

Spain - Pedro Sánchez: The Nowhere Man

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Socialist leader Pedro Sánchez styles himself as the main barrier to Spain's rising far right. Yet his record as prime minister shows how little he is doing to stop it.

Contents

- [No Corbyn](#)
- [Subordinating Podemos](#)
- [Fear of the Right](#)
- [Betting on Macron](#)

As Spain faces crucial elections this weekend, interim Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez looks set to be the big winner. Polling between 28 and 30 percent, his center-left Socialist Party (PSOE) is expected to be the largest force in the new parliament, even if not able to form a majority government.

In fact, even to be this close to power makes Sánchez's party the envy of most social democrats across Europe. With France's Socialist Party (PS) in terminal crisis (it secured 6 percent in 2017), and its German and Italian counterparts also in steep decline, the PSOE is the continent's largest center-left force except for the UK Labour Party.

Given his government's underwhelming record in office, Sánchez's ability to buck this downward trend may look rather surprising. The forty-seven-year-old came to power ten months ago after removing former conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy with a motion of no-confidence. Hopes were raised, particularly after his government agreed to an ambitious reform agenda together with the radical-left Podemos. The parties promised a reversal of public spending cuts, rent controls, a historic 22 percent rise in the minimum wage, and an end to a notorious "gag law" limiting free speech.

Yet this so-called "Frankenstein coalition" was unstable from the start, especially due to Spain's thorny national question. Sánchez's government depended not only on the support of Podemos, but also on Catalan and Basque nationalists. Caught between the demands of maintaining his majority and his own party's deep entrenchment within the Spanish establishment, Sánchez's ten months in office have been primarily defined by legislative gridlock. The fallout from Catalunya's disputed 2017 independence referendum has cast a particularly long shadow, with pro-independence parties pulling their support for his government's budget in response to the trial of former Catalan ministers for sedition.

In a political climate dominated by flag-waving and nationalism, Sánchez has been forced to operate within very tight margins. And his response has been defined more by opportunism than by any determined defense of a progressive agenda. When the PSOE leader's proposals for rent controls or freezing arms sales to Saudi Arabia met with pushback from economic elites, his default position was to retreat. Similarly, his decision to withdraw the offer of talks with the Catalan nationalists during budget negotiations suggested not just an inability to take on growing dissent within the PSOE, but also a more cynical calculation that snap elections would strengthen his position — both

within and outside his party.

These kinds of tactical shifts have been a hallmark of Sánchez's leadership — with the PSOE swinging from the center to the left and back again in rapid succession. If this points to the premier's agility as a political operator, it is also indicative of the brittleness of his current electoral surge. Far from fighting the election around the promise of serious social democratic reforms, his current appeal is mostly defined in negative terms, by what he opposes: Spain's "new-old monster" as embodied in the extreme-right Vox. Positioning himself as the only bulwark against the advance of Spain's radicalized right, his surge in the polls resembles Emmanuel Macron's victory against Marine Le Pen more than Jeremy Corbyn's historic gains in 2017.

No Corbyn

The limits to Sánchez's project and his distance from Corbynism were already visible at the very point when he most resembled the Labour leader: after an internal coup [1] forced him to resign as PSOE leader in September 2016 [2]. To all intents and purposes, this move left him politically dead — abandoned by even his closest allies in the PSOE parliamentary group. Yet positioning himself as the anti-establishment candidate in the subsequent leadership race, he secured one of the great political comebacks in modern Spanish politics. His victory was met with disbelief by Spanish elites, with the country's leading daily *El País* describing it as Spain's "own populist moment."

Yet Sánchez's revolt against his party hierarchy was very different from that of his UK counterpart. It was waged primarily in terms of how to position the PSOE within Spain's new fragmented political landscape — that is, as a matter of narrow tactical maneuvering, rather than a dogged assertion of socialist policies.

This situation owed to the inconclusive December 2015 elections, which came after years of austerity and corruption scandals had exploded Spain's two-party system. As Pablo Iglesias's Podemos and the center-right Ciudadanos exploited the woes of both PSOE and the conservative Popular Party (PP), Spain's economic and media establishment called for a stable government of the center. Yet this move to block Podemos's influence demanded that the PSOE close ranks with the PP, allowing conservative Mariano Rajoy to be re-appointed as premier. Sánchez came under huge pressure to accept this de facto grand coalition, particularly after a second set of elections in June 2016 returned another fragmented parliament.

While Sánchez maintained his firm opposition to a Rajoy premiership across nine months of political deadlock, he seemingly lacked sufficient weight within in his own party to openly push for a coalition spanning the Left. Indeed, only after he ultimately lost the leadership in September 2016 did he acknowledge the PSOE had "to work side by side with Podemos."

This developed into the central argument of his comeback campaign in spring 2017 as he spelled out the core dilemma facing the Socialists: the PSOE could either accept a subordinate position to the Spanish right, or if it wished to lead a left-wing government again, it had to adapt to Spain's new multiparty system.

This message resonated with the aging Socialist membership. Indeed, they had experienced the PSOE's backing for the PP's return to power (and the corresponding coup against Sánchez) as a profound identity crisis. As historian Juan Andrade explains, Spain's two-party system was long based on a "vehement confrontation" between left and right [3], allowing the parties to clearly differentiate themselves from one another despite a shared consensus on economic policy, the monarchy, and the territorial arrangement of the Spanish state. PSOE and PP were incompatible

precisely because their clash was a matter of identity; as Andrade puts it,

“It had more to do with party allegiances than programmatic differences, with the phobias and exaggerated fear of the other side than opposition to their policies, with symbolic representation in media and institutional debate . . . than with the material conflicts actually dividing society . . . Many party activists, and even leaders of the PSOE, had conceived their raison d’être in terms of this confrontation with the PP.”

If in 2016 the PSOE establishment insisted on sacrificing this “appearance of pluralism” the better to safeguard Spain’s economic and constitutional regime, Sánchez instead promised to renew the traditional confrontation between the parties. The PSOE, he asserted, would “once again become the left-wing force it had been during the last thirty-five years.”

This gave his anti-establishment appeal a specific character. Like Corbyn’s victory in the Labour leadership contest, Sánchez secured his second stint as PSOE chief through a mass revolt of the membership against their party hierarchy. Yet with PSOE members having an average age of sixty, this was not exactly a campaign driven by “millennial socialists.” There was no equivalent to the pro-Corbyn Momentum movement in Labour and instead of attracting a new wave of members with a new class-based politics of “the many,” Sánchez’s core message was based on nostalgia as well as sense of betrayal felt among activists.

This is not to ignore that Sánchez’s campaign also railed against the injustices of neoliberalism and recognized Spain’s plurinational status as a “nation of nations.” Yet this was secondary and, given the conservatism of both the PSOE parliamentary party and its regional chiefs, there were more questions than answers about the direction he would now take the party in. He had been willing to defy the dominant bloc of power over an alliance with the PP, which he saw as threatening electoral suicide for the PSOE. But Spain’s regime crisis was at its core economic and territorial, not party-political. Tackling such questions would be another matter entirely.

Subordinating Podemos

The Catalan crisis brought these questions into stark relief just months into Sánchez’s rebooted leadership. His party’s lurch to the right in autumn 2017 — backing the PP’s imposition of direct rule in Catalonia along with the king’s hardline address to the nation — figured in some quarters as an early signal of the limits to Sánchez’s leftwards turn. Up against the PSOE apparatus and facing a moment of crisis in the Spanish state, he could do little more than align himself with a right-wing/monarchical bloc.

The situation appeared to become more open in June 2018, as Rajoy was forced from office by a no-confidence motion. Sánchez now had the opportunity to become prime minister, and perhaps form a new alternative coalition. Yet at the same time, it would be up to the PSOE when to call fresh elections. Accordingly, as PSOE began to climb national polls, further doubts were raised as to what extent Sánchez would seek to convert the so-called “Frankenstein coalition” of left-wing and nationalist parties into a viable governing bloc [4].

The early signs were unclear, with Sánchez’s initial measures confined to symbolic issues, such as his decision to exhume Franco’s remains from the Valley of the Fallen [5]. Yet last autumn, Sánchez seemed ready to bet on governing with his diverse coalition, displaying his willingness to make key concessions in the negotiations over the 2019 national budget plan [6].

Featuring a 22 percent hike in the minimum wage, a restoration of slashed pensions, tax increases

on multinationals and rent controls, the anti-austerity package looked to set out a shared program for the subsequent eighteen months. A considerable investment package for Catalonia — matching the levels promised in the region’s undermined 2006 Statute of Autonomy, a particular propaganda coup for independentism — was also included in the deal in order to win the Catalan parties’ backing for the budget in Congress.

Txema Guijarro told *Jacobin* last autumn that Sánchez’s principal motivations for agreeing to these concessions did not stem so much from a deeply held commitment to left-wing values and policy. Instead, the Podemos MP explained, it was the price he had to pay to see out the entire two years in office. As he put it then, “Sánchez went further not because he is a left-winger — but because he had to ensure that his government survived.”

Moreover, Sánchez appeared to have made two important calculations at this moment which confirmed his tactical leftwards pivot. The first was a confidence in his ability to balance opposing political and economic forces, making such concessions to Podemos and nationalist parties while at the same time managing to appease broader economic pressures and getting the 2019 deal over the line.

An apparent truce with leading newspaper *El País* after an editorial changeover in the summer seemed to provide Sánchez with further breathing space [7]. At the time the PSOE premier believed he could sell his package — which implied a higher than expected deficit — to the European Union. Himself boasting experience in European institutions, Sánchez was also aided by an economy minister that had previously worked at the highest rung of the European Commission.

Sánchez’s second key calculation at this time was a party-political one. He believed he could successfully engage Podemos, and at the same time contain its influence at a time of internal turmoil. From the PSOE’s perspective, the budget deal aimed to tell the electorate that it could implement Podemos’s social agenda without voting for them or risking their direct (and disruptive) presence in government. In this way, Sánchez could begin to effectively relegate his more radical rivals to a subordinate position — little more than a left-wing pressure group that could connect to the political and generational demands of the 15-M movement.

All this required a delicate balancing act of keeping economic elites on side while ensuring policy disputes with Podemos never gained popular traction. For example, when the Spanish Supreme Court ruled, in a controversial U-turn, that citizens and not banks should pay for a mortgage tax, Iglesias called for “a great civic mobilization” that same weekend. Yet in a pre-emptive move Sánchez passed a decree in subsequent days modifying the imposition of the levy so that “Spaniards would never again pay” the tax. The Socialist leader was thus successful in stymying the mobilization, which ultimately drew lower-than-expected numbers of demonstrators.

This type of hesitant probing and playing with the limits of the provisional governing agreement — constantly assessing and reassessing how far to push on each political gesture, policy measure or proposal — defined the first phase of Sánchez’s premiership.

Fear of the Right

Yet Sánchez’s margin of maneuver was becoming narrower and narrower. The constant dilemma implied by his juggling act would gradually push him away from engagement with the fledgling progressive bloc, and towards calling early elections; a chance to break out of the PSOE’s impasse.

The cracks were beginning to appear already in November 2018. That month, Sánchez’s budget plan

was thrown into serious doubt as the hitherto cooperative Catalan nationalists withdrew their support [8]. They were reacting against the Spanish judiciary's harsher-than-expected charges against jailed independence leaders.

This difficulty was compounded later that same month, when Sánchez received further pushback on the budget proposals from Brussels. December then delivered a political earthquake, as Vox registered the far right's first electoral breakthrough since the late-1970s Transition to democracy [9], winning eleven seats and 12 percent of the vote in Andalusia's regional elections.

This made the budget vote crucial. However, the Socialist leader reached a point where he could no longer maintain his balancing act without risking further confrontation with the PSOE party establishment. Warnings from PSOE chiefs over his alleged softness on Catalonia were an indication of the growing pressure he faced to cash in on his poll ratings by heading to early elections.

At the same time, public opinion was becoming increasingly polarized around the national question, as imprisoned Catalan leaders faced their date in court. In mid-February, forty-five thousand demonstrators gathered in Madrid to protest Sánchez's perceived openness to talks with the Catalan groups whose leaders were about to stand trial. A photo emerged showing the heads of Spain's two major right-wing parties (the PP and Ciudadanos) standing shoulder to shoulder with the far-right Vox party's Santiago Abascal.

Sánchez now had his election platform. A potent image capturing Spain's increasingly radicalized right-wing bloc presented him with a vital opportunity to fight looming elections on a favorable terrain. Having withdrawn his concessions to the Catalan nationalists even before the right-wing rally, he then effectively abandoned the budget fight entirely. Rather, the time had come to strike at the ballot box.

The PSOE leader's wager was that he could now build a broad electoral bloc based on the mounting fear at the rise of Vox. He instead positioned himself as defending a forward-looking vision of Spain defined by openness and diversity. In a sense, this simply recycles PSOE's old tactic of mobilizing progressive voters around a symbolic confrontation with the PP — though here there is much more at stake given Vox's promises to roll back even basic rights.

Sánchez's stance nonetheless seems likely to pay off electorally, with the PSOE currently commanding a five- to six-point poll lead. Tellingly, a recent poll also indicated that PSOE is set to gain the votes of a quarter of those who voted for Podemos in the last contest in 2016.

Betting on Macron

Sánchez can thus hope to pull off the same trick as Emmanuel Macron, posing his own party as the unifying force able to defeat the far right. Yet this plan is anything but foolproof. Firstly, by placing Vox at the center of the national debate in order to maximize the PSOE vote share, he runs the risk of unnecessarily magnifying a deeply antidemocratic force which still has no national-level representation.

Secondly, if Sánchez is successfully viewed by the Spanish electorate as a Macron-style bulwark against the far right, rather than just another continuity Third Way candidate, the circumstantial aspect of his success cannot be overlooked. By not confronting the reactionary threat of "the Three Rights" (PP, Ciudadanos, Vox), with a project of radical social reform, Sánchez has instead chosen to pursue a mandate that has no clear underlying platform of its own.

In this sense, like Macron's La France En Marche project, Sánchez's "Make the Spain You Want Happen" campaign more closely reflects the superficiality of catch-all marketing, "speaking to everyone," than it does the demands and divisions immediately posed by Spanish society.

In fact, while PSOE can today boast a poll lead, in the specific sense of being the biggest single party, it is unclear whether it will be able to form a government — and what kind. If Sánchez's sometimes invokes the need for a pluralist left-wing administration, his turn to the center and economic élites' own preferences point to the opposite possibility — a pact with the center-right Ciudadanos.

Across ten months in office, Sánchez has flip-flopped from one dilemma to another, seeking to maintain a precarious balancing act. The outcome of the April 28 vote looks set to present him with an even starker choice. The PSOE leader has long styled himself as the great survivor of the center-left. But if his party is not to go the same way as its European counterparts, it will surely have to reinvent itself once more.

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P.S.

• Jacobin, 04.24.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/04/psoe-pedro-sanchez-spain-elections-vox>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/spain-psoe-sanchez-diaz-podemos-pp-rajoy>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/01/pedro-sanchez-resigns-as-leader-of-spains-socialist-party>

[3] <https://cetxt.es/es/20160928/Firmas/8747/PSOE-socialdemocracia-felipe-gonzalez-crisis-interna.htm>

[4] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/06/spain-psoe-sanchez-rajoy-podemos-iglesias>

[5] <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/07/francisco-franco-spanish-civil-war-fascism>

[6] <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/11/unidos-podemos-pablo-iglesias-psoe>

[7] https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/06/14/inenglish/1528966483_833175.html

[8] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/11/podemos-inigo-errejon-psoe-populism>

[9] ESSF (article 46936), [Vox: the new face of the far right in the Spanish State](#).