minister [Pedro Sánchez](#) on the other hand, outperformed predictions significantly, with 122 seats, two more than they had before. The party's far-left allies, Sumar, were in fourth place with 31 seats.

Last night was supposed to bludgeon the PSOE's tentative hold on power, instead it showed their impressive capacity to mobilise their base, following their defeat in local elections less than two months ago. Meanwhile the far-right Vox party, who were widely predicted to be the king makers of this election, lost 19 of their 52 seats.

To make things more confusing, both sides have claimed that the results are a success, with the PP's leader, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, insisting that he viewed this as a victory for his party. While this may technically be the case, Feijóo is still unable to form a government, so there is a chance that there will be another election before the end of the year. While the Spanish public wakes up to an inconclusive result, one thing is clear: Spain has - for now - bucked the trend of far-right parties making their way into government across [Europe](#).

For today's newsletter, I spoke to the Guardian's Madrid correspondent, Sam Jones, about last night's results and how [Spain](#) got to this highly divided point. That's right after the headlines.

**In depth: 'The prospect of the far right playing a big role in governance ... has receded'**



Santiago Abascal the leader of Vox heads to the polls yesterday. Photograph: Aldara Zarrana/Getty Images

The decision by Pedro Sánchez, Spain's prime minister, to call a snap election six months earlier than he needed to was a huge risk that could have backfired. Many predicted that it would.

But, on the campaign trail, Sánchez put the options in front of the Spanish people in very stark terms. He told the public that they had to choose “between the forces of progress and the forces of reactionary conservatism”, Sam Jones wrote [in his analysis](#).

“The aim of that gamble was to mobilise left-wing voters massively,” Sam says. And they were able to pull that off. There was a 70% turn out despite the searing temperatures, which is significantly higher than in 2019. But despite this success in galvanising voters, it will be weeks, maybe even months, before there is a conclusive idea on who will run the government.

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### What triggered the snap elections?

At the end of May, Spain had its regional and municipal elections, in which prime minister Pedro Sánchez's Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) suffered significant losses, with the conservative opposition People's party (PP) taking control of a string of key city halls and regions.

After four years in power in which the government has been faced with the Catalan independence push, the effects of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis, the PSOE were braced for a bad night, but it turned out to be even worse than they had anticipated. The PP took 11 regions up from five, in comparison to the socialists who secured three, having held nine before the elections.

The results were troubling for the socialist party but not catastrophic, so Sánchez's response surprised many. Living up to his reputation as a risk-taker, the prime minister called a snap general election just after the regional elections. “It was an entirely pragmatic response from Sánchez and it was not a bad move because he knew what he was in for over the next six or so months with the mounting criticisms and attacks,” Sam says. “So he thought, ‘Let's bite the bullet and get it over with.’ And he did.” The stakes were high but Sánchez was hoping that, as with his [previous gambles](#), it would pay off.

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### The campaign

The PP and Vox homed in on Sánchez's political dealings as a way to portray the socialist leader as unreliable and power-hungry. His association with the Basque nationalist party, EH Bildu, a group that had ties to the disbanded separatist terror group Eta, had been at the centre of these tirades. “The whole business with Eta is still very warm [in Spain] even though it hasn't been on the scene for a long time,” Sam says. Eta was an armed organisation that for four decades tried to achieve independence for seven regions in northern Spain and south-west France. Sánchez's involvement with Bildu, a party that the PSOE has relied on to get policy through Congress, only became more controversial after it was revealed Bildu was fielding 44 convicted members of Eta as candidates, including seven people found guilty of violent crimes.

The right-wing parties, PP and Vox, used this to claim that “[Sánchez] has gotten into bed with the terrorists again”. “That's the constant line of attack from the right and the far right. They say Sánchez is hypocritical, cynical and is very happy to rely on the votes of ‘terrorists’, as they call Bildu, despite the fact that [ultimately] they are still a legitimate political party,” Sam says.

And then there was the political blunder that dealt a huge blow to Sánchez's reputation. Last August the Spanish government passed new legislation known as "Only Yes Means Yes" on sexual consent. It created a loophole that inadvertently cut jail time for more than 1,000 convicted rapists. [Sánchez was forced to apologise and swiftly pushed through changes](#). But the political damage was done, with Vox leader Santiago Abascal saying: "As far as Pedro Sánchez is concerned, protecting democracy is about getting the votes of rapists, coup-mongers, [the convicted Eta murderer] Txapote and of Mohammed." However, the chiding and campaigning did not work as well as the PP and Vox had hoped.

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## A surprise loss

Riding high on the success of the regional and municipal elections, the Vox party seemed as if they were a shoo-in to help form the next Spanish government. They had come a long way from their formation less than 10 years ago. Vox's breakthrough came in the 2019 elections, running on an [anti-immigrant and anti-LGBT ticket](#), with a heavy focus against the Catalan independence movement. They have also been campaigning to repeal and roll back laws on abortion, gendered violence and euthanasia. Their tactics seemed to be working - Vox [doubled its share of the vote](#) in May.

But yesterday's results show that their influence is waning. "It's an absolute bloody nose for Vox, no doubt about it," Sam says. "It looks like a lot of their voters have gone back to the PP."

He adds: "Vox and the PP thought they had the momentum to win this and get very close to the absolute majority of 176 seats, but that just hasn't happened." The "emphatic victory" expected for the PP simply did not arrive.

This election has revealed that the PP could have shackled itself to a slowly sinking ship. "For now, the prospect of the far right playing a big role in governance for the first time since the return to democracy after Franco's death has receded," Sam says.

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## What's next?

The PP can now only govern with the support of both Vox and other regional parties. However, Vox's politics means that many other groups have drawn a red line on going into coalition with them.

Sánchez, on the other hand, has far more options in terms of other parties he can call on for support. "But that's going to open up the old can of worms for the PSOE," Sam says because they will have to call on the Catalan independence parties for support, including Bildu, which will give Sánchez's rivals more ammo to portray him and the PSOE as anti-nationalists. He will also need the backing of the hardline Junts party, who do not support Sánchez and have said that they would "take advantage of [this] opportunity", meaning they will likely use this moment to try to bring Catalan independence back on the table.

There will be weeks of negotiations to try to secure the number of seats needed, until 17 August when parliament reconvenes. If there is no resolution, there could be another election before the end of the year.

The most striking takeaway from this election, however, is that Spain appears to be bucking the Europe-wide trend seen in [Germany](#), [Hungary](#), [Italy](#), [France](#) and [Finland](#) of far-right parties steadily making gains.

“There was always a kind of assumption, before Vox really broke through, that Spain was immune to it because of the recent memory of the Franco dictatorship, and because it wasn’t a very nationalistic country,” Sam says. And that seemed true until Vox started gaining momentum riding the wave of public anger after the Catalan independence crisis. “It seems that Spain is coming up to the line - which many other European countries have stepped over - and thought [at least for now] ‘No, we’re not going to do this,’” Sam concludes.