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ELECTION REPORT

The 2015 Spanish election: the times they are a' changing

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ABSTRACT

The Spanish legislative election of 2015 speaks of change. This is the end of the traditional two-party system and the beginning of a new political era marked by institutional renewal. The Socialist Party and the *Partido Popular* have both lost significant parliamentary force, whereas two new parties (*Podemos*, and *Ciudadanos*) are now crucial to ensure stable government majorities. This new parliamentary scenario seems to better mirror the political pluralism of a changing society which has already demonstrated for change in striking events such as the 15-M Movement. However, political parties are far from showing conciliatory aspirations, possibly because a new election is suddenly a realistic option. This report outlines the political context of the election, indicates the main topics during the campaign and discusses the results.

KEY WORDS Spain; legislative election; Podemos; Ciudadanos; crisis

Introduction

The 2015 legislative election in Spain held on 20 December may be regarded as one of the major political events to have occurred in recent Spanish political history. For the first time since the restoration of democracy in 1978, Spanish democracy has revealed signs of institutional fatigue, particularly visible in the electoral weakening of the two main parties—the conservative *Partido Popular* (PP) and the socialist *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE)—as well as in the rise of quite a sense of public indignation.

Many events have taken place in the Spanish political, economic and social scenes since the last time the Spaniards were able to express themselves electorally in 2011, harshly punishing the PSOE and giving an absolute majority to the PP (Martín and Urquizu, 2012). Popular dissatisfaction with the functioning of the institutions and discourses against the widespread corruption of elites have prompted the birth of two new parties—*Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*—both

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claiming substantial progress in democratic improvements (Kioupkiolis, 2016; Rodón and Hierro, 2016; Rodríguez-Teruel and Barrio, 2015). The 2014 European election already showed signs of change in the electoral preferences of Spaniards (Cordero and Montero, 2015), and this was reinforced by the outcome of the 2015 regional elections (Gomez Fortes and Urquizu, 2015), and in the 2015 Catalan election (Martí and Cetrà, 2016).

This report is structured as follows: the next section introduces the political, economic and social context of the past four years to highlight the popular dissatisfaction with austerity policies and the functioning of democracy. Then, the campaign evolution is presented with the aim of highlighting the main issues addressed by the major parties, as well as the pre-election polls. The fourth section reports the election results and its impact on the party system. Finally, we discuss the future implications of this election for the Spanish political system.

Context

Since the 2011 legislative election, Spain has undergone an escalation of social dissatisfaction due to the erratic evolution of the economic crisis. What began as a sovereign debt crisis in 2007 has ended up in an economic crisis of the first magnitude. The PP gave priority to strict austerity policies over the past four years, which come down to far-reaching reforms in the banking sector, the labour market and economic policy. The reforms in the banking sector were encouraged so that big banks could consolidate their accounts and absorb the collapsed Savings Banks throughout the country. In order to balance the public deficit, the central government launched a series of new taxes (i.e. in environmental activities) and increased income taxes, although during the 2011 electoral campaign the PP promised not to do such a thing. Also, both the central government and the Autonomous Communities, which have been forced to meet strict deficit targets, saw no other choice than reducing the budget for education, health and social services. This led to the exacerbation of poverty rates, let alone the increasing costs of public transportation, cultural products, energy services and education.

Despite all the negative figures, it is true that some macroeconomic data have greatly improved (see Table 1), such as GDP, which has risen from -3.1% in 2012 to 3.5% in 2015. Unemployment is also another indicator that seems to improve slowly, but this does not disguise the fact that the working conditions of Spanish workers have deteriorated sharply. The Spanish government reformed the labour market to reduce the power of unions in collective bargaining, encourage labour flexibility and permit lower wages.

Regarding politics, opinion polls have reflected a constant decline of support for the main democratic institutions and actors since the beginning of the crisis. Citizens have expressed great concern about corruption. It comes

Table 1. Economic indicators. Spain (2008–15).

Indicator	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Real GDP growth (% of GDP)	−1.2	−2.9	0.5	−1.7	−3.1	−0.3	2.1	3.5
Unemployment	13.8	18.7	20.1	22.6	25.7	25.7	23.7	20.9
Public debt (% of GDP)	39.4	52.7	60.1	69.5	85.4	93.7	99.3	100.7 ^a

Source: *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (INE) for data on GDP and unemployment. European Commission (2016 Country Report for Spain) for data on public debt.

^aForecast.

as no surprise that the increase in corruption scandals, many of them of great political significance, has affected the public image of the traditional parties. Yet corruption has also tarnished the prestige of public institutions (i.e. the monarchy), subnational governments and big banks.

The loss of confidence in the traditional parties has legitimized alternative forms of collective action through loose platforms of political protest (known as *Mareas*), in which some organizations have become true symbols of civil society. This is the case for the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH), a strong referent for the 15-M Movement. This also applies to the *Asamblea Nacional de Catalunya* (ANC) and *Òmnium Cultural* related to the pro-independence movement in Catalonia. An interesting consequence in this regard is the institutionalization of political protest in a twofold sense: on the one hand, these movements have taken advantage of their social leadership to set up successful electoral candidacies (*Podemos*, *En Marea*, *En Comú*) and, on the other hand, some traditional parties have managed to integrate the leaders of these movements into their candidacies, especially the Catalan nationalist parties.

This all paved the way for the discourse of the ‘new politics’ (transparency, new parties, anti-austerity policies) as opposed to the ‘old politics’ concept (corruption, two-party system, austerity policies). Not only do the social forces around *Podemos*—i.e. *Democracia Real Ya*; PAH; *Juventud Sin Futuro*; *NoLesVotes*— herald discourse in favour of the regeneration of politics, but there is a collective sense of institutional renewal of both the Constitution and the whole policy process. *Ciudadanos* (C’s) stands as a liberal party with reformist aims, whose leaders claim some connection with the former president Adolfo Suárez’s *Unión de Centro Democrático*. Even the PSOE, which is willing to reform the Constitution, and the PP support reforms in certain aspects of the political system. In this line, the government passed a Transparency Law in 2013 to enhance public accountability and improve access to public budgets.

The electoral campaign

The electoral strategies of the traditional political parties have been quite innovative due to the rise of new parties. While the 2011 elections showed

that the social-liberal *Unión Progreso y Democracia* (UPyD) posed no major threat for the PP and the PSOE, the 2015 regional elections made it clear that the new parties were strong enough to attract votes transversely (Correa, 2015: 301–5). This led the traditional parties to focus the electoral debates on fuzzy ideological disputes, hoping the ‘new/old politics’ cleavage could lose momentum.

As Tables 2 and 3 show, the parties’ most overriding preferences for the 2015 elections stressed the improvement of the welfare state; the best way to fulfil economic recovery; the need to accomplish various institutional reforms—especially in the electoral system, the judicial system and regional funding—and the limits of a constitutional reform. Not all parties deemed it necessary to reform the territorial model. The PSOE and *Izquierda Unida* (IU) pledged a federal reform, whereas *Podemos* is likely to support an independence referendum in Catalonia and *Ciudadanos* is determined to abolish the Senate. Regarding the nationalist parties, the Catalan *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC) and *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC, now *Democràcia i Llibertat*) and the Basque EH Bildu openly campaigned for secessionism. The *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* did not address the independence issue in its electoral manifesto.

The main issues in the electoral manifestos did not get much media attention during the campaign, however. Figure 1 shows the media coverage for each party’s electoral pledges, most of which went unnoticed. Instead, the parties chose to disparage the attributes of their opponents. The PP’s electoral messages praised the work of Mariano Rajoy by noting that his leadership was decisive for fostering economic recovery. During the first week, the PP fuelled electoral slogans with such old topics as the unity of Spain, the defence of the current Constitution and the need to prioritize economic reforms over other policy issues (Correa, 2015). The PP was especially critical of the PSOE, possibly in an attempt to confine the campaign to a bipartisan logic. In fact, Mariano Rajoy rejected all electoral debates but the one with the socialist Pedro Sánchez. In the second week, however, the conservatives intensified the negative comments about *Ciudadanos*, after noticing a piecemeal loss of votes from liberal sectors.

Table 2. 2015 electoral manifestos: welfare state and economic issues.

	Welfare State			Economic Issues		
	Education	Health	Social Rights	Labour Market	Employment	Industrial Model
PP		✓	✓		✓	
PSOE	✓	✓		✓	✓	
IU	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ciudadanos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Podemos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
UPyD	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Source: own elaboration based on each party’s electoral manifesto.

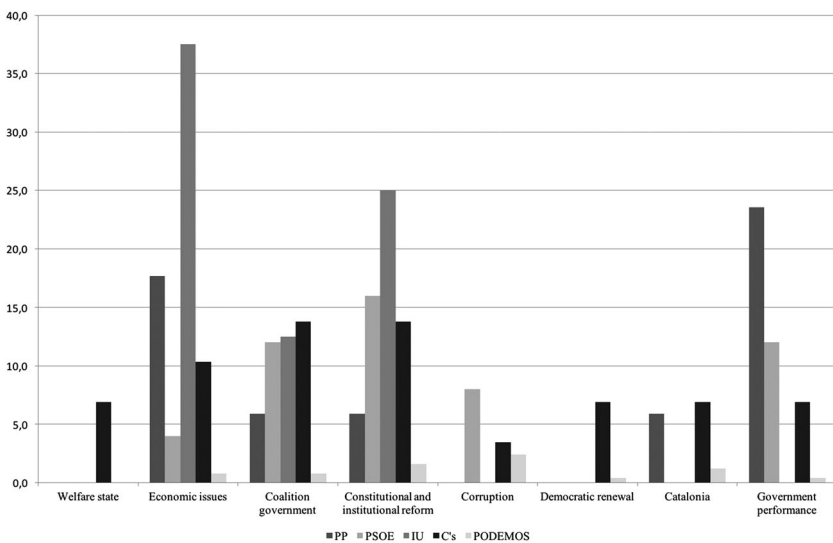
Table 3. 2015 electoral manifestos: institutional and constitutional reforms.

	Institutional Reform					Constitutional Reform	
	Electoral System	the Courts	Regional Fund	Corruption Control	Senate	Territorial model	Political Rights
PP	✓			✓			
PSOE		✓		✓		✓	✓
IU	✓			✓		✓	✓
Ciudadanos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Podemos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
UPyD	✓	✓	✓	✓			

Source: own elaboration based on each party's electoral manifesto

In this vein, according to the polls (see [Figure 2](#)), *Ciudadanos* was improving its electoral expectations as time passed. *Ciudadanos's* electoral campaign aimed at disgruntled, moderate citizens across the left–right spectrum. In so doing, *Ciudadanos* targeted the PP by highlighting corruption scandals and scorning the inefficiency of the austerity policies led by Mariano Rajoy. *Ciudadanos* also accused the Socialist Party of being a catalyst of the collapse of Spanish politics. It was also important for *Ciudadanos* to outline a firm stance on the Catalan question after the party became the second largest party in the last Catalan elections. *Ciudadanos* credited unionist stances, especially to differentiate itself from *Podemos*, which favoured holding an independence referendum.

The interesting point in this regard is the identification of electoral rivals. [Figure 3](#) indicates the PSOE sought a place in between the PP and

**Figure 1.** Media coverage of electoral pledges.

Source: own elaboration. Newspapers: ABC, El Mundo, El País, La Razón and El Periódico.

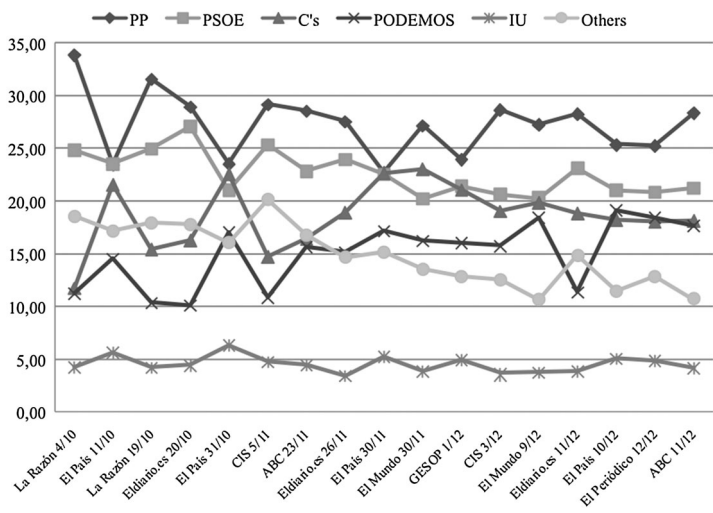


Figure 2. Evolution of electoral polls.
Source: www.cis.es and the main national newspapers.

Podemos. This confirms that the PSOE regarded *Podemos* as a quite serious rival. (Data for *Podemos* confirms this as well: the majority of the critiques from *Podemos* were geared towards the Socialist Party.) The Socialists constantly insisted on the idea that there was no alternative to the PP other than the socialist Pedro Sánchez. This was the reaction to the PP's strategy of exalting *Podemos* as the true interlocutor of the left—of course, with the complicity of *Podemos*'s leaders. If ever the PSOE was open to coalition governments with new parties before the campaign, this changed due to the

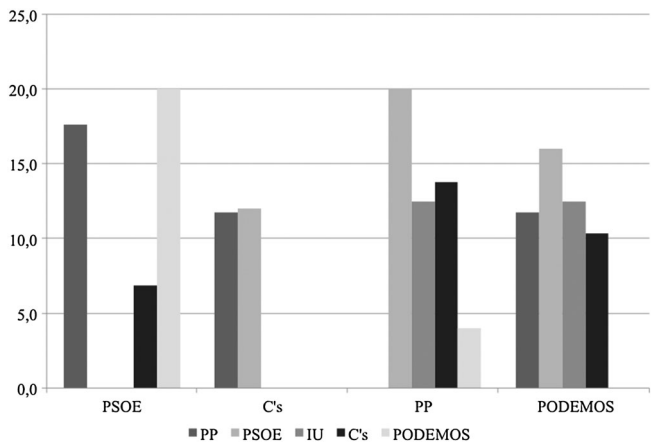


Figure 3. Identification of electoral rivals.
Source: own elaboration. Newspapers: ABC, El Mundo, El País, La Razón and El Periódico.

bleak electoral support the pre-election polls were forecasting. The PSOE toughened its criticism by highlighting the ideological closeness between *Ciudadanos* and the PP. Regarding *Podemos*, the Socialists pointed out that they lacked political experience.

Podemos disregarded the discourse on the lack of experience. Their point was that the old politics' experience brought nothing but corruption and poverty. *Podemos* classified both PP and PSOE as intrinsic elements of the so-called 'old politics'. Besides this, the main objective of the *Podemos* campaign aimed at reinforcing the image of Pablo Iglesias as a solid politician by combining a belligerent language during election rallies and a conciliatory tone in televised debates. Moreover, the emergence of *Podemos* shadowed IU. The media soon realized that *Podemos* was better equipped than IU when it comes to connecting with traditional voters of the radical left and beyond. The result was that *Podemos* occupied the political niche formerly reserved for the IU candidate, thus IU did not take part in any of the most relevant debates. This placed IU in a tricky dilemma insofar as IU acknowledged that any attempt to undermine *Podemos* was, in essence, an attack to its very own political project. The IU strategy remained at an ideological level by focusing on the need to implement welfare politics, hence IU identified the PP as its main rival.

The elections

Electoral turnout reached 73.2%, four points higher than in the previous 2011 legislative elections. It seems that Spanish society was keen on expressing in the polls all the political unrest that has surfaced on the streets in recent years and originated with the now widely famous 15-M Movement (Hughes, 2011). For the first time, there is no clear forecast on the resulting government—as of March 2015—, since a rainbow coalition is needed to assure parliamentary majority.

The PP obtained 28.7% of total votes, which means 123 seats in the *Congreso de los Diputados*. The conservatives were the first political force in most regions, despite the significant loss of seats (63) and votes (3 650 814). But also in most regions the PP lost around 15% of the votes compared to the 2011 elections. The bad news was, however, that support in traditional fiefdoms—Balearic Islands, Murcia, València—fell as much as 20%. The Socialist Party scored the second position with 90 deputies and 22.01% of the total votes. This represents a loss of 20 deputies and almost 1.5 million votes. This is their worst result ever as the Socialists managed to top the poll only in Andalusia and Extremadura. As polls predicted, the new parties have achieved broad parliamentary representation. *Podemos* practically reached the *PSOE* in number of votes and obtained 69 seats. *Ciudadanos* won a little more than 3.5 million votes and 40 seats.

As Table 4 and Figure 4 show, statewide parties were the ones losing larger percentages of votes, not the regionalist parties, although many of them

chose to compete in electoral coalitions. *Podemos* became the third force in most of the regions (Andalusia, Aragon, Asturias, Cantabria, the Canary Islands, Extremadura and La Rioja), and the second in the Balearic Islands, Madrid, the Basque Country and Navarra. In coalition with other regionalist parties, *Podemos* ranked second in Galicia (with *En Marea*) and in València (with *Compromís*), and won the elections in Catalonia (along with *En Comú*). The best score for *Ciudadanos* was a third position in Castile-La Mancha, Madrid, Castile-Leon and Murcia. The *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV) was the only regionalist party that could win fighting elections alone in the Basque Country, for the *Unión del Pueblo Navarro* (UPN) was in coalition with the PP. Some old regionalist parties were also affected by the rise of new parties, especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country. This is the case for *Democràcia i Llibertat* (formerly *Convergència i Unió*). This time the Catalan conservatives lost eight seats, making it the third force in Catalonia, right behind ERC for the first time. In the Basque Country, *Podemos* surpassed the PNV in votes, but not in seats, causing *Bildu* to move to third place after being the second force in the last 2012 Basque regional elections.

In the Senate, things were different. In this election there were 208 seats at stake,¹ and the cast was as follows: PP obtained 124 senators (thus, an absolute majority), the PSOE languished on 47 seats, *Podemos* entered the Senate for the first time with 16 seats, ERC, *Democràcia i Llibertat* and the PNV won 6 senators each, then 1 senator each for *Cambio-Aldaketa*, *Coalición Canaria* and ASG. It is worth noting *Ciudadanos* obtained no seats in the Senate.

The fragmentation index is higher in both legislative chambers. Regarding the *Congreso de los Diputados*, fragmentation is now 0.76 while it was 0.61 in

Table 4. Electoral results. *Congreso de los Diputados*.

Party	% Votes 2015	% Votes 2011	Votes 2015	Votes 2011	Votes % $\pm$
PP	28.72	44.63	7 215 752	10 866 566	-15.91
PSOE	22.01	28.76	5 530 779	7 003 511	-6.75
Podemos	20.66		5 189 463		20.66
Ciudadanos	13.93		3 500 541		13.93
IU	3.67	6.92	923 133	1 686 040	-3.25
ERC	2.39	1.06	599 289	256 985	1.33
DL (CDC)	2.25	4.17	565 501	1 015 691	-1.92
EAJ-PNV	1.2	1.33	301 585	324 317	-0.13
EH Bildu	0.87	1.37	218 467	334 498	-0.5
Cca-PNC	0.33	0.59	81 750	143 881	-0.26
UPyD	0.61	4.7	153 505	1 143 225	-4.09
GBAI	0.12	0.17	30 554	42 415	-0.05
unión.cat	0.26	-	64 726	-	0.26
Compromís	-	0.51	-	125 306	-0.51
BNG	-	0.76	-	184 037	-0.76
FAC	-	0.41	-	99 473	-0.41
Others	2.98	4.62	975 402	1 440 496	-1.64
Turnout	73.2	68.94	25 350 447	24 666 441	4.26

Source: Electoral results from the *Ministerio de Interior*.

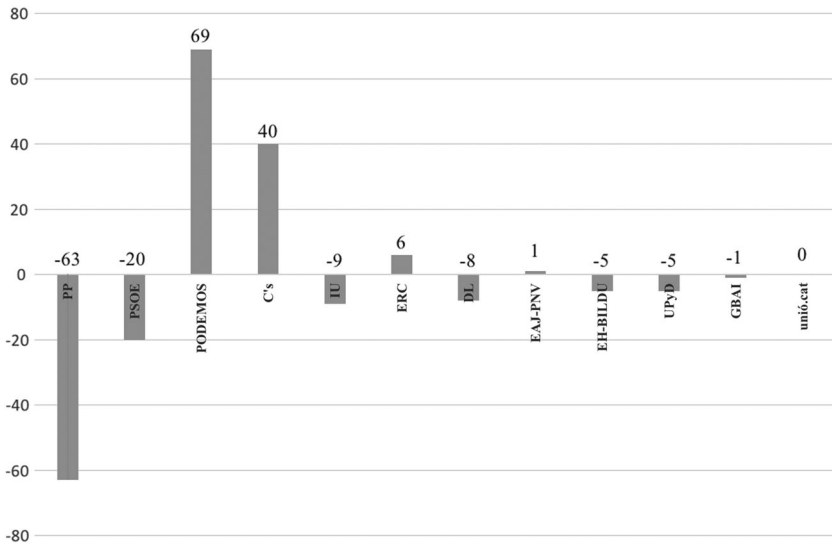


Figure 4. Variation in number of seats by party (2011–2015). *Congreso de los Diputados*. Source: Electoral results from the *Ministerio de Interior*.

2011. Fragmentation in the Senate has increased slightly from 0.52 in 2011 to 0.59 today. This means a greater number of parties are represented in both chambers, especially in the *Congreso*. Furthermore, ideological polarization has also increased. According to Casal Bertoa (2016), the polarization index in 2011 scored 12.5, while the index now amounts to 31.5 points. This indicates that the party system has polarized greatly, which makes the formation of coalition governments even harder. Moreover, the concentration index is still quite high (50.7%), although it has been reduced substantially since the 2011 elections (73.4%). The electoral decline of the two traditional parties has prompted the transition from an imperfect two-party system towards a multiparty model at the provincial level. In 40 out of the 52 constituencies, at least three parties obtained seats in the *Congreso*. Most of these are small constituencies sending from three to seven seats to parliament, and all of them were dominated by either the Socialist Party or the PP in previous elections. Only 10 out of the 52 constituencies are still two-party oriented, and only in València has the number of parties with parliamentary representation reduced—from five to four.

Discussion

The 1978 Spanish Constitution's main political goal was to achieve government stability, so the Spanish democracy has long favoured a two-party system, the government dominance over the parliament, a sort of elitist

political culture and the blatant absence of institutional transparency. However, in a context of serious institutional crisis and social unrest, the 2015 Spanish general elections produced, at least, four major changes:

- (a) The emergence of multiparty trends in constituencies traditionally inclined to support bipartism;
- (b) The increase of fragmentation in the lower legislative Chamber (the Congreso de los Diputados), whereas the PP still holds an absolute majority in the Senate. This can somehow strengthen the Senate to modify and delay law reforms;
- (c) The declining leadership of the left by the PSOE, especially in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Madrid and València, where Podemos has become the bearer of the leftist discourse; and
- (d) The significant loss of votes of the PP and its subsequent difficulty to become the pivotal party in the negotiations to form a new government, breaking the historical trend where the same party was able to rule at least for two terms in a row.

The question is whether these electoral changes will produce changes in the functioning of the Spanish democracy. In the early months since the election, the Spaniards learnt the meaning of parliamentarism in a traditional two-party system, that is, the importance of political parties as representatives of political pluralism. For the time being, this new parliamentary dynamic hinges upon strong narratives of conflict, rather than relying on wide agreements.

Considering the investiture debate by the socialist candidate, political leaders expressed manifold messages hardly compatible with the formation of stable coalitions. Despite being the largest party in parliament, the PP rejected the offer from the king to lead the first attempt to form a government and forged a conservative narrative in favour of structural reforms, negating the need for changes in the political agenda. Mariano Rajoy's proposal aspires to a grand coalition—PP, PSOE and Ciudadanos—in which the policies of recent years are not subject to discussion. The PSOE waves the flag of the reformist left, particularly sensitive to the recovery of social and political rights. The Socialists are against a government supported solely by leftist forces, for the parliamentary majority would need the votes of the Catalan separatists. Ciudadanos follows reformist aspirations focusing on the middle classes and a liberal discourse in economic terms. Ciudadanos aims to bridge the gap between the PP and the PSOE, but so far to no avail. Podemos accuses both the PSOE and the PP of lack of social sensitivity, as Podemos stands itself as the true referent of the Spanish left. This new party is calling for a coalition government with the PSOE—and possibly other political forces—in which neither the PP nor Ciudadanos is involved. This sort of 'excluding narrative' is also present in the Catalan nationalist parties. They have imposed a

pro-independence logic that seems hardly compatible with being partners with PP, PSOE or Ciudadanos.

In sum, Spanish politics is in a deadlock situation. The formation of a stable government seems highly unlikely, although political parties are not in favour of a new election. A new election does not appear to be able to produce substantial changes and, either way, the results would be reduced to a matter of time. This is not beneficial for a political elite with serious difficulties in proving their contribution to the renewal of democratic institutions.

Note

1. Senators are elected as follows: citizens choose two-thirds of the seats in the legislative elections, and one-third is appointed by the *Comunidades Autónomas*.

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