

Spain: Radical councils face challenge in May 26 municipal elections

Saturday 18 May 2019, by [NICHOLS Dick](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2019).

In the May 2015 Spanish local government elections, citizens from 6 out of 17 state capitals elected radical council tickets with more progressive policies than the mainstream Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), winner of the recent general election.

These tickets won control of Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Zaragoza (among Spain's largest cities) and took control of Navarra's capital, Iruñea/Pamplona and Galicia's capital, Santiago de Compostela.

Additional gains for the radical tickets were the provincial capitals Cádiz (Andalusia) and A Coruña (Galicia) and the important industrial and working-class centres Ferrol (Galicia), Badalona and Sabadell (Catalonia).

In the four years since, these radical councils have focused on affordable housing, improved public transport, restoring council services to public ownership, enhanced investment and services in the poorest neighbourhoods and creating liveable cities through a war on pollution and boosting green space.

They have also initiated a form of community-based decision-making, with a view to closing the gap between council administration and citizens.

As a result, all have, to some degree, been the subject of campaigns of destabilisation, sabotage, intimidation and slander from vested interests. A notorious example was the lawsuit brought by the water multinational Agbar against Barcelona City Council for consulting with citizens on whether the city's water supply should remain privatised.

While none of these platforms were created by the radical force Podemos, it gave them strong support and many Podemos members participated in building them. This was symbolised by leader Pablo Iglesias's enthusiastic appearances alongside Ada Colau, the successful Barcelona Together candidate for mayor.

Surge in support for PSOE

In the Spanish general election, Unidas Podemos (the coalition of Podemos, United Left and Equo) lost 29 of its 72 Congress seats. The question now posed is: which of these councils administering their "cities of change" will survive at the May 26 municipal elections?

On the basis of recent opinion polls, these councils can be divided into three groups: those likely to fall to PSOE (or even the PP), those likely to survive and those where the outcome is too close to call.

The challenge all face is PSOE's recent surge in support at the general election, where it took about 20 seats from Unidas Podemos. In every municipality with a radical council, opinion polls show a

growth in PSOE support. The question is whether this will be enough to displace those whom the PSOE apparatus views as its most dangerous competition.

The battle is to win the relative majority (the highest vote), because the party that achieves this has first stab at trying to build the absolute majority needed to govern. This imperative has shaped the PSOE's election campaign as a crusade against the radical mayors, portrayed as "amateurs" and "day-dreamers" who "waste precious public resources on failed experiments".

Based on polls to date, the undecided vote is as high as 44%, so the possibility of distortions and surprise results remains high.

The main questions to which only the actual ballot will provide an answer are:

- Will the actual gains made by the radical councils outweigh disappointment that they have not been able to carry out all their promises?
- How much will splits and desertions since 2015 affect their chances, especially between currents aligned with the all-Spanish left and left-independentist currents in the "historic nationalities" of Galicia, Catalonia and Euskadi (the Basque Country)?
- In Catalonia, what factor will determine the vote of supporters of the radical councils who also support the Catalan right to self-determination and are indignant at the present trial of the Catalan political and social leaders?

In Catalonia, the economic, institutional and territorial crises of the Spanish state have produced the biggest proliferation of candidacies. Various Catalanist tickets have nominated — the product of the 2017 independence referendum and its aftermath of repression — in addition to traditional party tickets and local platforms.

In the major industrial city of Sabadell, presently with a People's Unity List (CUP) mayor, the 2011 choice of 11 tickets has today become 16, including extra "community" and pro-independence candidacies both left and right.

Trouble in Galicia and Aragon

The region where the councils of change look to be in greatest trouble is Galicia, and the city with the worst disintegration of the non-PSOE left is the decaying shipbuilding city of Ferrol.

There is a strong trend among working-class voters to return to the Party of Socialists of Galicia (PSG, the PSOE's Galician franchise). The party is set to win 8 seats (up from 5) ahead of the ruling Ferrol Together (FeC), down from 6 to 3. Marea (a left-independentist split from FeC) is set to gain 2 seats, while the centre-left Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG) would retain 2.

The mayoralty would return to the PSG/PSOE, because the entire left vote, increasing from 13 seats to 15, would be greater than the 10 seats held by the right's People's Party (PP) plus Citizens.

Barring unexpected, last-minute surges in their favour, a similar result looks likely in the capital Santiago de Compostela and the region's largest city, A Coruña. Polls show the Atlantic Tide ticket of mayor Xulio Ferreiro lagging behind the PSG/PSOE by 6 seats to 10.

The PSOE also looks set to get back the mayoralty of Aragon's capital Zaragoza, Spain's fifth-largest city, because of the split between Podemos Aragon and Zaragoza Together (ZeC), the united left and outgoing mayor Pedro Santisteve's community ticket.

The split is the result of an unravelling of alliances that began with the announcement of a pact between Podemos and Equo's Aragon branches, followed by Podemos's refusal to take part in ZeC's primaries.

According to Santistevé: "It has been a process badly managed by Podemos, above all for not wanting to take part in the primaries and for thinking more about positions than the political program about which there were no differences."

Good prospects in Valencia and Cádiz

The brightest prospects for the radical councils are those of Valencia and Cádiz.

In Valencia, sitting Mayor Joan Ribó, of the left-regionalist force Commitment, shades the PSOE's Valencian affiliate, the Socialist Party of the Valencian Country (PSPV). When support for Podemos is added, the left maintains a clear lead over the right.

In Cádiz, sitting Podemos mayor José María González ("Kichi"), from the Anticapitalists current, is showing increased support in polling, as is the PSOE. If the latest polling holds up, Forward Cadiz — Podemos's alliance with the United Left — will renew its lead in a left administration with a 17-10 majority over the three parties of the right (PP, Citizens and Vox).

A victory for incumbent Madrid mayor Manuela Carmena (More Madrid) is likely. Carmena has broken her 2015 alliance with Unidas Podemos, while drawing former Podemos number two Iñigo Errejón onto her side to lead the More Madrid ticket in the Madrid regional parliament.

Polls show Madrid Stands Up winning no seats in the Madrid City Council. This alliance between the United Left and Anticapitalists is the result of Carmena's split from Unidas Podemos.

Elections for the Madrid regional parliament, along with elections for assemblies in 11 other autonomous communities, will also be held on May 26. A victory for the left cannot be ruled out, but one with the PSOE as leading force over More Madrid and Unidas Podemos.

Too close to call

One of the closest contests will be in the council of Iruñea/Pamplona, run by a four-party coalition of the Basque left independentist force EH Bildu, the Navarra regionalist formation Geroa Bai, municipalist ticket Aranzadi-Pamplona Together and the United Left.

With only a 14-13 majority and with the Socialist Party of Navarra (PSN) under instructions from the PSOE to not support any government containing EH Bildu, the outcome in Navarra is unpredictable.

The same holds for the parliament of Navarra, presently the only one in Spain run by forces to the left of the PSOE.

The contest in the Catalan industrial city of Badalona is too close to call. The latest internal polling of Let's Win Badalona, supported by the CUP and the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), has lead candidate and former mayor Dolors Sabater just ahead of the PP's Xavier Albiol.

If that lead is confirmed on polling day, the Party of Socialists of Catalonia (PSC), the PSOE's Catalan affiliate, would have to vote with the PP to stop the renewal of Badalona's council of change.

Finally, the jewel in the crown of all the councils of change, Barcelona, is on a knife's edge, with opinion polls showing ERC candidate Ernest Maragall and Ada Colau as just ahead in the race.

The result will depend on what importance undecided left voters give to pro-independence forces governing Catalonia's capital, to strengthen Catalonia's position against the anti-democratic Spanish state.

Is that more or less important than allowing Barcelona Together a second term to advance its clearly progressive project — which has brought real benefits to the city in public transport, social housing, green spaces, support to its poorest neighbourhoods, for women's rights and against racism?

Those turned off by Barcelona Together's hot-and-cold record in the struggle to advance the Catalan right to decide and by the ERC's poor record of opposition to the former's progressive social proposals, will probably vote for the CUP, which is committed to bringing about a greater confluence of the national and social struggles in order to make greater headway in both.

Dick Nichols

P.S.

- Green Left Weekly, Issue 1221, May 17, 2019:
<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/spain-radical-councils-face-challenge-local-elections>

- Dick Nichols is Green Left Weekly's European correspondent, based in Barcelona.