

Elections in Spain: Podemos implodes, Catalan right to decide reasserted

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In the May 26 European elections, the greatest losses by an affiliate of the United Left Group/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) in the European parliament were incurred in the Spanish state by the radical force Unidas Podemos. The fact that the European contest coincided with elections for Spain's 8131 municipalities, for 12 of its 17 state governments ("autonomous communities"), for its Moroccan enclaves Ceuta and Melilla and for island administrations in the Balearic and Canary Islands, only helped multiply the damage.

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The question hanging over all these contests was whether they would confirm the basic trends of the April 28 Spanish general election: gains for the ruling Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) at the expense of Unidas Podemos; a rising vote for the far-right Vox at the expense of the EPP's Spanish affiliate, the People's Party (PP); and continuing support for Catalan pro- independence forces, with the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) gaining at the expense of Together for Catalonia (JxCat).

The results for Unidas Podemos could scarcely have been worse. The European parliament vote of the radical left force, won separately by Podemos and the United Left in 2014, fell from 18.01% to 10.05% while its seat tally nearly halved (from 11 to 6). Simultaneously, the PSOE's vote rose from 28.7% to 32.84% and its seat haul increased from 12 to 20.

In the elections for the 12 autonomous communities, where the United Left and Podemos run separately in some regions, the radical left lost two-thirds of the 99 seats it won in 2015, as the average of its vote fell from 13.65% to 6.67%. Its worst losses were in Castilla y León, where its caucus in the 84-seat regional parliament was reduced from ten to one. Its least bad result was in Extremadura, where it managed to hold on to four of the six seats won in 2015.

Symptomatic was the result in Castilla-La Mancha, the first autonomous community in which Podemos entered a PSOE-led government. After the 2015 election, the 33-seat parliament was divided between the PP (16 seats), the PSOE (14 seats) and Podemos (3 seats) and Podemos initially supported a minority PSOE government without taking part in it. Anxious for position, however, the Podemos leadership then forced the PSOE to accept it as a partner in government on pain of its withdrawing support for the PSOE's budget. A deal was reached, with the Podemos leader becoming the deputy premier of the state.

The fruits of this tactic, which general secretary Pablo Iglesias saw as a trial of the approach to the PSOE to be adopted at the all-Spanish level, were painfully visible on May 26: PSOE (19 seats, an

absolute majority); PP (10 seats, down 6); Citizens (4 seats, up 4); Unidas Podemos plus the green party Equo (no seats, down 3). Around 32,200 voters had abandoned Podemos since 2015, taking it from third to fifth (below Citizens and Vox).

The lesson of Podemos Castilla-La Mancha's failed tactic is clear: if the Podemos's goal in political life is to be a junior partner in PSOE administration, why vote for it when you can vote for the original? The argument that Podemos is needed inside a PSOE government to implement the policy that it has persuaded the PSOE to adopt—the argument that won the support of Podemos members in Castilla-La Mancha—has been proven false by experience. If Podemos had been outside the PSOE government it would have been better placed to pressure it, to organise popular support for Podemos's own proposals and, if the PSOE had reneged on promises, completely free to criticise the PSOE and offer itself as the genuine alternative.

The line adopted in Castilla-La Mancha and which the Podemos leadership has voted, with the opposition of Andalucía, to adopt towards the Spanish government—practically guarantees the generalisation of its Castilla-La Mancha disaster.

Cities of change lost

However, the May 26 meltdown didn't just affect the autonomous communities. The "cities of change", won in 2015 on the basis of broad progressive alliances and mass-meeting based decision-making, were another scene of carnage. In Galicia, the capital Santiago de Compostela, the largest city A Coruña and shipbuilding town Ferrol were all lost to the PSOE. Because of division between Podemos and other progressive forces, Zaragoza, the capital of Aragon, could even pass from being a progressive administration directly into the hands of the "tripled-headed" right of the PP, Vox and Citizens.

The only factor that could forestall this outcome would be Citizens' refusal to negotiate directly with the extreme-right Vox and Vox's insistence that from now on it will not just rubber-stamp deals done between the PP and Citizens, as happened after the December 2018 Andalusian elections.

In Madrid, the mayoralty of Marcela Carmena will also fall to the right unless Citizens decides to break its alliance with the PP and Vox. The decision of Podemos number two Iñigo Errejón not to lead the Podemos ticket but to throw in his lot with Carmena led to a double loss: the vote for their ticket More Madrid lost a seat compared to 2015, while the Stand Up Madrid ticket of the United Left and the Anticapitalist current failed to win anything, despite an increased vote and a vibrant campaign.

At the root of this defeat lay abstention in Madrid's most working-class suburbs: while participation there fell on average by 4%, in the Spanish capital's conservative northern suburbs it increased slightly, giving the right a majority of around 85,000 votes.

Only one of the cities of change still continues to shine in the general gloom caused by these defeats—Cádiz. In this Andalusian provincial capital, outgoing mayor José María González ("Kichi"), associated with Anticapitalists, increased the seat haul of the Podemos-United Left alliance Forward Cádiz from 8 seats to 13, one short of an absolute majority. Forward Cádiz will now govern the city alone.

Two other progressive city councils remained under the control of forces to the left of the PSOE. Valencia, Spain's third largest city, was re-won by outgoing mayor Joan Ribó, of the Valencian regionalist force Commitment, even though he will now have to govern in tandem with the PSOE

after Podemos lost its three council seats. Provincial capital Zamora (Castilla y León) will continue to be run by the United Left after mayor Francisco Guarido, critical of his party's alliance with Podemos, won an absolute majority.

The experiences of Cádiz, Valencia and Zamora show that there was nothing necessary about Podemos's losses on May 26. Indeed, "Kichi" won the support of thousands of Cadiz citizens who would not normally not even vote for Podemos: 12,000 of those who voted for him did not vote for Unidas Podemos in the European election.

However, these positive experiences were exceptions to a rule: that of reabsorption by the PSOE of millions of voters who tried Podemos and Unidas Podemos in 2014-2016. Óscar Puente, the PSOE mayor of Valladolid and close supporter of acting PSOE prime minister Pedro Sánchez, summed up his view of what has happened in his city in a May 27 interview in the daily El Norte de Castilla.

In 2011, there were young people in the [central square] Fuente Dorada and that crystallised as [the indignado movement of] 15M. I ended that [municipal] election campaign wanting them to come back to the PSOE. Four years later they ran under the slogan of "Yes, We Can" [the Podemos chant Si, se puede!] and today, those people who used to say 'You Don't Represent Me!', again feel represented by the PSOE. I want to stress that.

Puente went on to congratulate Charo Chávez, the former Podemos spokesperson in Valladolid, for having agreed to run as a councillor on the PSOE ticket. Chávez thus carried Podemos's prevailing tactic to its logical conclusion—to rejoin the party that says "We Are The Left" because of the absence of a political project that makes Podemos necessary as a distinct force.

Barcelona

The biggest loss for the cities of change was that of its capital, Barcelona, where outgoing mayoress Ada Colau (Barcelona Together) was defeated by the ERC candidate Ernest Maragall by just 4800 votes, with both sides scoring ten seats on the 41-seat city council and Barcelona Together coming first in six of the city's ten districts.

The result once again confirmed the importance of the Catalan struggle for self-determination—and unionist opposition to it—even in local government politics: at this poll turnout increased 6.29% compared to the 2015 local government elections. If this had only been an election about running and improving Barcelona, Colau would have won, given the many improvements the Barcelona Together administration has put in place over the past four years, even as a minority administration. Proof is the vote for the Colau ticket in the neighbourhoods where major projects of renovation and creation of extended green spaces has been completed: support for Barcelona Together here touched 30%.

However, the ERC vote jumped from 77,000 (11.01%) to 160,000 (21.35%), confirming the all-pervasiveness of the issue of Catalan self-determination and popular outrage at the present show trial in the Spanish Supreme Court of 12 former Catalan social and political leaders. In the grinding struggle against Spanish state centralism, the ERC campaign stressed the importance of making Barcelona, which has mostly been run by the PSOE's Catalan affiliate, the Party of Socialists of Catalonia (PSC), the capital of the Catalan Republic.

The Barcelona Together vote fell from 176,000 (25.21%) to 156,000 (20.71%), while the Party of Socialists of Catalonia, the PSOE's Catalan franchise, doubled its vote to 138,000 (18.4%). This increase came partly from former Citizens voters unwilling to back their party's ring-in candidate

Manuel Valls, the former Fench prime minister, but also from former Barcelona Together voters concerned about its support for the principle of a Catalan right to self-determination and/or disappointed that promised projects had not yet come to fruition. Telling was the PSC victory in Barcelona's most working-class district, Nou Barris, won in 2015 by Barcelona Together.

The biggest loser in the election was JxCat, whose vote halved compared to that of its predecessor Convergence and Union, with some of its socially conservative and well-off social base passing over to the ERC and some to Valls. The other loser was the People's Unity List (CUP), which failed to meet the 5% threshold for representation as many of its former voters deserted to the ERC as the useful pro-independence candidacy. It was joined in oblivion by the primaries-based pro-independence ticket Barcelona Is Capital, backed by the Catalan National Assembly, but not by the PP, which scraped back into the council with 5.01% of the vote.

Despite the efforts of Barcelona Together to frame the election as a battlers-versus-silvertails contest, the efforts of the Spanish establishment kept reminding voters this was not a normal election. For example, on May 24, the speakership panel of the Spanish congress, headed by Catalan Meritxell Batet, suspended as MPs the four Catalan political prisoners who had been elected on ERC and JxCat tickets on April 28. On May 29, the speakership panel of the Senate similarly suspended ERC senator Raül Romeva.

The importance of the ERC victory, the first in the capital since 1931, was subsequently confirmed by the reaction of the PSC leader, Miquel Iceta: "We will do everything to prevent Barcelona having an independentist mayor." Egged on by the Spanish establishment, the PSC has floated the idea that it form a coalition administration with Barcelona Together in order to keep Maragall from office. The necessary majority will come from Valls who, after an election campaign of veiled red-baiting of Colau, is promising unconditional support for her to continue as mayoress—a volte-face completely in line with the old motto of Spanish unionism: *mejor rojo que roto* ("better red than broken up").

Outside Barcelona

The ERC was also the big winner outside of metropolitan Barcelona. It not only took one provincial capital (Lleida) from the PSC but could also win another (Tarragona), where the result will depend on whether Together We Can supports the ERC or the PSC candidate. Overall, the ERC and JxCat basically swapped positions compared to the 2015 municipal poll, with the ERC vote increasing by 7.11% (to 23.48%) and the JxCat vote falling by 6.1% (to 15.39%), the worst result for this tendency in 40 years. The ERC overtook JxCat in the number of councilors elected and also registered important gains as a growing minority in the PSC strongholds in the "industrial belts" around Barcelona and in Tarragona.

The PSC also emerged with more support (up 4.87% to 21.92%), as unionist voters who had made the new right Citizens the lead opposition party in the Catalan parliament in 2017 now deserted it in droves, helping the PSC recover its historic bailiwicks in Barcelona province (which includes the industrial cities that surround the capital). The PSC, which hardened its anti-independentist message throughout the campaign, will now be able to run major cities like L'Hospitalet de Llobregat and Santa Coloma de Gramenet, with absolute majorities.

However, besides losing Lleida and possibly Tarragona, Catalonia's social democracy also suffered a serious loss in Terrassa, the country's fourth-largest city. Here the former PSC mayor, Jordi Ballart, who had remunicipalised the city's water supply against internal party opposition and had left the PSC because of its support for the suspension of Catalan self-rule after the 2017 independence referendum, was returned as mayor at the head of a community-based ticket called All For Terrassa

(TxT). Ballart will govern with the support of the ERC, ending 40 years of PSC administration. One feature of TxT was its decision to allow its councilors a conscience vote on all issues related to the Catalan national question: partly as a result, TxT won support evenly across the city, both in its more middle-class pro-independence inner neighbourhoods but also in its more working-class Castilian-speaking outer areas.

May 26 was also the first municipal election in which the vote for the CUP fell (from 7.63% to 5.07%), reducing its municipal presence from 382 councilors to 335. Against this trend of decline, two exceptions stood out: the re-election with an increased vote of Montserrat Venturós, the rebel mayoress of Berga (capital of Berguedà shire), who was suspended for six months last year for defying court orders to remove Catalan independence flags from the town hall; and the success of the CUP-based ticket Let's Win Girona, which increased the vote for left-independence from 14.14% to 19.15% in Catalonia's northernmost provincial capital.

How much the CUP's setback was due to the trend within the pro-independence camp to vote for the most useful ticket against unionism and how much to its own shortcomings will be the subject of intense debate in regional assemblies over coming months.

With the notable exception of Barcelona Together, results were even more disappointing for "The Commons", the generic name given to the confluences in which Podemos, the United and Alternative Left, Initiative for Catalonia and other smaller left forces participate. This current was effectively wiped out in major cities like Sabadell and Terrassa, in a mirror of the Podemos performance in the rest of the Spanish state.

Conclusion

The ERC scored 820,000 votes, but this was not the biggest total recorded in Catalonia on May 26. That went to the European election campaign of former premier Carles Puigdemont, with 987,000. This figure was enough to get him and former Catalan health minister Toni Comín, both of whom the Central Electoral Commission had vainly tried to disqualify, elected to the European parliament. They will be joined there by jailed ERC leader Oriol Junqueras.

The vote for Catalan pro-independence candidates reached 49.71% in the European poll, the highest ever in elections since 2012, when the present wave of mobilisations for Catalan sovereignty and independence began. The vote for Puigdemont was also 450,000 more than his party, JxCat, won in the municipal elections on the same day. This was the result of ERC, Catalonia Together and even PSC voters giving their support to the figure who is clearly regarded as leader of Catalonia's aspiration to national sovereignty.

The result of the gains of the unionist PSOE and the pro-independence JxCat and ERC will be to make the Catalan struggle an even hotter issue in European politics. The immediate fight will be to get Puigdemont, Comín and Junqueras into the European Parliament, over all the hurdles that the Spanish state is determined to place in their way.

A victory in this battle will be an important advance in the war of attrition over the national right of self-determination, which at these elections has become more than ever the core issue of Spanish state politics.

Dick Nichols

P.S.

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- Dick Nichols is Green Left Weekly's European correspondent, based in Barcelona. An initial version of this article has appeared on its web site.