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Spanish State

Election Results, Trends and Political Perspectives

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The results of the Andalusian regional elections left everyone waiting anxiously for what might follow. They indicated a trend which, if continued in an upward sense, would confirm the worst forecasts, comparable to the end of "Game of Thrones". But finally, the results were not an absolute disaster. The chessboard has moved just enough for these results to let us dream of a horizon that is not marked by a radical neoliberal tsunami, but by a situation of relative pause in the political landscape. And that is a good thing at a time when the chances of an offensive to win new rights are reduced.

But the dangers remain possible. If the government that is formed does not solve the crisis of the national-territorial conflict and the social problems that we face, if this new government does not take decisive measures to deal with the problems in a radical way (going to the root of the problem), we run the risk of a right-wing radicalization that could be devastating in the medium term.

The general results give important indications:

1. The LePenization of a large part of society has been (temporarily?) curbed;
2. The national-territorial conflict continues to mark the agenda;
3. the results do not make a clear change in the situation possible.

Popular Party (PP): between the neoliberal economic recovery and the ultra-reactionary turning point

Its slogan, "safe value" – opposed to the "uncertainty" attributed to the policies of the PSOE – was intended to be a continuation of Mariano Rajoy's discourse on economic recovery. The permanent lies concerning job creation at the time of the Rajoy governments were related to the fantasies of the Instituto Juan de Mariana – a neoliberal think tank linked to the PP – on economic recovery. This was one of the main axes of the electoral campaign of Pablo Casado's PP.

But he could not limit himself to continuity with his predecessor. He radicalized the programme, the discourse, the tone and the forms, knowing that he was in competition with Ciudadanos (Cs) and Vox to occupy the space farthest to the right. But it remains to be seen whether this radicalization is not one of the elements that has increased abstention among an electorate characterized by its advanced age. Because this electoral sector was the real "safe value" of the PP and it is more than likely that it was left behind by this radical change.

Finally, this turnaround did not convince either the really ultra-sectors of the electorate of the PP, who see Vox as a force in full swing, with more nationalistic values, not having a past as marked by corruption and able to win also the votes of abstentionists to awaken a real patriotic illusion.

All these elements caused a significant leakage of votes to Cs and Vox, and the PP has had one of its worst results. The right-wing vote that Casado has invoked can be turned against him: with such a fall in votes, the PP

could soon find itself below Cs.

It is hard to see how the PP can get out of its present situation. But it is more than possible that without a clear roadmap to strategically reorient the party and its prospects, we will have in the coming months other cases like the passage of Angel Garrido from the PP to the Cs. And it is very probable that the first steps will be opportunistically taken in municipalities and regions where there has been sharp competition between the right-wing forces, which could be repeated in the next elections.

Ciudadanos: a central task, the competition with Vox

Alberto Rivera has progressed by about one million votes since the general elections of 2016. But this is below the result last December in Andalusia and it is less than he had hoped.

Just like the PP, Cs was strongly conditioned by the irruption of Vox and the predictions of its further rise, which were clearly inflated. An opponent to the right of the PP, challenging its electorate, whose success was clearly expected, could only help Rivera to seize a political place.

And he saved his vote quite well by accepting the debate around Vox's themes at the price of a terribly exaggerated gesticulation. He thus avoided some of his potential electorate turning to Vox. But he also won part of the electorate that turned away from the PP while believing for the moment that the discourse of Abascal was excessively radical.

The moment seems to be favourable for Ciudadanos. If this combination of elements persists, if the PP fails to reorient itself and if the PSOE does not move forward in the domain of granting rights to the population, it is likely that Cs will continue to progress and, in a few months, replace the PP as the second political force of the country.

Since the moment is favourable for it, it makes sense for Ciudadanos to wait quietly without engaging in any form of government with the PSOE. Rivera seems to have understood this well and he marked it as his identity in the campaign. He is unlikely to let himself be carried away by the temptations of government, which would be justifiable only by declaring that "if it is not with me, it will be with the separatists, so it is better that I stop separatism from within". But this is an argument that could only be used once.

Vox: unexpected braking, "May dew"

The big news of the election results was the results of Vox. [1] Throughout the campaign and even on the day of the vote, speculation proliferated about an unlimited rise in votes for Vox, threatening to overtake Unidas Podemos (UP).

As a result, the irruption of Vox with the same percentage as that obtained during the Andalusian elections (about 10 per cent) is not the worst that could have been foreseen, since it was predicted that it would overtake UP. It allows us to breathe more easily, even though the dangers are obvious.

Nevertheless, it is a poor consolation. Behind this score lies a very dark truth. A part of Vox's electorate is

clearly working-class. This may not be the majority component, but there has been a workers' vote in working-class neighbourhoods.

This is a sector that has never politically identified itself with any party and believes that only an authoritarian option can change an extremely difficult social situation. Or that felt so disappointed by the PSOE that it stopped believing that a sociological relationship between the worker and the left was necessary.

Contrary to Ciudadanos, the moment was not favourable for Vox. This can serve as a buffer to limit the growth of Vox, but only at the cost of becoming in practice a little bit Vox. That is what Cs tried and what it will probably do.

On the contrary, an agreement by Alberto Rivera with the PSOE would situate Ciudadanos on the ground of the "loose right" denounced by Abascal. This could be the basis for a gradual growth of Vox's electorate. In any case, Vox's immediate electoral future does not seem to depend entirely on what it does, but on what Ciudadanos can do.

PSOE: between the Sánchez illusion and the useful vote

The illusions about Sanchez's politics and the useful vote aimed at curbing the rise of the right-wing parties came together, allowing the PSOE to obtain more than seven million votes and 123 seats.

These results cannot only be explained by the configuration of the useful vote against the right. The PSOE was only able to regain the two million votes it lost in 2016 thanks to the artificial reappearance of illusions in the socialist vote following on the victory of Pedro Sánchez. These new illusions channelled part of the Unidas Podemos electorate that was afraid of the right-wing trident.

Sánchez surfed on an epic feat, very attractive and not new: he managed to overcome the sabotage of the Socialist barons, to announce a turn to the left by the party (but only in his speeches), to defenestrate Rajoy and to take a pause in the national-territorial conflict (without solving it). Now the story has been embellished by electoral success and he could retain the Socialist vote for a while.

However, although it is attractive, the epic of a left turn by Sanchism rings hollow. In a way this left turn can be compared to the existence of God: many believe in him and even though his existence cannot be completely ruled out, no one has seen him clearly manifested in reality.

It is this same mixture of new illusions and useful votes that explains a remobilization of the Socialist vote in regions like Andalusia, where part of the electorate who had abstained in the regional elections last December preferred to vote once again for the PSOE. This Andalusian fact is not anecdotal: it represents nearly half a million votes. A quarter of the total increase of the PSOE vote in these legislative elections was realized in Andalusia, where there is already a kind of triple alliance of the right.

Nevertheless, Sanchism has to deal with a central problem. In the current context there is no room for immobilism. The vote for the PSOE is a vote that demands the return of social rights and a way out for the demands of the nations without a state. If Sánchez is not up to these two aspirations, the phenomenon of the new illusion could turn against him and be expressed in the medium term by a collapse of the PSOE, which would put the reinforced right at centre stage.

The PSOE has announced that it will try to govern alone. Sánchez is a prisoner of the illusion he has created: he would like to conclude a pact with Rivera that would stabilize him, which is symbolized by his "no cordon sanitaire will resist the urge to move forward". But the left turn that he himself invented to gain legitimacy limits this possibility. His electors themselves made it clear to him during the election night by singing "Not with Rivera".

He also wants to avoid governing with UP to avoid mixing the government with what can happen in the short term. He will therefore seek support for his investiture and will have to navigate a sea of difficult one-off agreements with several political options, depending on the moment and the objective.

Unidas Podemos: resistance without perspective

The loss of about 1.3 million votes was welcomed by those who expected to lose more than two million. But the flight of votes from UP to the PSOE and to abstention obliges us to think seriously about the future of this organization.

It is obvious that part of Iglesias's campaign discourse was true: the slanders against Podemos orchestrated by the "sewers of the state" have wreaked havoc. There should be no doubt about the negative impact of this campaign organized by the ruling classes of the country.

But it would have been possible to resist in much better conditions if the project had not moved so far from its starting point, if the basic democratic processes had not been stifled and if Podemos had learned how to live with the different tendencies within it, instead of crushing them. That is, if the project of advanced structural reforms had not been modified by favouring an agreement with the PSOE, run by a bureaucratic apparatus with its own interests.

On the other hand, we experienced a UP campaign with two heads, irreconcilable. On the one hand, an interesting programme putting at the centre a Public Bank, an investment bank to initiate the ecological transition, curb the increase in rents, with constraints imposed on municipalities, link pensions to the consumer price index ... On the other hand, a clear commitment to the PSOE and the Constitution which set strategic boundaries that are clearly irreconcilable with the stated programme.

And this is the keystone: either UP gives priority to its programme, or to alliances with the PSOE. To accept one of these things is to give up the other: either fight for structural reforms that are unacceptable to a PSOE that only makes a left gesticulation without content, or abandon this programme in favour of much more limited measures, in order to govern with the PSOE and respect the Constitution.

However, reducing the whole debate to UP's perspective of entering or not entering the government is a trap that evades the intermediate positions, the shades of grey that can mark the camp in which you find yourself. All of this, of course, is far from posing seriously the question of rank-and-file activism.

An actor in waiting: the national-territorial conflict

Today more than yesterday, this great conflict remains on the agenda. The increase of the independentist and nationalist vote in Catalonia and Euskadi is a reality. Turning a deaf ear, like the PSOE, will not solve the conflict, but

will make it worse.

The successes of the ERC (up by 7 per cent) in Catalonia as well as those of the PNV (+7 per cent) and Bildu (+3 per cent) in Euskadi will mark the agenda. Sanchez has so far attempted to curb the rise of independentism by suspending the open conflict with these forces in both Communities, but it is excluded that this can continue if there is no proposal that attempts to resolve in one way or another the fundamental national-territorial conflict: the exhaustion of the territorial model inherited from the transition and the lack of response to the demand for the right to decide.

Sanchez must make a move here, in the same way as he must in other domains. Perhaps one way to partially mitigate the momentum for independence would be to increase the level of competence of both Communities without touching the key to open conflict: the demands for self-determination and the right of decision of the two Communities. There may be intermediate gestures between that and nothingness. But it is unlikely that the PSOE will open the substance of the discussion.

What is certain is that whatever it does, it will be obliged to do it at the same time for both processes. To treat Catalonia in preference to Euskadi could generate mobilizing tendencies in Euskadi, which Sánchez has no interest in doing.

The discursive trap of the "bloc of the lefts"

It was to be expected that the press would position the post-election debate as a struggle between the blocs. Whereas the "bloc of the rights" is clear about the general strategic objectives (radical neoliberalism), it is not clear that there is an internal coherence in what has begun to be called the "block of the lefts".

This perspective is directly linked to a governmental alliance between UP and PSOE. Is this really the best way to move forward in the domain of social rights and freedoms? This is rather unlikely, despite the persistence of Iglesias.

Such formulas would compromise the capital for transformation that still exists in UP, to the advantage of the parliamentary stability of the PSOE. It is unlikely that the PSOE is ready to carry out the necessary social transformations and those of the territorial model, allowing a real recovery of labour, feminist, ecological, democratic, etc., rights. Therefore, a governmental compromise on these issues would place UP in a difficult position. UP would be a prisoner of a false choice: defend a government that does not advance where it should, or abandon it by lending the flank to accusations of dividing the "block of the lefts".

A governmental alliance is the shortest way to neutralize the potential for transformation that still exists in UP. Fortunately, and as has been happening for more than a year, Iglesias's governmental aspirations have come up against the insistence of Sánchez on governing alone.

Faced with this option, it would be much more judicious to remain outside the government by conditioning its investiture to commitments on key issues of the most important structural reforms: repeal of labour reform, limiting rent increases, investments for the ecosocial transition, territorial model ... If such reforms were conquered, they would be imputed to the work of oppositional activity by UP, which would not be conditioned or limited by taking part in government. And if by cowardice the PSOE did not proceed to the necessary reforms, UP could capitalize on the discontent of the socialist electorate.

Go beyond Podemos to achieve its founding purpose

During the election night, Iglesias stated that although the results were not the ones expected, the scores "have allowed us to achieve our goals". What are the goals we are talking about and how are we achieving them? A government alliance with the PSOE should be qualified as a means, not an end, an objective. This mixing up of ends and means is one of the Achilles heels of Iglesias's perspectives.

In the context in which we find ourselves, the goal of UP must be to build the necessary means to achieve transformative goals in the short term: structural reforms that improve people's lives. And this cannot be done by a government with the PSOE, which almost everyone considers to be excluded.

On the other hand, the most realistic approach would be to think about how we take steps to move forward in the strategic tasks of the period: to generate a new political and social militant culture, new relations of solidarity between those below, etc. Without progress in this domain, we run the risk that the programme, the coherence and the perspectives of the leaders of UP are as changeable as the votes. And the only perspectives for change will eternally wait for the elections in which UP will win an absolute majority, starting from no one knows what previous social bases.

These tasks of reorganization of the new working class cannot be done exclusively from UP. It is necessary to build a broader horizon, which integrates the best, purifies the worst and enables us to add much of the social space that is expressed outside Unidas Podemos, whose concerns are at the centre of a revolutionary strategy to transform the country and the world.

San Fernando, April 29, 2019

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[1] According to an Andalusian saying, "the dew of the month of May spoils everything or revives everything."