

Madrid elections shakes up politics in Spanish state

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Table of Madrid region early elections May 4th 2021

Right 78 seats Left 58 seats Governing majority = 69

Party	Seats	%	2019 %
PP (Popular Party)	65	(44,5%)	22.14
Más Madrid (More Madrid)	24	(16,9%)	14.6
PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party)	24	(16,7%)	27.2
Vox (Voice)	13	(9,1%)	8.8
U. Podemos (United We Can)	10	(7,2%)	5.6
Ciudadanos(Citizens)	0	(3.55%)	19.4
Abstentions		(24%)	36

Isabel Diaz Ayuso won the election she called two years early in the Madrid region this Tuesday 4th May. The leader of the main right wing party in the Spanish state, the Popular Party(PP), doubled its vote from two years ago and was just four seats short of the absolute majority. She will continue an alliance with the fascist Vox (Voice) party which only very slightly increased its score but gained an extra seat. Ayuso was not slow to put her ‘trumpist’ model forward for the national PP party as the route back to power. At the leadership meeting the day after she stated:

“I believe we must make sure this dream carries on and hope is spread throughout Spain”.

Her success is a warning to the ruling left of centre coalition between the social liberal PSOE and the left populist Unidad Podemos (UP) that the PP could come back at the next general elections. It is also an opening salvo in a potential leadership bid within the PP.

Remember this PP party was mired in numerous trials involving its leading members for corruption. At the same time it was hemorrhaging votes to the Ciudadanos party that had been promoted by the media and those sectors of the ruling class worried about the failures of the traditional PP to hold on to its electoral base. For a time Ciudadanos had tried to present itself as the liberal centrist version of the other new party on the block, Podemos. Like Podemos it presented itself as above the traditional left/right divide and appealed to middle class professional layers alienated from the old

school corruption of the PP. Without an alliance with the PSOE it turned to its right, trying to overtake the PP. The voters in this election look like they have returned to the red meat of the PP with Ayusa's strident right populism. The centre of Spanish politics has been squeezed. Ciudadanos lost nearly 16 points and no longer has any councillors.

'Liberty vs communism' in the Pandemic

The regions have control of much of the regulations concerning public health during the pandemic. Unlike nearly every other major capital in Europe she continually prioritised keeping business open as much as possible and proclaimed the need to defend liberty, the right to relax and 'have a beer'. Closures of bars were portrayed as an attack on private property. Cinemas and theatres remained open with reduced audiences. The curfew in the region was deliberately set one hour later than in the rest of Spain, at 11 pm. This was a direct challenge to the policies of the central PSOE/UP government. Throughout the campaign she hardly mentioned her local opponents, it was a bare knuckle fight with Sanchez and his left government. She framed her pandemic policy as comparable to her parties' struggle for freedom against the communists and the left. The result was 35% more deaths relative to the rest of Spain but undoubtedly it won her votes too. Her right populist profile appears to have contained the rise of Vox as she stole their tunes. The high turnout of 76% was a 12 point increase on 2019 so her gamble of calling early elections clearly paid off. Increased turnout helped the right which contradicted the message I saw Iglesias making at his closing campaign rally - if we increase participation we will win. You can guarantee that the British elections on Thursday 6th May will mobilise a lot less.

The hard right Vox party is much happier acknowledging its links with the Francoist fascist past. In a debate with Iglesias on the SER TV channel the Vox leader Rocio Monasterio cast doubt on the death threats he had received with bullets in an envelope (no joke this). Iglesias walked out since she did not retract her comments. He has also been told by Vox leaders to get out of Spain if he was not happy here. Vox whipped up racism against migrants. This racist election poster (below) makes false claims that the state provides migrants with more money than pensioners:

Creeping fascism

At the same time the traditional right wing parties are taking on the racist policies, the language and tone of the fascist or post-fascist parties. A video of the Popular Party mayor, José Luis Martínez Almeida, saying we may be fascists but we know how to govern was widely shared on social media. Johnson's Tories reflect this too with their Little Englander Brexit narrative and orchestrated attacks on 'woke' culture and the left.

The Madrid elections confirm the analysis that in many countries that fascist parties are on the rise. Vox had no institutional representatives a few years ago. Meloni, leader of the post fascist Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) is one of the most popular leaders in Italy and her party is polling at 16%. Marine Le Pen in France with her extreme right party is exciting discussion about at least getting to the run off in the presidential elections with a small but real chance of perhaps winning. At the same time the traditional right wing parties are taking on the racist policies, the language and tone of the fascist or post-fascist parties. Johnson's Tories reflect this too with their Little Englander Brexit narrative and orchestrated attacks on 'woke' culture and the left. Johnson's nod and wink alliance with Farage's Brexit party in the 2019 general election is not so different to the arrangement between Ayusa and Vox to control the Madrid government. Ayusa was relaxed about her alliance with the fascists:

"When they call you fascist, don't worry, you are on the right side of history" (3rd May 2021 Corriere della Serra)

Isabel Diaz Ayusa, PP leader

A defeat for the left

For the left the results are worst than expected. It is the lowest result in history for the PSOE in Madrid. Sanchez, the Primer minister and PSOE leader, is supposedly going to clear out a lot of the regional leadership. Their candidate was acknowledged by all the media as particularly inept. His performance and indeed Iglesias's was contrasted with the impact made by Mas Madrid leader, Monica Garcia. Her job as an anesthetist played well to gather votes on the left of people who profoundly disagreed with Ayusa's callous management of the pandemic. Garcia actually won more votes than the PSOE.

It must have been particularly galling for Iglesias to see that. Back in the day when Podemos was riding high he had promoted the idea of overtaking ('il sorpasso', from the Italian film of the same name) the PSOE. To see this done by the party of Errejon, his previous partner in the Podemos leadership who had split because he felt Podemos should further open up to the centre and become more moderate, must have been a bitter pill to swallow. Mas Madrid, apart from refusing to align on the left/right axis has a more ecological profile. It may be able to build on its stronghold in Madrid to compete more effectively with Podemos which is in some difficulty.

When Iglesias announced a few months ago that he was resigning his vice prime minister post to go to Madrid to lead the good fight against the PP and the fascists people both expressed some surprise and a little respect too. Given the polls it was always going to be a tall order. But Pablo is nothing if not supremely self confident. His talent, simpatico personality and communication skills were both one of Podemos's strongest assets but also ultimately its Achilles heel.

The vibrant committees of Podemos that inherited the radicalism of the indignados movement which had filled Spanish squares in 2011 and 2012 were gradually gutted of activity and any real control over the Podemos apparatus. Despite the opposition of minorities like the Anticapitalistas who had helped set up Podemos in the first place the Iglesias team refused to develop a collective leadership with minority representation and proper debates. Instead it opted for plebiscitary digital votes organised from the top down which gave Iglesias, as the nationally well known leader, all the cards.

At the same time it got carried away with its initial electoral success. Everything was subordinated to erecting a well run electoral machine that would help overtake the PSOE. A failure to embed the party in the localities and to reach out more effectively into the workplaces has weakened the parties' resilience once the PSOE was able to regain the initiative. The very success of Podemos meant that many of the activists - mostly from the younger university educated generations that had been denied the opportunities of similar layers coming out of the 78 transition - took on the staff and institutional posts that became available and lost a lot of their radicalism. From denying that the left and right categories were meaningful Podemos ended up in the class coalition with the PSOE as a junior partner, a satellite, even a left cover for a social liberal government. Although there was some progressive measures won - an improved welfare benefit for the poorest families and soe action blocking evictions for example - Podemos effectively abandoned its radical policies in exchange for a handful of the lesser ministerial posts and a vice premier post for Pablo.

Some commentators have suggested Iglesias's frustration with the government led him to his audacious move to head up the UP slate in Madrid.

Iglesias quits frontline politics

"I don't want to be an obstacle for the party. We need to renew ourselves. I am resigning from all my political responsibilities (...) When one is no longer useful you need to know when to step aside"

Iglesias campaigned as a charismatic leader of the left in the battle between democracy and fascism in Madrid. Ayusa's triumph, the resilience of the Vox vote and the meagre improvement in the UP score has hit him hard. He has announced his retirement from frontline politics. Maybe he had intended Madrid to be his swansong in any case. Certainly the constant, intense attacks by the media and the right on him and his family must have taken a toll. The right wing organised loud protests in front of his house. He requires 24 hour security. There have been constant attempts to tie him into financial irregularities or Venezuelan money. Then there are the death threats. In his latest interview he wants to use his step back to encourage the movement to look more to feminism and to the leadership of women. He even goes in for a bit of self criticism, saying his style may have been macho in some respects. This is positive: "feminism will be key to the coming social transformations" (Corriere della Sera 3rd May). However he presents it also as a way of going beyond the historic left/right antagonism and 'workerism'. This is much more debatable:

"Feminism is the present and the future and is also more socially transversal than workerism and for this reason can achieve big economic changes." (ibid Corriere)

Where does this all leave Unidad Podemos? Apart from the challenge of the Errejon split its potential vote is squeezed by radical or even revolutionary nationalist currents in Euskadi or Catalonia. There will be internal divisions on strategy with a lot of pressure from the PSOE with whom it is an alliance. How easy will it be for it to maintain an independent intervention and party? Surely some of its cadre will be tempted to integrate the PSOE. Without their most well known media figure it will be hard to lift the party back about double figure election results. Pablo is publicly passing the baton to Yolanda Diaz, female UP minister of labour, as the new leader of UP. It is unclear whether the membership or other leadership structures have discussed or decided this but this is how it works in this current. In some senses it is party with lots of officers but less and less soldiers.

Following the election results Miguel Urban Crespo, Member of the European Parliament and a leader of the Anticapitalista current [1] made the following statement:

"Madrid's election results confirm there will be two more years of policies carried out in favour of the rich. We need to transform these two years into a struggle to roll back these results, beginning straightaway tomorrow morning. We must build resistance from below. The opposition has to be come together in the organised communities and on the streets."

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance

<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/madrid-elections-shakes-up-politics-in-spanish-state>

- Dave Kellaway is a supporter of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans

Footnotes

[1] it was a cofounder of Podemos and built it with Iglesias for over 3 years until 2020 when they parted company over the decision of Iglesias to join a coalition with the PSOE and refuse to even discuss a position of external support on an issue by issue basis as the Bloco Esquerda currently does in Portugal.