



Spain's 2019 Election

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Many U.S. officials and Members of Congress consider Spain to be an important U.S. ally and one of the closest U.S. partners in Europe. Spain's April 2019 election returned a fragmented result, but most seated parties favor the continuation of close U.S.-Spain relations.

Socialist Party Wins, But No Majority

The center-left Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), led by incumbent Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, came in first place in [Spain's general election](#) held on April 28, 2019. The PSOE won 123 out of the 350 seats in Spain's Congress of Deputies (lower house of parliament), with nearly 29% of the vote. The center-right Popular Party (PP) came in second place with 66 seats.

The election was Spain's third general election in three and a half years. General elections in 2015 and 2016 did not produce a majority government; no single party won a majority of seats, and no combination of parties adding up to a majority was able to agree on forming a coalition government. After a 10-month political deadlock, the PP formed a minority government in late 2016.

To form a minority government, a party holding less than half of the seats in parliament negotiates with one or more other parties for their support in reaching the majority threshold needed to win a parliamentary vote of confidence, in return for certain policy concessions. Support for ensuing legislation is typically determined on a case-by-case basis.

The PP was subsequently damaged by a [corruption scandal](#), and Sánchez became prime minister in June 2018 after a parliamentary vote of no confidence defeated the PP-led government. After leading a [minority government](#) holding less than one-quarter of the seats in the Congress of Deputies (85 out of 350), Sánchez called an early election when he was [unable to](#) secure enough votes to pass the 2019 budget.

Sánchez has [indicated](#) that the PSOE could run another minority government. In order to win a parliamentary vote of confidence, the most likely [scenario](#) appears to be that Sánchez would seek support from *Podemos*, a far-left, anti-establishment party that won 42 seats in the election, as well as from an array of smaller, regional parties. Reliance on Catalan separatist parties, two of which won a combined 22 seats, would likely prove contentious and raise concerns about what concessions those parties might demand in return for their support.

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A less likely scenario, but one which has not been completely ruled out, would be a partnership between the PSOE and center-right party *Ciudadanos*, which came in third place in the election with 57 seats.

Table I. Results of 2019 Spanish Election

(voter turnout: 75.75%)

Party	# of Seats	% of Vote	Seats +/- compared to 2016	Vote % compared to 2016
Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	123	28.7%	+38	+5.7%
Popular Party (PP)	66	16.7%	-71	-16.3
Ciudadanos (Citizens)	57	15.9%	+25	+2.9
Unidas Podemos (Together We Can)	42	14.3%	-29	-6.7%
<i>Results incorporate the electoral alliance of Podemos, United Left, EQUO (a merger of green parties), and En Comú Podem.</i>				
Vox (Voice)	24	10.3%	+24	+10.3
All Others	38	10.1%	+13	+0.1
<i>Eight regional parties won between one and 15 seats each.</i>				

Source: "Elecciones Generales 2019," *El Pais*, April 29, 2019.

Trends and Dynamics

Spanish politics have become increasingly fragmented in recent years, as a system long dominated by the PP and the PSOE has fractured into five parties each drawing between 10% and 29% of the vote. In winning the most seats in the 2019 election, the PSOE benefitted from a splintering of the right-wing vote between three parties. Support for the PP dropped considerably, as many voters angry over PP-linked corruption scandals turned to *Ciudadanos* and others shifted to *Vox*, a new far-right, anti-immigration party that [entered parliament](#) with 24 seats. Competing with the PSOE on the left, *Podemos* arose largely out of a protest movement in the wake of the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Although the Spanish economy has been improving in recent years, economic conditions and high unemployment have been a predominant issue in Spain since the crisis.

The [Catalan separatist issue](#) has been the other predominant issue for Spain in recent years. All of the mainstream national political parties oppose the idea of Catalan independence. Whereas hardline opposition to Catalan independence is a fundamental position of the three parties of the right, the PSOE has been more willing to enter into dialogue with the separatists, and *Podemos* has expressed [support](#) for Catalonia's right to decide.

On the European level, the victory of the PSOE provides a measure of optimism for the continent's center-left social democratic parties, many of which have experienced [declining support](#) in recent years. The emergence of *Vox* adds to the trend of far-right, anti-immigrant parties making gains in a number of European countries, although some observers assert that backlash to *Vox* helped [mobilize](#) center-left voters. Previously, Spain had often been cited as a European country that had remained relatively ["immune"](#) to the far-right, as prior to *Vox* the far-right had no significant role in Spanish politics since the end of the Franco dictatorship and transition to democracy in the mid-1970s.

U.S.-Spain Relations and Issues for Congress

Given its role as a close U.S. ally, developments in Spain and its relations with the United States following Spain's April 2019 election are likely to be of continuing interest to the U.S. Congress.

The United States and Spain have extensive cultural ties and a mutually beneficial economic relationship, and the two countries cooperate closely on numerous diplomatic and security issues, including counterterrorism. Spain has been a member of NATO since 1982 and a member of the European Union (EU) since 1986.

Spain plays an important role in U.S. defense strategy for Europe and Africa. Four U.S. destroyers equipped with the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense system are based at [Rota naval station](#), and Morón air base is the headquarters for a [rapid reaction force](#) of U.S. Marines that protects U.S. interests and personnel in North Africa. Spanish armed forces participate in numerous [international peacekeeping and security operations](#).

Since taking office in 2018, Prime Minister Sánchez has not made any dramatic changes to Spain's foreign policy. His government has adopted a distinctly pro-EU approach and an outlook emphasizing multilateral foreign policy cooperation through Spain's membership in institutions such as NATO and the United Nations. The PSOE favors maintaining U.S.-Spain defense cooperation and security ties. *Podemos*, which could provide parliamentary support for a Socialist-led government, has in the past demanded a referendum on Spain's NATO membership and most recently campaigned to redirect Spain's security strategy away from NATO in favor of the EU.

For additional background information, see CRS Report R44298, *Spain and Its Relations with the United States: In Brief*, by Derek E. Mix.

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