

The 2015 Spanish general election: a final look at the parties and the polls

Spain will hold a general election on 20 December, with opinion polls indicating a tight contest between four parties for the largest share of the vote – the governing People's Party (PP), who have a small lead in most polls, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), Ciudadanos (C's), and Podemos. **Sebastian Balfour** provides a final look at the campaigns and the polling. He writes that with Spain's traditional two party system giving way to a new political landscape, the result remains impossible to predict.

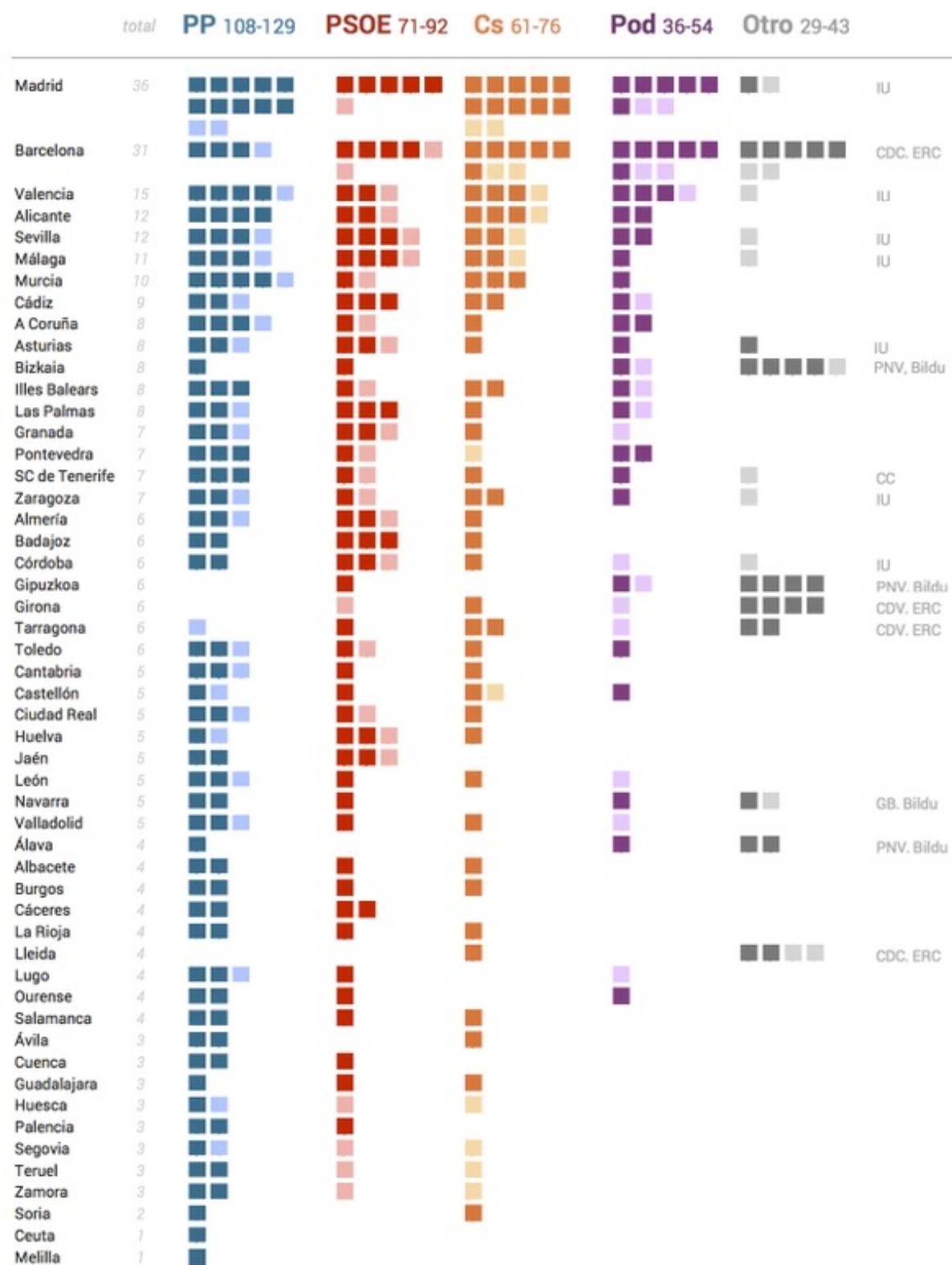


The general elections in Spain on 20 December are likely to transform the country's political landscape. Polls suggest the end of the two-party system that has dominated Spanish politics since the consolidation of its democracy. The fragmentation of the vote already became apparent in the European elections and the regional and local elections this year.

The central feature of this new landscape is the sudden emergence of two new parties of the left and centre-right, **Podemos** and **Ciudadanos**, in a challenge to the political culture of the established parties of Spanish democracy. The legitimacy of the political system is under question after seven years of economic crisis, austerity and unemployment and the unravelling of the corruption and clientelism at its heart. The words that resound in the electoral rallies of the two new parties are renewal and regeneration.

If the polls are to be believed, however, the elections are unlikely to produce a clear result. The contest, it seems, is a four-horse race without a clear winner. The parliamentary arithmetic implied by the polls suggests that no party will emerge with an absolute majority of 176 seats and above in a parliament of 350 seats. When that happens, a second vote is held in the Congress 48 hours later in which the party winning a simple majority of seats is invited to form the government.

Chart 1: Seat prediction for the Spanish general election



Note: The chart is reproduced with permission from [El Español](#) and is provided for illustrative purposes rather than as an attempt by the author to predict the result. The prediction was compiled by Kiko Llaneras based on 15,000 simulations using polling data up to 12 December 2015. Each square indicates one seat in a given location, with darkly coloured squares predicted with 75% certainty and lighter squares with 50% certainty. Party abbreviations are: Partido Popular (PP), Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), Ciudadanos (C's), Podemos (Pod) – 'Otro' refers to other parties.

According to opinion polls the ruling [Partido Popular](#) (PP) is likely to achieve more seats than any other party. Yet politically it is less likely to form a coalition or minority government. Arithmetically, the PP and Ciudadanos could combine to form such a government. Together, they might muster anything from 169 to around 200 seats.

No combination of the left would be able to reach the same number of seats nor would a coalition of Ciudadanos and the [Spanish Socialist Party](#) (PSOE) without the support of Podemos, an unlikely marriage of convenience, at least on paper, since both Ciudadanos and the PSOE have bitterly opposed Podemos. Much depends on the horse-trading in posts and policies that is no doubt taking place now behind the scenes and will surely intensify in those 48 hours between one Congress vote and another.

The arithmetic pointing to a possible PP-Ciudadanos coalition hardly squares with the electoral commitments made by the parties. This is of course a familiar scenario in many European countries, but the dilemmas it involves are particularly acute in the Spanish case. Ciudadanos emerged at a national level only a year ago partly in reaction to the corruption scandals that were shaking the Popular Party. Its leader, Albert Rivera, has drawn on the British experience of the Liberal Democrats' coalition with the Conservatives to warn of the danger of the party losing legitimacy in any coalition with the PP.

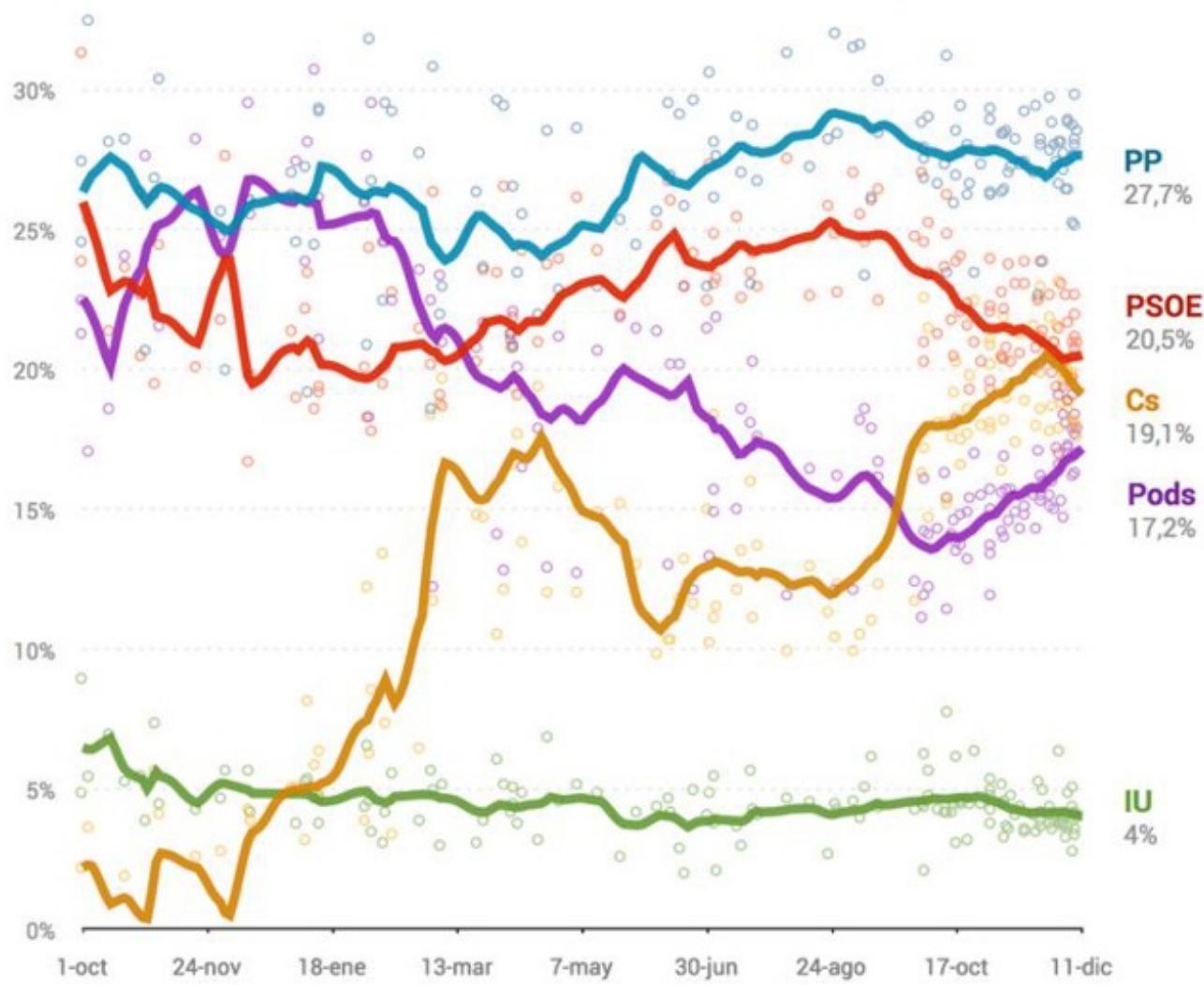
That is, Ciudadanos is conscious of the risk of contamination with a party tainted by corruption and clientelism. Its programme has attracted voters because it calls for a fundamental renewal of political life, which would involve, among other things, the abolition of the Senate, the transformation of the electoral system, and significant changes to the Constitution, none of which the PP is likely to support.

Given its corruption scandals and uncharismatic leader, the PP's lead in the polls is somewhat surprising. But it has sought to present itself as the party best able to defend the economy. Following a decline in GDP of 8 per cent between 2008 and 2013, the economy has been expanding for eight consecutive quarters and GDP is now growing at the rate of 3.1 per cent.

The PP also claims to be the best able to defend national unity when faced with the challenge of Catalan secession. Perhaps its greatest test is the rise of Ciudadanos as an alternative party of the centre-right unidentified so far with corruption. This might drive a wedge between centre and right, and the PP, which has always sought to cover the widest possible political spectrum, might find itself identified solely with the right. So the PP's electoral machine has also turned its guns on Ciudadanos.

For their part, the Socialists have suffered from a drift of voting intentions towards Ciudadanos on the right and Podemos on the left. Their identification with the old bipolar political system, their handling in power of the economic recession between 2007-11, added to the cases of corruption among local politicians in the Socialist stronghold in Andalusia, have eroded their vote from almost 29 per cent in 2011 to 21 per cent in December 2015, according to a number of polls.

Chart 2: Opinion polling in the Spanish general election (Oct – Dec 2015)



Note: The chart is reproduced with permission from [El Español](#) and is provided for illustrative purposes rather than as an attempt by the author to predict the result. The lines represent averages based on the indicated polls (shown in the chart as circles). Party abbreviations are: **Partido Popular (PP)**, **Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)**, **Ciudadanos (C's)**, **Podemos (Podemos)**, **United Left (IU)**.

Podemos' votes have also fallen in the opinion polls from almost 30 per cent in January to 19 per cent in December. It is likely that this fall is connected to the rise of Ciudadanos, which emerged just before the high point scored by Podemos in the opinion polls. Podemos and its regional allies may also have suffered from the polarisation of the two competing nationalisms of Spain and Catalonia, in which questions of identity have trumped economics and social policies.

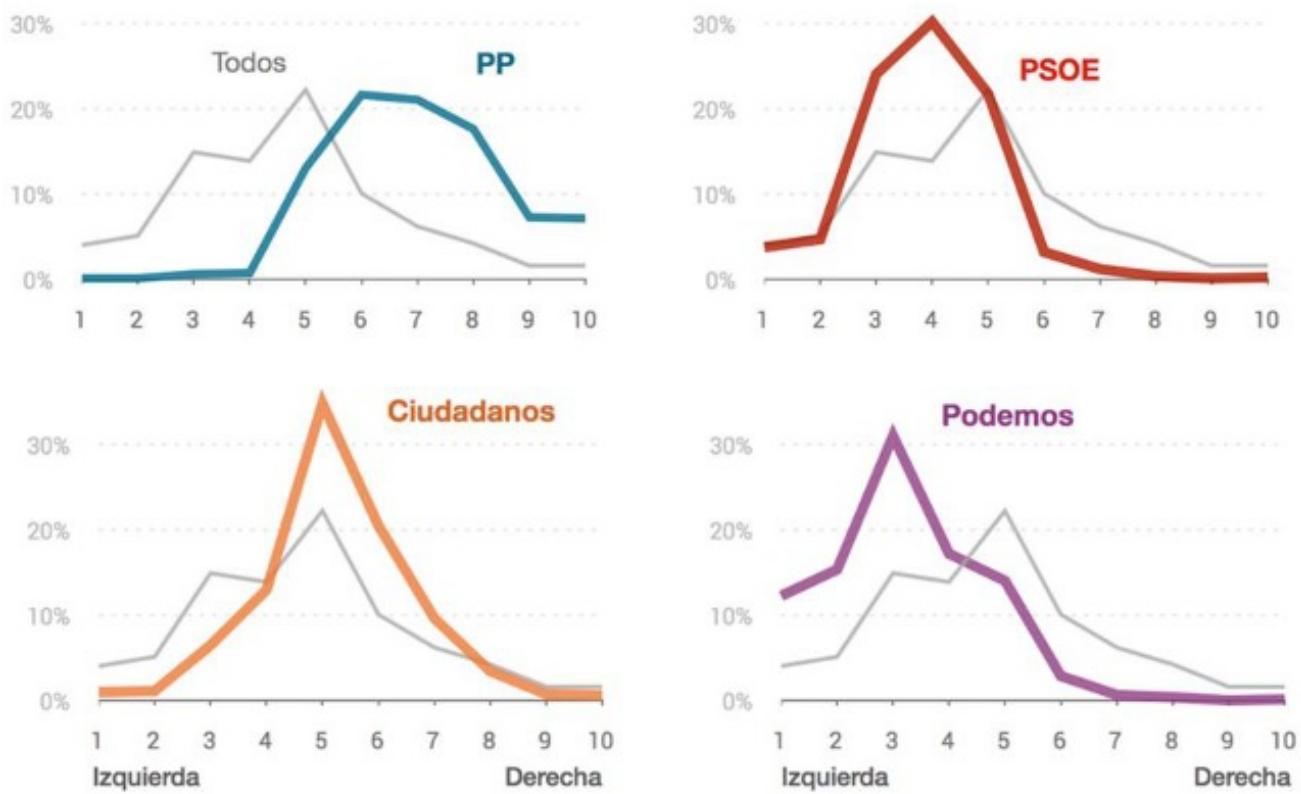
Its reasoned defence of the right of referendum over independence is cutting no ice in the polarised discourse in both Spain and Catalonia. Podemos is also likely to have lost support on the radical left as it seeks to consolidate its position as a parliamentary party. Its efforts to take on the mantle of the popular rank and file movement 15M may have contributed to the demobilisation of the movement. Also in the competition for the vote for regeneration, the polls indicate that the youth vote tends to support Ciudadanos rather than Podemos, suggesting the continued strength of concern about corruption rather than capitalism.

The polls suggest a complex segmentation of the vote around age, occupation, region, and urban-rural polarities. The PP appears to have lost more than a half of the youth vote it enjoyed two years ago, while more than 20 per cent of

the over-65s say they would always vote PP. This age gap is reflected in the age of the candidates. While the President and leader of the PP, Mariano Rajoy, is 60, the leaders of the other three main parties are between 36 and 43 years old. The average age of the PP's main candidates is over 51 years of age whereas that of the other three parties is much lower. Of young voters, students and the unemployed tend to favour Podemos, while those in work are more likely to vote for Ciudadanos.

Again according to the latest polls, rural areas tend to replicate the traditional two-party vote while cities reflect the new fragmentation of the party system; this favours the two traditional parties because the electoral system privileges the rural over the urban seat. Therefore in terms of votes rather than seats, the shift in voting patterns may well be greater than the results suggest.

Chart 3: Self-identification of voters for the four major parties on a left-right scale



Note: The chart is reproduced with permission from [El Español](#). The chart shows where voters and 'sympathisers' for each party place themselves on a ten point ideological scale between left (izquierda) and right (derecha). For more information on the parties see: [Partido Popular \(PP\)](#), [Spanish Socialist Workers' Party \(PSOE\)](#), [Ciudadanos \(C's\)](#), [Podemos](#).

Electoral behaviour also varies according to region. The strength of the Socialists remains in the south while the PP continues to enjoy the support of the centre and the north-west. The results in Catalonia will be somewhat overshadowed by the continued problem of negotiating a new government to begin the process of 'disconnection' from Spain following the regional elections of 27 September, although the polls suggest a fall in support for the parties seeking independence. In the Basque Country the conservative nationalist party, Partido Nacionalista Vasco, shows continued strength, whereas the radical nationalist party EH Bildu is likely to lose two seats to Podemos while, against the trend elsewhere, Ciudadanos is unlikely to gain any.

Ultimately, the electoral outcome is hazardous to predict for several reasons. The two parties challenging the status

quo have only been tested in European and regional and local elections. There are significant variations across all the opinion polls, which in any case do not take into account the current volatility of voting intentions. Also the undecided voters are legion, no less than 41.6 per cent in one poll, making any predictions of the electoral outcome even more risky.

Yet from the polls we might extrapolate two hypothetical scenarios. So far, the Socialists are emerging as the party likely to win the second highest number of seats after the PP, followed at some distance by Ciudadanos and Podemos in a neck-and-neck race for third place. A coalition between the Socialists and Ciudadanos, with the Socialist leader Pedro Sánchez as PM, and with the negotiated abstention of Podemos, could win an absolute majority of seats. Rivera would need to swallow his assertion that he would refuse to take part in a coalition government led by Rajoy, Sánchez or Iglesias. It would suit Podemos to be seen as kingmakers yet also remain in the opposition to continue campaigning for radical change.

A second more hypothetical scenario would flow from the popularity stakes of the four party leaders which Rivera leads by some margin. A late surge in support for Ciudadanos among undecided voters might conceivably lead to a Ciudadanos-Socialist coalition led by Rivera. All bets are off. The uncertainty of the electoral outcome is a measure of the transformation of the Spanish party system.

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