

# Elections in Spain: four men debating about women

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**EL PAÍS gender correspondent Pilar Álvarez analyzes Monday night's pre-election debate, during which the all-male candidates discussed sexual consent, surrogacy and the so-called "tampon tax"**

The first women to appear at [the pre-election debate on Monday night](#) – in particular on social networks – were two cleaning ladies. In their work uniforms and mops in hand, they were there to buff up the floor of the TV set in the studios of state broadcaster RTVE minutes before the four-way debate between the male leaders of Spain's biggest political parties got underway.

"There are no – nor have there ever been – female candidates for prime minister in Spain."

During the verbal sparring, the voices of women were not heard. That's because there are no female candidates for prime minister in Spain. But there were mentions of ideas and proposals for women that would have never been heard before [the upsurge in the feminist movement seen in 2018](#). Among the issues covered by the leaders of the Socialist Party (PSOE), Popular Party (PP), Podemos and Ciudadanos (Citizens) were gender-violence victims, sexual consent and the so-called "tampon tax."

Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias made promises on feminist issues during the first part of the debate, which covered the economy. He pledged a reduction in sales tax on feminine hygiene products, which is currently around 10%. Meanwhile, Pablo Casado (PP) and Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) competed with one another over whose party was responsible for [the cross-party pact on gender violence](#). "I'm very proud of being from the party that proposed, approved and promoted [the pact]," said Casado. "We put [the deal] in motion," said Sánchez at another point of the live broadcast. In fact, the pact was approved with almost unanimous support in Congress in 2017, when the PP was in power, but the first funds for the initiative were released by the PSOE after it came to power in June. Before then, feminist movements had called a protest against the PP for not having provided the promised funding.

## Consent

Prime Minister Sánchez had a message for Casado, which he requested be passed on to PP candidate for Barcelona Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo. The politician, who is also a historian and a journalist, was involved in a controversial moment last week during another televised debate, when she was discussing [the issue of consent](#). "Do you really say 'yes, yes, yes' right up until the end?" she asked a rival politician on the panel. "Mr Casado, I would like for you to say to your candidates, and above all your female candidates, that 'No means no,' and that when a woman does not say yes, that is a no," Sánchez told his PP rival during Monday's debate. "I am saying this because there is clear experience on the part of women that sometimes when they feel coerced they are unable to say no,"

he continued, referring to the so-called Running of the Bulls rape case, which saw an 18-year-old sexually assaulted by a group of men during the 2016 fiestas in the northern Spanish city of Pamplona.

### **The “right” to have children**

The PSOE leader also had a rebuke for the Ciudadanos leader. “To you, Mr Rivera, I say that a woman’s womb is not for hire,” in reference to the intention of the party leader to [legalize surrogacy in Spain](#), in line with the altruistic model of Canada and United Kingdom. Rivera responded by saying that the prime minister had “retrograde” ideas. “So you are the one to decide for women or should adult women be able to choose freely? Are you talking about surrogacy? Don’t be retrograde Mr Sánchez, we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: [euthanasia, a dignified death](#), surrogacy,” he continued.

“Casado and Sánchez competed with one another over whose party was responsible for the cross-party pact on gender violence.”

Sánchez argued during the debate that he supported feminism “without adjectives,” in contrast to the “liberal feminism” that Ciudadanos champions, in which surrogacy and prostitution are included. Meanwhile, Rivera accused female ministers from the PSOE of excluding women from Ciudadanos from the [March 8 Women’s Day protests this year](#). “All Spaniards have the image of Ms Calvo [the deputy prime minister, Carmen Calvo] and other figures from the PSOE shouting against the women of Ciudadanos during the women’s demonstration,” the Ciudadanos candidate said. “Could you be more sectarian than to throw out women from Women’s Day as the PSOE did?” The ministers who took part in the march did shout: “Liberal feminism, completely ridiculous!” in response to the Ciudadanos manifesto. But they did not throw out the participants from Ciudadanos.

Casado, meanwhile, advocated a maternity law so that any woman who decides to be a mother “can have everything she needs.” He did not mention the issue of abortion, about which he [uttered some controversial phrases ahead of the campaign](#). “If we want to finance our pensions we should think about how to have more children, not about abortions,” he said in February. Pedro Sánchez stated that with phrases like this, “you don’t just frighten men, but also the women in our country.”

### **FE DE ERRORES**

An earlier version of this story wrongly stated that Spain hadn’t ever had a woman run for president. In 2008, Rosa Díez, the spokesperson of UPyD, was the first female candidate for president as the leader of nationwide political party.

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