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This study examines the transformation of the Spanish party system, particularly in the context of the July 2023 general elections. Over the last decade, the party system has become more fragmented and polarized. From a two-party format, the contest has gradually turned into a competition between two blocs: the right and the left. The July 2023 general elections showed that the party system has partially stabilized, with the mainstream parties (PP and PSOE) recovering, but not enough to form a single-party government. Support from regional parties remains essential for forming a central government. However, the possibilities for cooperation between political parties are limited by the nature of the party blocs, and the high degree of ideological and social polarization.

Key words:

Elections, electoral volatility, government, party system, polarization, Spain.

THE DYNAMICS OF THE PARTY SYSTEM IN SPAIN IN THE LIGHT OF THE GENERAL ELECTIONS IN 2023

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This study examines the transformation of the Spanish party system, particularly in the context of the July 2023 general elections. Over the last decade, the party system has become more fragmented and polarized. From a two-party format, the contest has gradually turned into a competition between two blocs: the right and the left. The July 2023 general elections showed that the party system has partially stabilized, with the mainstream parties (PP and PSOE) recovering, but not enough to form a single-party government. Support from regional parties remains essential for forming a central government. However, the possibilities for cooperation between political parties are limited by the nature of the party blocs, and the high degree of ideological and social polarization.

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For decades, Spain has been a case of imperfect bipartisanship, with two major parties at either end of the political spectrum. The Popular Party (Partido Popular, PP) represented the right and the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE) the left. These two par-

ties differed mainly in their positions on socio-economic issues and the role of the state in implementing economic and social policies. This imperfect bipartisanship has fractured over the last decade, mainly due to austerity policies following the 2008 economic and financial crisis, corruption scandals and Catalan secessionism. Between 2015 and 2019, support for mainstream parties declined significantly and new parties gained parliamentary representation. The party system has not only become more fragmented but also more polarized. The far left, and later the far right, have gained ground on the political scene and have become indispensable in forming governments. This eventually led to the formation of the first coalition government at national level between the PSOE and the far-left Unidas Podemos (2020-2023). The last general elections were held in July 2023 and can therefore provide insights into the current degree of stabilisation of the party system and the way political parties interact.

To complete the picture, it is also necessary to consider the centre-periphery cleavage in Spanish politics. The regional parties gain parliamentary representation and, in the absence of a majority for the national parties, they are the ones who have the key to government formation. The most prominent of these come from Catalonia and the Basque Country, au-

onomous communities where strong regional nationalist parties compete alongside the national parties. There are also strong regional parties in Galicia, the Canary Islands and Navarre. It is worth noting that some of these parties have become radicalised and opposed to the existing political system, which is shaped by the 1978 constitution. This is most evident in the Catalan separatist parties (ERC, Junts per Catalunya), even when compared to similar Basque parties.

This study focuses on how the party system has changed in the context of July 2023 general elections and how parties interact, which is crucial for government formation. Particular attention is paid to the degree of institutionalisation of the Spanish party system. This is measured by electoral volatility (Pedersen index) and the effective number of parties (Laakso-Taagepera index). These data are complemented by an analysis of the polarization of the party system. It turns out that the strong polarization of the party system is one of its characteristics that affects the way political parties interact with each other. In particular, it makes communication and consensus-building between traditional, mainstream parties more difficult. The study also shows how the party system has been transformed into two competing blocs, one on the right and one on the left. The change in the interaction between political parties also makes it difficult to form a stable government. The mainstream parties are unable to form a government on their own, so the country has moved from single-party governments to coalition governments. But winning a parliamentary majority has not become easier, and elections have been repeated in the recent past.

The main data sources are the election results provided by the Ministry of the Interior and the opinion polls of the CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas). In the case of polarization, I used expert calculations (Simón, 2020b) and data from the EU Political Barometer of the Carlos III University of Madrid. I decided not to use the data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and the Manifesto Project Database (MARPOR) because they are only available for Spain up to 2019 and therefore cannot be used to show the current situation.

The study draws on the literature on party systems (e.g. Sartori, 1976 (ed. 2005), Bardi and

Mair, 2008; Poguntke, 2014), the institutionalization of party systems (e.g. Bértoa Casal, 2014; Havlík, 2015) and political polarization (e.g. Dalton, 2008; Dalton, 2021; McCoy, Rahman and Somer, 2018; Borbáth, Hutter and Leiningner, 2023). There is also a rich literature on the Spanish party system and elections (e.g., Simón, 2020a; Simón, 2020b; Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020; Rama, Cordero and Zagorski, 2021; Orriols and Cordero, 2015).

The study will be structured as follows: first, I will present a theoretical discussion of the dimensions of party system change, such as electoral volatility, fragmentation, and polarization. I will then outline the main changes in the Spanish party system over the last decade, its increasing polarisation and transformation into two blocs. Finally, I analyse the July 2023 general elections along the dimensions of electoral volatility, effective number of parties and polarization, providing insights into the current interactions between political parties that are crucial for understanding the government formation in the current context.

Dimensions of party system change

To understand how party systems change, we first need to consider the parameters used to define them. The seminal work on party systems was provided by Sartori (1976), who considered the number of parties and the degree of party polarization to be the most important defining elements of party systems. Several other works (e.g. Bardi and Mair, 2008, Dalton, 2008, Poguntke, 2014, Havlík, 2015) have built on Sartori's work and reassessed which parameters define party systems and best explain their transformation. The consensus among scholars is that there are two basic approaches to studying party systems in pluralistic, democratic settings.

The first approach, in the words of Bardi and Mair (2008, p. 152), "sees party systems as little more than 'sets of parties' in which all of the individual parties jostle up against one another and may be juxtaposed to one another". The focus is upon individual political parties, especially the number of parties operating within the party system. The second approach is more concerned with how political parties interact within a given party system. The sheer number of political parties, or their description,

does not tell us much about the dynamics of the party system. Therefore, as Poguntke (2014, p. 952) states, “a combination of qualitative and quantitative indicators may be more instructive”. The dynamics of the party system reflects the stability of the interaction between political parties and is thus related to the institutionalisation of the party system.

Electoral volatility and fragmentation

Bértoa Casal (2014, p. 17) defines the party system institutionalisation as “the process by which the patterns of interaction among political parties become routine, predictable and stable over time”. Over the last decade, there has been a certain de-institutionalisation of party system competition in so far stable Western European countries, with the emergence of new parties, usually from the far right or the far left, but not exclusively. In contrast, party systems in many Central and Eastern European countries have never reached a high level of institutionalisation (Bértoa Casal, 2014). Those that were considered institutionalised (such as the Czech party system) have also undergone de-institutionalisation (Havlík, 2015).

The extent to which political parties are embedded in the electorate can be expressed by the volatility (Pedersen) index.¹ If the ties between voters and parties are close, the volatility index will be low (Cabada, Hloušek and Jurek, 2014, p. 72). Havlík (2015, p. 187) outlines three sources of electoral volatility: “1) change in electoral support due to the preferences of voters participating in both subsequent elections; 2) change in electorate composition (loss of electorate, new voters, changes in voter turnout); and 3) change in the supply of political parties standing for the election”. Electoral volatility affects the political strategies of political leaders. According to Moraes and Béjar (2023, p. 637) “higher electoral volatility lead to higher levels of ideological polarization, and particularly in cases where newcomers get into the electoral game”. For the sake of winning more votes, a party may make a rational decision in favour of a polarizing strategy in a context of increased instability. Electoral volatility may also influence politicians’ attitudes to-

wards dissolving a party or merging with other parties.

Another approach to the institutionalisation of the party system is the focus on the fragmentation of the party system. An index measuring the effective number of parties in terms of votes and seats was developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979).² The fragmentation index advanced the basic counting of parties in political systems. Maurice Duverger in the 1950s and later Jean Blondel in the 1960s developed basic criteria for the typology of party systems based on the number of parties. They defined a party system as a one-party, two-party, two-and-a-half-party or multi-party system. Sartori’s (1976) counting method was based on the criteria of the party relevancy in the party system. Only parties with coalition or blackmail potential were relevant. Laakso and Taagepera emphasised that their aim was to measure the effective number of parties operating in the political system. Their index uses either votes or mandates. Blau (2008) also extends the measurement of the effective number of parties to their legislative and governmental power. Regarding the stability of the party system, a high fragmentation index is associated with a lower degree of institutionalised party system (Cabada, Hloušek, and Jurek 2014, p. 78).

Ideological and affective polarization

The rise of extreme poles and populism has focused research on the party system on the phenomenon of polarization, already conceptualised by Sartori. Polarization reflects a second approach to understanding the party system, based on the quality of party competition and interaction between political parties. In words of Dalton (2008, p. 900), “party system polarization reflects the degree of ideological differentiation among political parties in a system”. It is therefore a polarization of party positions on policy issues (Hanretty, 2022, p. 2). In Sartori’s typology of the party system, ideo-

¹ The calculation of Pedersen index is as follows:

$$V = \sum |v_{i,t} - v_{i,t-1}| / 2$$

² The actual number of parties is calculated as follows $ENP = 1 / \sum p_i^2$. In the case of the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP), p is the proportion of votes that party i received in the election. The index can also be calculated by determining the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP). The share of votes is replaced by the share of seats won by each party.

logical distance is a key feature of polarized pluralism, which has a centrifugal dynamic and thus differs from the category of moderate pluralism, which has a centripetal dynamic.

Both categories share other characteristics. In the case of polarized pluralism, it is primarily the presence of an anti-system party/parties, while in a broader sense they adopt a delegitimising attitude towards the existing political system. Thus, the political spectrum includes parties that disagree with the basic principles of the existing political regime and behave irresponsibly. The political centre faces opposition from both the right and the left (Sartori, 2005, p. 135-146). Reaching consensus in such a system is therefore very difficult. Moderate pluralism is mainly characterised by coalition governments and the existence of alternative coalitions. According to Sartori, it is very similar to the logic of a two-party system because it is essentially bipolar. There are no major anti-system parties and overall politics is moderate (Sartori, 2005, p. 190-192). Specific cases may not fit all the characteristics of these categories. There are borderline cases. In the case of Spain, it is certainly debatable whether it is a borderline case of polarized pluralism or whether the logic of the party system still corresponds to moderate pluralism.

Now let's see how we can measure polarization. Ideological polarization is usually measured by the Dalton (polarization) index (Dalton, 2008; Dalton, 2021). Ideological polarization is independent of the number of parties. Therefore, there may be only a few parties and the party system may be highly polarized (Dalton, 2008, p. 908). Data from several databases can be used to calculate ideological polarization. The Dalton index can be calculated using data from mass opinion polls in which respondents rank parties on a left-right scale from 0 to 10, with 0 representing the far left and 10 representing the far right. Thus, the measurement of ideological polarization is based on voters' perceptions of the parties' positions (e.g. Comparative Study of Electoral Systems). It is also possible to rely on the quantitative content analysis of the Manifesto Research Project (MARPOR). In contrast to other methods, the higher impartiality of this method is emphasized (Dinas and Gemenis, 2009, p. 428). One of the most used indices that MARPOR produces is the RILE (Right-Left In-

dex). In a similar vein, the EU Political Barometer analyses the social media posts of political parties (here on Facebook).

Parties are usually positioned on the left-right dimension of the political spectrum. The left-right divide encompasses differing party positions on socio-economic as well as valence and cultural issues. Dalton (2008, p. 910) points out that the left-right scale can reflect any political issue relevant to a country. For example, the RILE index uses economic, social, and cultural categories. For a long time, party competition in institutionalised party systems (such as in Western Europe) has centred on socio-economic issues. The left-right divide was mainly associated with the parties' different positions on economic and social policy (e.g. social democratic parties vs. liberal-conservative parties). In the last decade, however, this has changed, and cultural issues have become more prominent. In addition to socio-economic issues, other issues such as immigration, national identity and minority rights have come to the fore. Several scholars point out that the left-right scale does not capture well the cleavages associated with the cultural dimension, such as traditional vs. modern cultural values or cosmopolitan vs. nationalist cleavages (e.g. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, 2018; Borbáth, Hutter, and Leininger, 2023). The importance of the cultural dimension of political conflict may vary from country to country. In some, it may exist alongside an already existing socio-economic dimension, while in others, it may replace it (as is the case in Hungary, for example) (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, 2018, p. 26). It is therefore necessary to consider what the left-right scale says about political party attitudes in each country context.

Recent studies on polarization (e.g. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, 2018; Borbáth, Hutter, and Leininger, 2023; Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020) work with the distinction between ideological polarization (at the level of elites) and affective polarization (at the level of society). Affective polarization highlights the divisions in contemporary society, the existence of closed groups with strong in-group attitudes that limit cooperation at the social and political level (Borbáth, Hutter, and Leininger, 2023, p. 633). A certain degree of polarization is considered beneficial for democracy as it can positively influence participation, voter decision-making

and strengthen political parties (Dalton, 2008; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, 2018). However, extreme polarization has a negative impact on democratic politics in terms of consensus building and governance. This is already well known from historical examples such as the German Weimar Republic (1920s-1930s) or the French Fourth Republic (1940s-1950s), where extreme polarization of party systems negatively affected the governance of the country.

In contemporary societies McCoy, Rahman and Somer (2018, p. 18) define the extreme (also severe) polarization “as a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’”. The political and social life is marked by “strong emotions of antipathy and distrust toward opposing parties, candidates and social groups” (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018, p. 19). A highly polarized political environment negatively affects citizens’ trust in political institutions, which can lead to a decline in support for democracy. In such a context, polarization is associated with the erosion of liberal democracy. Party leaders themselves can exacerbate polarization by deciding to adopt a polarizing electoral strategy to gain more votes (Moraes, Béjar, 2023, p. 638).

Affective polarization can be measured by opinion polls in which respondents are placed on a left-right scale. One can also rely on expert surveys, which are the basis of, for example, the V-dem project. Its index of political polarization can be used, which asks a question “Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps?”. The scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (Yes, to a large extent) is used. Another distinction of polarization is between horizontal polarization,

i.e. ideological polarization, and vertical polarization, which captures “the distance between voters and parties, that is the voters’ perceptions of how far party elites are from the voters’ own positions” (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020, p. 384).

The following analysis captures the changes in the Spanish party system, particularly between the 2019 and 2023 general elections. However, it is necessary to go deeper into the recent past, when the party system was de-institutionalised, but soon two political blocs gradually emerged. The 2023 general elections brought signs of consolidation of the party system, but also a deepening of political polarization between the competing party blocs.

The decline of imperfect bipartisanship over the last decade

The Spanish party system has been very stable for decades, with two mainstream parties – the PSOE on the centre-left and the PP on the centre-right. Both parties won more than two-thirds of the vote in every general election from 1982 to 2015 (see table 1), and more than three-quarters of the vote between 1996 and 2011. In terms of seats, their dominance was even more remarkable, with more than 80 % of parliamentary seats. The PP was considered “one of the strongest conservative parties in Europe” (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020, p. 381). Its support peaked in 2011, when it won 44,6 % of the vote (Ministerio del Interior, not dated). Despite these facts, by this time the Spanish party system was already showing a high degree of polarization, 4,33 in the 2004 parliamentary elections (Dalton, 2008, p. 905-906). According to Dalton, the Spanish case confirmed that a bipartisan system does not have to be less polarized than multi-party systems.

Table 1 Vote and seat share of PP and PSOE from 1982 to 2023

PP+PSOE share/Electoral year	1982	1986	1989	1993	1996	2000	2004
Vote Share in %	74,47	70,03	65,39	73,54	76,42	78,68	80,3
Seat Share in %	88,29	82,57	80,57	85,71	84,86	88,00	89,14
PP+PSOE share/Electoral year	2008	2011	2015	2016	2019 (April)	2019 (November)	2023
Vote Share in %	83,81	73,39	50,71	55,64	45,36	48,81	64,75
Seat Share in %	92,29	84,57	60,86	63,43	54,00	59,71	73,71

Source: Author based on data on general elections and results to the lower chamber of parliament (Congreso de los Diputados). Data are provided by the Ministry of the Interior (not dated, 2023b).

At the national level, single-party governments either had an absolute majority in parliament or were supported by regional parties. The Spanish party system was highly institutionalised. One of the most important factors influencing the stability of the party system was the electoral system, which imposed high constraints on achieving parliamentary representation. Even though it is a proportional system, it has a strong majoritarian effect due to the different sizes of constituencies (52 constituencies with sizes between 37 and 1, many of which are small constituencies) and the D'Hondt method for the conversion of votes into seats (Rama, Cordero, and Zagórski, 2021). The most common constituency size is 4 seats (10 out of 52) and 5 seats (8 out of 52) in the 2023 parliamentary elections. This type of electoral system favours large parties with support evenly distributed across constituencies and regional parties, usually representing nationalist sentiments, with concentrated support in a limited number of constituencies. Conversely, third parties with support evenly distributed across constituencies are disadvantaged (for a detailed analysis, see Penadés and Santiuste, 2013, p. 100-113).

De-institutionalisation of the party system between the 2015 and 2019 general elections

Over the last decade, the Spanish party system has undergone a significant transformation. In the 2015 and 2016 general elections, two new parties were able to overcome the constraints of the electoral system and gained significant parliamentary representation. The 2015 parliamentary elections can be seen as an "earthquake" in the political system. The mainstream parties lost around 23 % of the vote and 24 % of parliamentary seats, and despite some recovery in the 2016 parliamentary elections, their dominance came to an end. The third and fourth political forces were new parties - the far-left Podemos and the liberal Ciudadanos (C's) (see annex 1).

Looking at the new parties, Podemos emerged from popular protests against austerity. The so-called anti-austerity movement 15-M (Indignados) was at the forefront of these protests. From its inception, the party built on a populist anti-establishment discourse against

the political and economic elites, which it referred to as "la casta" (Rama, Cordero, and Zagórski, 2021). It also adopted a delegitimising stance, speaking of the "crisis of the 1978 regime", accompanied by the political and moral decline of the traditional elites (Podemos, not dated, p. 5-7). Podemos became a strong competitor to the PSOE in the 2015 and 2016 general elections but did not overcome the PSOE among left-wing voters. In the 2015 general election it won 12,67 % (42 seats), but together with other left-wing parties (often in coalition with Podemos)¹ it won 20,66 % (69 seats). Before the 2016 general election, Podemos joined forces with the traditional left-wing party United Left (Izquierda Unida) to form a party called Unidos Podemos (United We Can).² Together they won 13,37 % (45 seats), but with other left parties 21,3 % (71 seats). C's³ began to win more votes thanks to its anti-corruption campaign and its strong opposition to the Catalan secessionist movement. The party initially positioned itself as a centrist party, claiming to be able to negotiate with both the PP and the PSOE for government support. However, it has moved much further to the right of the political spectrum. After the 2015 regional and local elections, the C's had already supported most PP candidates (Rama, Cordero, and Zagórski, 2021). In the 2015 general elections the C's won 13,93 % (40 seats) and in the 2016 general elections 13,05 % (32 seats).

¹ These parties were En Comú Podem (Catalonia), En Marea (Galicia) and Compromís-Podemos-És el moment (Valencia) in the 2015 elections. Before the 2016 general election, Compromís regrouped to become Compromís-Podemos-EUPV.

² Ahead of the April 2019 general elections, Unidos Podemos has renamed itself Unidas Podemos to emphasise its feminist appeal. Its leader was Pablo Iglesias Turrión, a university political science teacher. He was second deputy prime minister of Spain from 2020 to 2021. He left politics in 2021.

³ Ciudadanos was founded in Catalonia in 2006 by Albert Rivera Díaz. The party's main aim was to oppose the secessionist tendencies that were already growing. At the same time, it presented itself as a new centrist party that represented a new politics, as a "clean" party without corruption scandals. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, the party overcame its regional entrenchment. However, after the November 2019 parliamentary elections, Albert Rivera resigned and left politics. Since then, the party has been in steady decline.

What factors influenced the broad support for the new parties? First, the financial and economic crisis that began in 2008 hit the country hard due to the simultaneous bursting of the housing bubble (Orriols and Cordero, 2016). It was accompanied by a crisis in the banking sector, which had a negative impact on the growth of public debt. The PSOE, which was in power between 2008 and 2011, had to adopt austerity measures, which were continued by the PP government (2011-2015). The austerity policies at that time were strongly supported by the EU institutions and several key EU member states, such as Germany. The party in power had to respond to international commitments and to put off the demands of the electorate. Their governmental responsibility was more important than their responsiveness to the electorate (Měšťánková, 2019). Economic factors explain the support for Podemos and C's, but they are not the only ones (Bosch and Durán, 2019).

Second, political factors played a role. In the aftermath of the 2011 parliamentary elections, the main political parties faced several corruption trials. Trust in political parties and political institutions, such as parliament, fell sharply. Orriols and Cordero (2016, p. 476) note that "The concept of 'old politics' was popularised in Spanish political discourse and lack of confidence increased among the population, especially among those who had been more critical of the political elites: young, urban and/or politically sophisticated citizens from the wealthiest regions". The general political crisis contributed to a final, notable factor, the rise of the Catalan secessionist movement, which led to the holding of two illegal independence referendums (2014 and 2017) (Dowling, 2018). The Catalan political scene has undergone turbulent changes, with the de facto demise of CiU (Convergència i Unió), long the main regional party seeking greater autonomy. Catalonia has been governed by the ERC and the Junts per Catalunya, which have adopted an anti-systemic stance, in clear opposition to the existing political system. The C's remained strongly opposed to the secessionist forces and was the main anti-secessionist party in Catalonia between 2015 and 2021. The salience of the territorial conflict was not as pronounced in the 2015 general election (Orriols and Cordero,

2016), but its salience increased over time as the conflict escalated.

The repetition of the 2015 and 2016 elections showed not only that bipartisanship is on the decline, but also that forming a government will be a more difficult task than in the past. It was only after the second general election that the PP formed a single-party government because the main opposition party, the PSOE, abstained. Until then, the informal rule had been that the winning party formed the government. However, the PP government faced serious problems in 2017 and 2018. One of them was the escalation of the conflict in Catalonia, the result of which was the unilateral declaration of independence in October 2017 by a narrow majority in the Catalan parliament. In response, the national government of Mariano Rajoy (PP) dissolved the regional parliament and government with the approval of the Senate. It established direct government administration over the autonomous community and called new elections for the regional parliament (Simón, 2020a). The PP has adopted a more repressive strategy towards Catalan secessionism. However, this has also had the effect of distancing it from other regional parties that have been able so far to cooperate with the PP (e.g. EAJ-PNV).

The second was a court decision in a major corruption case involving the PP. The National Court (Audiencia Nacional) ruled that the PP had been illegally financed and had created an effective institutional system of corruption. The court also did not find some of the testimonies credible, which had a negative impact on the credibility of Mariano Rajoy (Prime Minister), who also testified at the court (Gil, 2018, Simón, 2020a). This was the final straw that prompted the opposition to trigger a vote of no confidence in the government. A constitutional provision called for a constructive vote of no confidence, which meant that Mariano Rajoy's government could only be replaced if another parliamentary majority was formed. For the first time in Spanish history, this succeeded, and Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) was supported not only by the left but also by regional, nationalist political parties. From that moment on, a new majority was formed including the left parties and a large part of the nationalist forces. This was the moment of the emergence of a new left-wing bloc in Spanish politics.

Overall, this period has seen the de-institutionalisation of the existing party system and its greater fragmentation. The ideological distance between political parties has increased and attitudes have become more radicalised. The attitude of the far left towards the political system can be described as delegitimising, but the regional, nationalist parties in Catalonia have adopted an anti-system stance. Despite the radicalisation, the logic of the Spanish party system has been one of moderate pluralism, as the traditional, mainstream political parties have still been able to find consensus and have not faced bilateral opposition.

Formation of a two-block party competition between the 2019 and 2023 general elections

In the general elections of April 2019, the PP reached its lowest level of electoral support, winning only 16,7 % of the vote. The PSOE has begun to recover from the setbacks it suffered in the 2015 and 2016 general elections (see annex 1). The PSOE won the April 2019 parliamentary elections but was unable to form a centre-left government with the C's, where the swing to right-wing parties was confirmed (on government formation between the April and November 2019 parliamentary elections, see Simón, 2020b). The repeated inability to form a government led to an elections' repetition in November 2019. The most important change came with the unexpected rise of the far-right party Vox, which based its programme on defending Spain's territorial integrity against separatist parties and on defending conservative values. Its strong questioning of Catalan secessionism was the main reason why voters voted for the party (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020, Rama, Cordero, and Zagórski, 2021). On the other hand, the liberal C's suffered an electoral defeat in the November elections (see annex 1). The right wing of the political scene has been radicalised by the strong position of Vox.

The party system has become more polarized and the ideological distance between political parties has increased. On either side of the spectrum, two major parties have established themselves - Unidas Podemos on the left and Vox on the right. The left bloc has been composed of the moderate PSOE and the far-left Unidas Podemos, as well as several region-

al parties, often in a coalition with Podemos (such as En Comú Podem in Catalonia or En Común-Unidas Podemos in Galicia). After the successful constructive vote of no confidence, the PSOE has moved further to the left. The regional, nationalist parties (such as the ERC in Catalonia) have begun to work more closely with the left-wing governmental parties.

Right-wing voters split their votes. In addition to the PP, they voted for the liberal C's and the far-right Vox, which managed to win over 50 % of former PP voters (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020, p. 385). The C's wanted to replace the PP among right-wing voters. This was a risky strategy, but the shift to the right was evident both in the refusal to cooperate with the PSOE on the formation of national government, which had a sufficient parliamentary majority after the April 2019 elections, and at the regional level, where C's only cooperated with the PP in regional government coalitions (Azpitarte Sánchez, 2020, p. 145-149). The C's suffered an electoral defeat in the November 2019 general elections. The PP and C's tried to distance themselves from the far-right Vox, but on the other hand they needed its support for right-wing regional governments (Simón, 2020b, p. 537-538). They were careful not to make this collaboration too visible, because they did not want to be associated too closely with Vox's radical positions.

The differences between the left and right politics have traditionally been based on different attitudes to socio-economic issues and redistribution (e.g. fiscal policy, housing, health care). They have also involved issues of values and identity (Simón, 2020b, p. 535), in particular the approach to different national identities within the Spanish state and to the concept of the state of autonomies. Traditionally, left-wing parties have taken a much more inclusive stance towards regional, nationalist parties than right-wing parties, which are more associated with Spanish nationalism. The most striking manifestation of this difference was the divergent approach to the territorial conflict in Catalonia, which culminated in Catalonia's unilateral declaration of independence in October 2017. The PP government adopted a strategy of suppression, while the Sánchez government sought rapprochement with separatist parties.

Regarding the degree of political polarization, Simón (2020b, p. 536) shows that the degree of polarization has been steadily increasing over the last two decades, exceeding 5 on a 10-point scale in the November 2019 parliamentary elections. The increase in polarization is attributed to the polarizing political strategies of new parties, rather than to the radicalisation of voters' attitudes. The polarization contest "has blurred the differences between moderate and radical parties in the eyes of the voters" (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020, p. 382). In the 2015 general elections, it was Podemos with its anti-establishment appeal against the political and economic elites. In the November 2019 general elections, it was the far-right Vox party that surfed the wave of rising nationalism (Simón, 2020b, p. 537). Spanish nationalism had long been negatively associated with the Franco regime, but the rise of Catalan nationalism, which led to separatist politics, opened the door to Spanish nationalism. Shortly before the November 2019 parliamentary elections, the Supreme Court sentenced Catalan separatist leaders to prison. There were mass demonstrations and eventually riots in Catalonia. These events played a role for those who voted for Vox. The exhumation and reburial of Francisco Franco in October 2019 also had a positive impact on the vote for Vox (Simón, 2020b, p. 547-549).

The two-bloc competition was confirmed by the formation of a coalition government between the PSOE and Unidas Podemos (Azpitarte Sánchez, 2020, p. 151-158). An act that the PSOE refused to do between the 2015 and 2016 elections, when it wanted to form a government with the C's. The coalition government legitimised the close cooperation between the moderate left and the far left. This coalition was also repeated at regional and local level. The PP strongly criticised this move and portrayed the UP as an undemocratic party close to undemocratic leftist regimes in Latin America (e.g. Venezuela). The government was also supported by regional parties, including separatists such as ERC and EH Bildu, which decided to abstain. The right-wing parties then began to associate the PSOE, led by Pedro Sánchez, with the radicals. They subsequently referred to his government pejoratively as 'Sanchism' (sanchismo) (PP, 2021).

Political situation ahead of the parliamentary elections in July 2023

Pedro Sánchez has called early general elections for July 2023. They were called in the context of the exhaustion of the left-wing coalition government of PSOE and UP. This government focused mainly on issues such as unemployment, social policies for low-income groups and economic recovery after the health crisis caused by COVID-19, which completely shut down the country in the first phase of the pandemic (see, for example, OECD, 2020, Rodríguez Teruel, del Pino, and Real-Dato, 2023). However, it has also pushed through reforms aimed at extending the protection of minority rights, which have particularly clashed with the far right, such as the law on transgender persons (ley "trans").

After the formation of the first coalition government, tackling unemployment became a key government priority. In the 2019 general election, unemployment was one of the top issues in Spain (see annex 2). The problem has persisted since the economic and financial crisis, reaching its peak in 2013 with 26,1 % of the population unemployed. Unemployment remained above the EU average in the following years (Eurostat, 2023a). The government has negotiated a reform of the labour code, aimed at reducing precarious employment and seasonality. Contracts of an indefinite duration have become a common way of employing workers. As a result, the problems of seasonality and contract duration have improved in the country (Flores, 2023). The overall level of unemployment has also fallen, and its importance has diminished in the run-up to the July 2023 elections (see annex 2). Other notable socioeconomic measures include the introduction of a minimum subsistence income, the taxation of bank and energy company profits, the regulation of energy prices during the energy crisis and the first regulation of housing (Flores, 2023).

Legal reforms aimed at strengthening the rights of minorities have led to disputes and clashes with right-wing parties, especially the far right. These included the extension of the right to abortion, which was extended in time (to 14 weeks), and the abolition of parental consent for girls over the age of 16. The rights of the LGBTI community were extended by the

law on transgender persons, introduced gender self-determination. This provision completely relaxed the conditions for gender change in the civil registry (Flores, 2023). The most controversial reform was the reform of the penal code in the area of sexual abuse (ley “solo sí es sí”), which aimed to provide greater protection for victims of sexual abuse. However, once it was put into practice, prisoners began to ask for their sentences to be reviewed. According to the General Council of the Judiciary in July 2023, 31,7 % of the reviews resulted in a reduction of the sentence and 117 prisoners were released (Iustel, 2023). This caused friction in the government, and the PSOE, along with the main opposition party (PP), voted for further reform of the penal code against the opposition of the Unidas Podemos, which was the author of the first reform of the penal code.

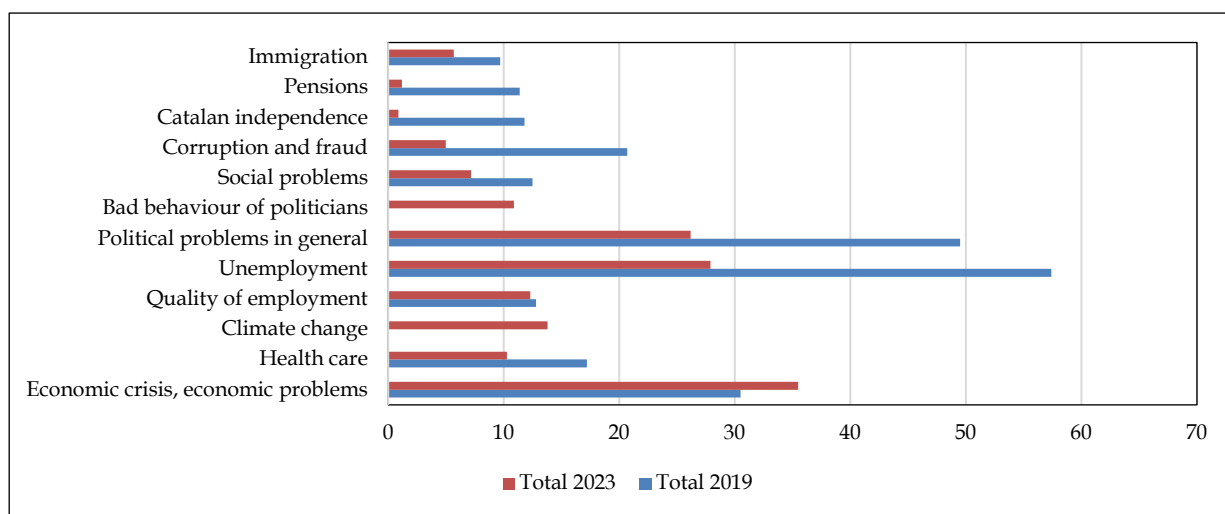
The last reform that caused serious tensions between the government and the opposition was the law on democratic memory, which introduced the obligation to find all those who disappeared during the civil war (1936-1939). The Franco regime was declared illegal, and the commission of inquiry on human rights violations between 1978 and 1983 was created. It means during the consolidation of the democratic regime which led to strong opposition from right-wing parties (Flores, 2023).

The territorial conflict over the secession of Catalonia, which was still very much alive before the 2019 parliamentary elections, completes the picture of the situation in the coun-

try. The government has adopted a strategy of rapprochement with separatist parties, especially the ERC. Following the Supreme Court ruling that sent a number of Catalan politicians to prison for years, the government granted them pardons. However, their exclusion from public office remained in force. To calm the conflict, the government reformed the penal code and removed the crime of sedition (Camut, 2022). The intensity of the territorial conflict was definitively reduced, which was reflected in a decrease in support for Catalan independence (CEO, 2023, p. 68) and an increase in support for the non-independent Catalan Socialist Party (PSC).

The views of the Spanish voters have also changed between 2019 and 2023, as captured by the CIS barometers. These barometers ask, among other things, what citizens think are the most important problems facing the country (see Figure 1). In 2019, unemployment was the most important issue. However, valence issues such as the country's political problems, corruption and fraud, and the territorial conflict in Catalonia were also important (see annex 2). This has to be seen in the context of the general political crisis that accompanied the fall of Mariano Rajoy's government in 2018. It was also the time when the territorial conflict in Catalonia reached its peak. However, the severity of the conflict was perceived much more strongly by voters on the right than by voters on the left. For the far left, social and economic issues were more important than Catalan separatism.

Figure 1 The most important problems in Spain in 2019 and 2023 general elections (voters' perceptions)



Source: Author based on CIS data (2019b, 2023b). The figure captures those topics that gained more than 10 % of the total in given time periods.

The state of economy was seen as the most important issue ahead of the 2023 elections, especially among right-wing voters. Unemployment has declined in importance but remains an important cross-party issue. The importance of valence issues has declined but remains prominent especially among right-wing voters. In addition to political problems in general, they emphasised the bad behaviour of politicians. The importance of the territorial conflict in Catalonia has fallen sharply among voters of different political parties. Finally, left-wing voters were much more concerned about the impact of climate change than right-wing voters. Immigration, a typical socio-cultural issue, was only important for Vox voters (Castro Martínez, Mo Groba, 2020), but even they were less concerned about this issue in the 2023 general elections.

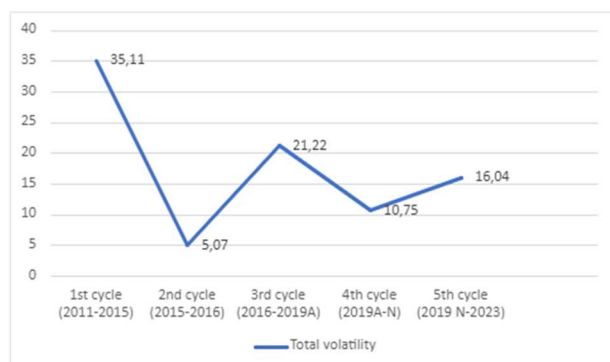
Regarding the party system, several changes could be observed in the run-up to the elections. The PP, as the main opposition party, increased its preferences among voters. Vox remained an option for right-wing voters, but the C's became a party without the possibility of winning a mandate at national, regional or local level. In the regional and municipal elections in May 2023, the PP won, and Vox improved its results, while Unidas Podemos and C's lost ground among voters (Ministerio del Interior, 2023a). The PP also won a majority in the elections for the autonomous communities, and in several of them it formed a coalition government with the far-right Vox (Aragon, Comunidad Valenciana, Extremadura, Murcia). In doing so, the PP openly legitimised the extreme right participation in the government. This raised legitimate expectations that this right-wing coalition could be repeated at national level, at least in the form of tacit support for the PP's government by Vox. The right-wing bloc was thus radicalised, as the liberal C's almost disappeared and decided not to participate in the 2023 general elections (Chislett, 2023). On the left, the sharp decline in support for the far-left Unidas Podemos and its regional partners led to a realignment. The left-wing parties came together in an electoral coalition - Sumar - led by popular Minister of Labour Yolanda Díaz.

Party system change after July 2023 general elections

Changes in the party system in the context of the July 2023 parliamentary elections were observed through several parameters: electoral volatility, effective number of parties (electoral and parliamentary) and degree of political polarization. The first indicator, electoral volatility, can be used to show the degree of instability within the party system (see figure 2). As electoral volatility figures can vary depending on measurement (Bertóla Casal, Deegan-Krause, and Haughton, 2017), the measure presented here uses inclusive aggregation to capture predecessor/successor party links. In this case, this is particularly relevant for the new left-wing coalition Sumar, which was formed just before the general election in July 2023. Therefore, all the gains of the parties forming this coalition were used in the calculation, and name changes were ignored. The issue of the threshold was problematic because in Spain, parties can win a mandate with a very low total number of votes but concentrated in a single constituency. However, using a zero threshold would have meant including all parties with a very low percentage of votes. In the end, a threshold of 0,5 % was used because it is still relatively accurate in terms of providing information on overall volatility. All shares below this threshold were excluded, as the exclusion method is considered more reliable (Bertóla Casal, Deegan-Krause, and Haughton, 2017, p. 153). If a party exceeded the threshold once, all data points were included (blanket inclusion).

Figure 2 shows that the level of electoral volatility has declined steadily since the 'earthquake' of the 2015 general election. The decline in electoral volatility in the second and fourth cycles is due to the repeat elections, which brought little change.

Figure 2 Electoral volatility between 2011 and 2023 general elections



Source: Author; calculations based on data from the Ministry of the Interior (not dated, 2023b).

In the last elections, the traditional mainstream parties largely regained their position among the Spanish electorate (see table 2). For 2019, their share of the vote was only 48,81 %, but for 2023, 64,75 % (+15.94 %). Converted into seats in 2023, they have 258 seats (out of

350), that is, 49 more than after the November 2019 election results and 73,71 % overall. The newcomers to the political contest – C's, Unidas Podemos, Vox – have generally lost ground, but with differences. C's did not participate in the contest, as the party has been in decline since the November 2019 general elections. Unidas Podemos joined Sumar to cushion its decline. Vox remained, but also lost around a third of its parliamentary seats compared to the previous 2019 general elections. Regional parties, including the separatist ones, are also generally losing ground in terms of electoral support and seats. In Catalonia, the PSC, the regional branch of the PSOE, won and the separatist parties (ERC, CUP, and Junts) lost around 40 % of their seats. In the Basque Country, both nationalist parties maintained their support, but the far-left separatist EH Bildu overtook the more moderate EAJ-PNV.

Table 2 Comparison of 2019 November and 2023 July general elections (in % of votes and number of seats)

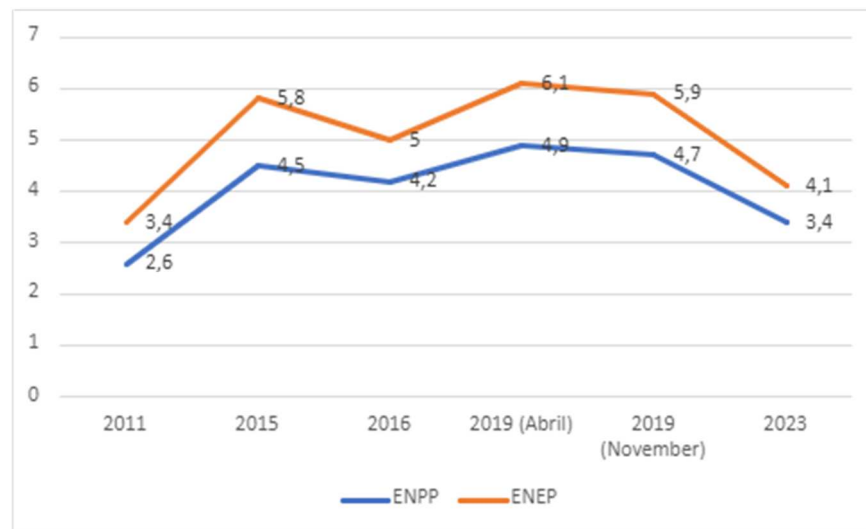
Party	2019 N/votes	2023/votes	Difference	2019 N/seats	2023/seats	Difference
PP	20,99	33,05	+12,06	89	136	+47
PSOE	28,25	31,7	+2,82	120	122	+2
Unidas Podemos	9,91			26		
En Comú Podem	2,28			7		
Más País-EQUO	1,37			2		
En Común-Unidas Podemos	0,78			2		
Compromís	0,73			1		
Sumar		12,31	-2,76		31	-7
Ciudadanos	6,86		-6,86	10	0	-10
Vox	15,21	12,39	-2,82	52	33	-19
Junts per Catalunya	2,21	1,6	-0,61	8	7	-1
Esquerra (ERC)	3,64	1,89	-1,75	13	7	-6
EH Bildu	1,15	1,36	+0,21	5	6	+1
EAJ-PNV	1,58	1,12	-0,46	6	5	-1
BNG	0,5	0,62	+0,12	1	1	=
CC-NC-PNC	0,52	0,46	-0,06	2	1	-1
CUP	1,03	0,4	-0,63	2	0	-2

Source: Author, based on data from the Ministry of the Interior (not dated, 2023b).

The revival of mainstream parties and a certain return of political competition to its original contours was confirmed by the calculation of the effective number of parties in terms of votes and seats (Laakso-Taagepera index). All parties were included in the calculation of the effective number of electoral parties unless they had less than 0,1 % of the vote (i.e. very

small and regional parties were included). The final decision was arbitrary but was based on the fact that even parties with very low vote totals can win a parliamentary seat if their support is concentrated in a constituency. For example, in both 2019 parliamentary elections, the Teruel Existe party won one seat with only 0,08 % of the total vote.

Figure 3 Effective Number of Electoral Parties (ENEP) and Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP) between 2011 and 2023

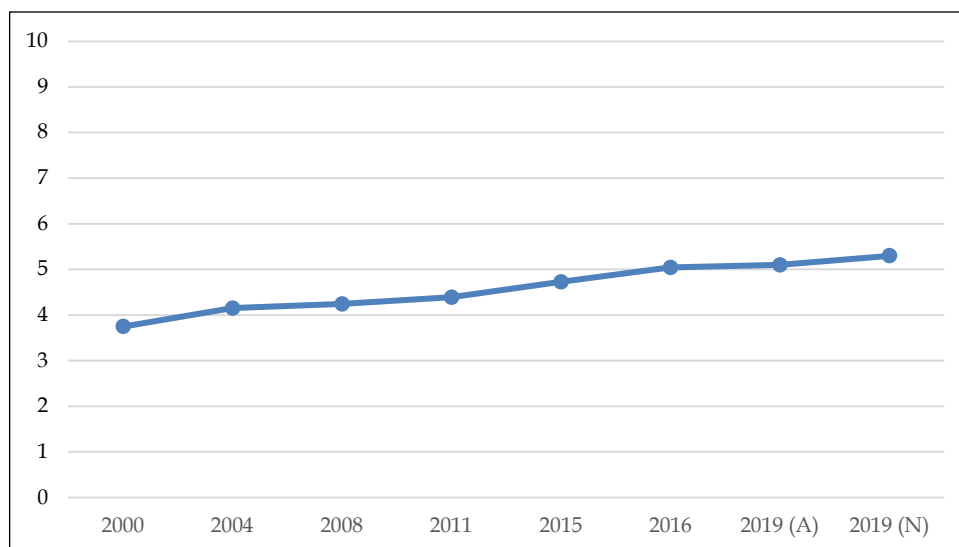


Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Ministry of the Interior (not dated, 2023b).

Figure 3 shows a decline in both the effective number of electoral parties, confirming the place of four leading parties/movements - two on the right (PP and Vox), two on the left (PSOE, Sumar) and the decline of regional parties. This has also affected the effective number of parliamentary parties, where a disproportionate effect of the electoral system must be considered. The system over-represents the largest parties, while third and fourth parties lose out. The effective number of parliamentary parties fell to 3,4, but in fact two-bloc politics was strengthened after these elections.

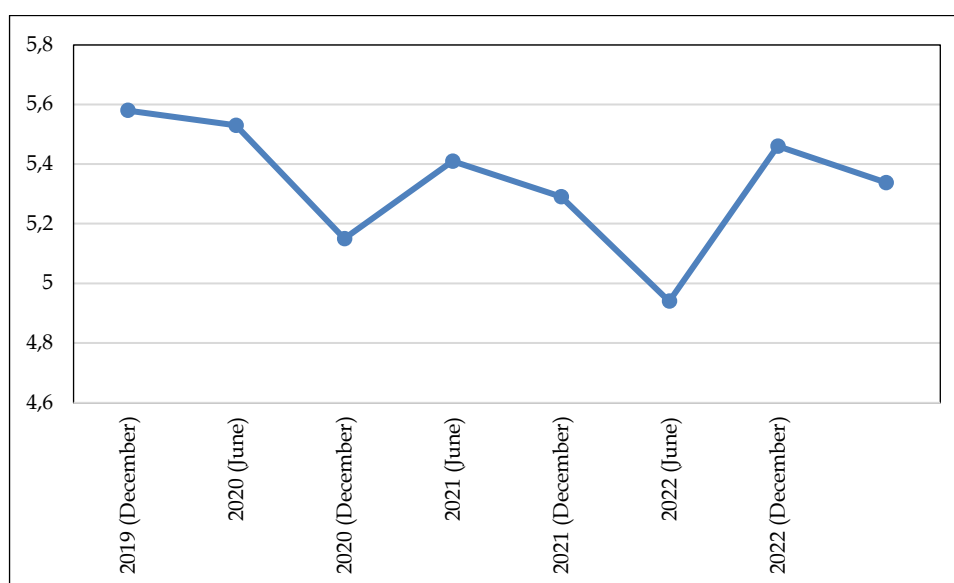
The polarization index on the level of the party system has steadily increased in recent decades, as captured by expert analysis (see figure 4). In the November 2019 general elections, the polarization index was 5,3, making Spain one of the countries with the highest polarization index in the EU, along with France and Cyprus (EU Political Barometer, not dated). In the following years, the polarization index remained high (see Figure 5).

Figure 4 Polarization index from 2000 to 2019 November general elections



Source: Simón 2020b.

Figure 5 Polarization index between 2019 and 2022



Source: EU Political Barometer (Universidad Carlos III of Madrid).

Polarization manifests itself not only at the level of elites, but also at the level of society as a whole. If we look at the V-dem index of political polarization, Spain went from a value of 1 (mostly no) before 2011, to a value of 2 (to some extent) between 2011 and 2019, to a value of 3 after 2019, which means that “supporters of opposing camps communicate with each other more often in a hostile way than in a friendly one” (V-dem, 2023).

The general elections in July 2023 confirmed the division of the party spectrum into two antagonistic blocs: the right (PP, Vox) and the left (PSOE, Sumar). The electoral gains of both blocs were almost equal, as shown in table 3. Thus, the 2023 general elections did not confirm the dominance of the right-wing bloc.

Table 3 Changes in electoral support for political blocs between 2019 and 2023 general elections

	2019 in %	2023 in %	Difference in %
Right-wing bloc	43,06	45,44	2,38
Left-wing bloc	41,04	44,01	2,97
Regionalist bloc	10,63	7,45	-3,18

Source: Author based on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

However, the composition of the right-wing bloc (PP, Vox) significantly limits cooperation with other parties across the political spectrum. Relations between the PP and the PSOE have long been strained. The PP has personalised its electoral strategy directly against Prime Minister Sánchez, making cooperation even more difficult. However, the PP’s alliance with Vox also limits cooperation with regional parties, which is a typical feature of Spanish politics. Regional parties are key to forming a government when the winning party in an election does not have an absolute majority. Agreements with regional parties have secured the necessary parliamentary majority for minority

governments (e.g. Field, 2014). However, the PP cannot rely on this political tradition because only some of the regional parties (such as Coalición Canaria) are still part of it, while for others (such as EAJ-PNV) the link between the PP and Vox is not acceptable. The Vox defends the unity of the Spanish state and calls for the suspension of the autonomy of those autonomous communities whose governments work against the unity of the state (Vox, 2023, p. 16).

As a result, the regional parties are tending to work with the left-wing bloc. In particular, the PSOE and Sumar need the votes of the separatist parties (ERC and Junts), which are demanding further concessions as they lose elec-

toral support. The first is an amnesty law for Catalan politicians who were behind the illegal referendums and the declaration of independence. If the amnesty law passes, those currently abroad could return from abroad. Similarly, those who were convicted but pardoned could return to politics. Another issue is the financing of Catalonia and the transfer of further powers in the management of transport networks (Rovira, 2023). However, the ERC and Junts have pushed through a resolution in the Catalan parliament demanding an agreement with the central government on the terms of a referendum on self-determination, which the PSOE has rejected.

The continuation of the coalition government of the PSOE and Sumar, led by Pedro Sánchez, was finally confirmed in a vote of confidence in November 2023. Regional parties, including separatist parties, ultimately supported the left-wing government. However, this support could prove very fragile. Especially if Sánchez's government fails to meet the expectations of the Catalan separatists.

Conclusions

Over the past decade, the Spanish party system has undergone several important changes. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, imperfect bipartisanship ended as voters distanced themselves from the traditional mainstream parties. The new parties overcame the limitations of the electoral system and gained strong parliamentary representation. Between 2015 and 2019, the far left and the far right gained significant electoral support. The liberal C's also became a significant parliamentary party during this period, but steadily lost ground after November 2019 general elections and currently has no parliamentary representation.

After 2015, in a context of growing political and social polarization, a two-bloc political competition gradually took shape. The PP, C's and Vox formed a right-wing bloc and the PSOE and Unidas Podemos a left-wing bloc. The main differences between them remained mainly on socio-economic issues. On cultural issues, there were differences between the extreme poles of the party spectrum (Unidas Podemos and Vox) regarding the extension of minority rights. The political blocs also di-

verged in their approach to Catalan secessionism, with left-wing parties in favour of concessions to Catalan separatist parties and right-wing parties in favour of a strategy of suppression (with certain differences between them). Nevertheless, the regional parties remained key to the formation of the government, and the different positions of the national parties on the territorial conflict influenced how they allied with them.

The parliamentary elections of July 2023 showed signs of some stabilisation in the party system, as electoral volatility was not as high as in previous elections. Mainstream parties were able to regain some of their positions, while newcomers suffered losses. This opens the possibility of further research into the factors influencing party survival in the political arena. The effective number of electoral and parliamentary parties has also decreased. On the other hand, polarization has remained high. The two blocs now consist of a moderate (PP, PSOE) and a radical party (Vox, Sumar), which severely limits their cooperation. This has implications for government formation, as both blocs need either an absolute majority or a result close to an absolute majority, which reduces their dependence on regional parties. In the absence of the necessary parliamentary majority, regional parties are crucial for government formation. As they are also fighting for their votes at the regional level, they have no hesitation in putting pressure on the national parties to push through their issues. The options for forming a government at national level are now limited. The territorial conflict in Catalonia and the harsh discourse of the far right have distanced most regional parties from the right-wing bloc. As a result, most regional parties are inclined to support the left-wing bloc, which could make more concessions in terms of greater powers for the regional government and the de-judicialization of the Catalan independence conflict.

In conclusion, Spain provides an interesting case in which Sartori's categories of moderate and polarized pluralism can be discussed. The existence of a coalition government and the perspective of an alternative coalition are still key features of moderate pluralism. On the other hand, the high degree of polarization and the ideological distance between political parties tend towards polarized pluralism. To this

must be added the delegitimising attitudes of certain political parties. The Catalan separatist parties have also not abandoned their goals and their current support for the government may be very shaky. Although the traditional political parties have regained some of their strength, consensus politics has not returned. On the contrary, confrontation, both between party blocs and between the traditional parties that shaped democracy after the fall of the Franco regime, has persisted as a characteristic feature of Spanish politics.

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Annex 1 Electoral results from 2011 to 2023 general elections (only parties that got the parliamentary seat)

	2011	2015	2016	2019 A	2019 N	2023
PP	44,62	28,72	33,03	16,82	20,99	33,05
PSOE	28,73	22,01	22,66	28,89	28,25	31,7
IU-LV	6,92					
Unidad Popular (IU)		3,67				
Podemos		12,67				
Podemos-IU-EQUO/Unidas Podemos			13,37	11,14	9,91	
En Comú Podem		3,69	3,55	2,37	2,28	
Más País-EQUO					1,37	
En Común-Unidas Podemos				0,92	0,78	
En Marea		1,63	1,64			
Compromís Q/Compromís	0,51			0,67	0,73	
Compromís-Podemos-És el moment		2,67				
Compromís-Podemos-EUPV:A la Valenciana			2,74			
Sumar						12,31
UPyD	4,69	0,61	0,21			
Ciudadanos		13,93	13,05	15,98	6,86	
Vox		0,23	0,2	10,34	15,21	12,39
CiU	4,17					
DEMOCRÀCIA I LLIBERTAT (CDC, DC, RI.cat)		2,25				
CDC			2,01			
Junts per Catalunya				1,93	2,21	1,6
Esquerra Republicana (ERC)	1,05	2,39	2,63	3,92	3,64	1,89
AMAIUR/EH Bildu	1,37	0,87	0,77	1	1,15	1,36
EAJ-PNV	1,33	1,2	1,2	1,52	1,58	1,12
BNG	0,75	0,28	0,19	0,36	0,5	0,62
CC-NC-PNC	0,59	0,33	0,33	0,53	0,52	0,46
Navarra Suma (UPN, C's, PP)				0,41	0,41	
UPN						0,21
FAC	0,4					
GBAI	0,17	0,12	0,06	0,09		
PRC	0,18			0,2	0,29	
CUP					1,03	0,4
Más País					0,22	
Teruel Existe					0,08	

Source: Ministerio del Interior (not dated, 2023b).

Annex 2 Top five most important problems for party voters in 2019 and 2023 general elections

PP 2019	PP 2023	PSOE 2019	PSOE 2023
Health Care Political problems in general Unemployment Economic crisis Catalan independence Corruption and fraud	Unemployment Economic crisis Bad behaviour of politicians Political problems in general Quality of employment	Corruption and fraud Economic crisis Unemployment Political problems in general Health Care	Health Care Economic crisis Unemployment Climate Change Political problems in general
Vox 2019	Vox 2023	Unidas Podemos 2019	Sumar 2023
Immigration Unemployment Political problems in general Economic crisis Corruption and fraud	Economic crisis Political problems in general Unemployment Immigration Bad behaviour of politicians	Political problems in general Economic crisis Unemployment Quality of employment Social problems	Quality of employment Climate Change Economic crisis Unemployment Political problems in general

Source: Author based on the data from CIS (2019b, 2023b). Font size reflects the importance of the issue. As for PP, the topics "Health Care" and "Corruption and Fraud" had the same percentage of responses in 2019.