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Spain: Political Developments and Data in 2021

From the State of Alarm to the Recovery Plan

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Abstract

During 2021, Spain faced problems arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, including high-risk public health situations in some regions. A vaccination campaign was carried out for the entire Spanish population, constrained by the arrival of doses and their distribution among regions. Several precepts of the legislation framing the COVID-19 state of alarm were declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. The Cabinet underwent successive reshuffles prompted by the regional electoral processes held in Catalonia and Madrid, and by the balance of power between the two parties that formed the coalition government. In 2021, the labour market began to improve thanks to the arrival of European funds aimed at implementing programmes to mitigate the economic and social damage of the pandemic.

Introduction

The year 2021 was marked by the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and by the massive vaccination campaign implemented throughout the country to immunize all population groups. By the end of the year, Spain had suffered a total of four waves of coronavirus infections. The year was also marked by two rulings of the Constitutional Court that declared unconstitutional several precepts of the legislation framing the COVID-19 state of alarm. Other key events included the pardons granted to the prisoners of the so-called *procès* (short for 'Catalan independence process'), the changes in the national Cabinet, and the repercussions of the regional elections in Catalonia and Madrid on national politics.

Election report

During 2021, two of the most important Spanish regions—Catalonia and Madrid—held early elections (table 1). Their electoral results had political consequences for national politics.

The regional election in Catalonia was held automatically on 14 February in accordance with legal provisions when no candidate received enough support in Parliament for an

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Table 1. Results of regional (Catalonia and Madrid) elections in Spain in 2021

Region	Catalonia
Date of election	14 February 2021
Total number of seats	135
Electorate	5,624,067
Total votes cast	2,884,845
Turnout	51.3%
Total valid votes	2,843,415
Share of valid votes	98.6%

				Seats	
Party			Votes %	*N*	%
Socialist Party of Catalonia	*Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya*	(PSC-PSOE)	23.0%	33	24.5%
Republican Left of Catalonia	*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*	(ERC)	21.3%	33	24.5%
Together for Catalonia	*Junts per Catalunya*	(Junts)	20.1%	32	23.7%
VOX	*VOX*	(VOX)	7.7%	11	8.2%
In Common We Can	*En Comú Podem*	(ECP)	6.9%	8	5.9%
Popular Unity Candidacy	*Candidatura d'Unitat Popular*	(CUP)	6.7%	9	6.7%
Citizens	*Ciutadans-Partido de la ciudadania*	(CS)	5.6%	6	4.4%
People's Party	*Partido Popular*	(PP)	3.8%	3	2.2%

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Table 1. (Continued)

Region	Community of Madrid
Date of election	4 May 2021
Total number of seats	136
Electorate	5,112,813
Total votes cast	3,667,806
Turnout	71.7%
Total valid votes	3,645,559
Share of valid votes	99.4%

				Seats	
Party			Votes %	*N*	%
People's Party	*Partido Popular*	(PP)	44.8%	65	47.8%
More Madrid	*Más Madrid*	(+M)	17.0%	24	17.7%
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*	(PSOE)	16.8%	24	17.7%
Vox	*VOX*	(VOX)	9.2%	13	9.6%
United We Can	*Unidas Podemos*	(UP)	7.2%	10	7.4%

Source: Central Election Commission (2021).

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investiture vote. Several months before the election, Quim Torra had been disqualified as regional President by a Supreme Court ruling for disobeying the Central Electoral Board during the legislative elections of April 2019. The election date was then postponed to 30 May because of a new wave of COVID-19. Postal voting requests tripled and the number of people asking to be exempted from polling station duties also increased. The election turnout was 54%, and eight parties obtained seats in the regional Parliament. The Socialist Party of Catalonia/*Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (PSC-PSOE), led by the former Minister of Health, who had had a prominent role during the pandemic, came first with 23 per cent of the votes. It was followed by the two majority pro-independence parties with, respectively, 21.3 (Republican Left of Catalonia/*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*—ERC) and 20 per cent (Together for Catalonia/*Junts per Catalunya*—Junts) of the votes. The other parties obtained lower levels of support, ranging from 11 per cent (VOX/*VOX*, a right-wing populist party) to 3.8 per cent (People's Party/*Partido Popular*—PP). After two failed investiture bids, the ERC leader, Pere Aragonés, was elected regional president in May with the support of the three pro-independence parties (ERC, Junts and the Popular Unity Candidacy/*Candidatura d'Unitat Popular*—CUP), the first two subsequently forming a coalition government.

A snap election was also held in the Madrid Region (Community of Madrid). The president of the incumbent coalition government Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP) called elections for 4 May. She anticipated the presentation of a motion of censure against her by her coalition partner Citizens/*Ciudadanos-Partido de la Ciudadanía* (Cs) and other parties. It was an action to avoid losing the government as happened a few days earlier in the region of Murcia. The leader of United We Can/*Unidas Podemos* (UP), Pablo Iglesias, resigned as second Vice-President of the national government and stood as candidate in the regional elections to try to save his party from an anticipated election disaster. Turnout was 77.8 per cent, and five parties obtained representation in the regional Parliament. The PP won with 45 per cent of the vote, twice the percentage they had achieved at the previous election, and ended up four seats short of an overall majority. Two left-wing parties, PSOE and More Madrid/*Más Madrid* (+M), obtained 17 per cent of the vote, two other populist right-wing, VOX, and left-wing parties, Podemos-Izquierda Unida (IU), 9 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively. After the electoral failure of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias decided to retire from politics. Another party that suffered a major failure was the PSOE, being surpassed as second-most voted party by *Más Madrid*, a party founded by members of a former faction of Podemos. Cs, the junior partner of the incumbent coalition government, did not obtain parliamentary representation. After a fist failed attempt, PP candidate Isabel Díaz Ayuso was sworn in as President of the Government of the Madrid region with the support of PP and VOX, and went on to form a minority PP government. The election contributed to Ayuso's consolidation as a key leadership figure within the right-wing party.

Cabinet report

The Cabinet of Sánchez II, the first coalition government, experienced several changes during the year (table 2). In January, the President of the Government announced the first reshuffle of his Cabinet. After the appointment of the Minister of Health, Salvador Illa, as

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Table 2. Cabinet composition of Sánchez II Spain in 2021

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	13 January 2020	Dissolution	Still in office at the end of the year					
Period covered by table	From	1 January 2021	Until	31 December 2021					
Type of Cabinet	Minority Coalition								
A.	Party/gender composition on 1 January 2021			Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
				N	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*	(PSOE)	18	78.2%	9	50.0%	120	34.3%
	United We Can	*Unidas Podemos*	(UP)	5	21.8%	2	40.0%	26	7.4%
	Totals			23	100.0%	11	47.8%	146	41.7%
B.	Composition of Sánchez II Cabinet on 1 January 2021 See previous editions of the *Political Data Yearbook* for Spain or http://politicaldatayearbook.com								

C.	Changes in composition of Sánchez II Cabinet during 2021					
	Ministerial title		Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
	Were there any Cabinet changes?	Yes				
	Minister of Health	*Ministerio de Sanidad*	Salvador Illa (1966 male, PSOE)	26 January 2021	Carolina Darias (1965 female, PSOE)	Salvador Illa runs for the elections in Catalonia
	Minister of Territorial Policy and Public Administration	*Ministerio de Política Territorial y Función Pública*	Carolina Darias (1965 female, PSOE)	26 January 2021	Miquel Iceta (1960 male, PSOE)	Salvador Illa runs for the elections in Catalonia
	Minister of Social Rights and 2030 Agenda	*Ministerio de Derechos Sociales y Agenda 2030*	Pablo Iglesias (1978 male, UP)	31 March 2021	Ione Belarra (1987 female, UP)	Pablo Iglesias runs for the election in Madrid
	Second vice presidency	*Vicepresidencia 2ª*	Pablo Iglesias (1978 male, UP)	31 March 2021	Yolanda Díaz (1971 female, UP)	Pablo Iglesias runs for the election in Madrid

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Table 2. (Continued)

C.	Changes in composition of Sánchez II Cabinet during 2021					
	Ministerial title		Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
	Minister of Justice	*Ministerio de Justicia*	Juan Carlos Campo (1961 male, PSOE)	10 July 2021	Pilar Llop (1973 female, PSOE)	Cabinet reshuffle
	Minister of Presidency, Parliamentary Relations& Equality and First Vice presidency	*Ministerio de la Presidencia, Relaciones con las Cortes e Igualdad. Vicepresidenta 1ª*	Carmen Calvo (1957 female, PSOE)	10 July 2021	Félix Bolaños (1975 male, PSOE)	Cabinet reshuffle
	Minister of Territorial Policy and Public Administration	*Ministerio de Política Territorial y Función Pública*	Miquel Iceta (1960 male, PSOE)	10 July 2021	Isabel Rodríguez (1981 female, PSOE)	Cabinet reshuffle
	Minister of Culture and Sports	*Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes*	Jose Manuel Uribe (1968 male, PSOE)	10 July 2021	Miquel Iceta (1960 male, PSOE)	Cabinet reshuffle
	Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation	*Ministerio Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación*	Aránzazu Gonzáz (1968 female, PSOE)	10 July 2021	José Manuel Albares (1972 male, PSOE)	Cabinet reshuffle
	Ministry of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda	*Ministrio de Transportes, Movilidad y Agenda Urbana*	José Luis Ábalos (1959 male, PSOE)	10 July 2021	Raquel Sánchez (1975 female, PSOR)	Cabinet reshuffle
	Minister of Education and Professional Training	*Ministerio de Educación y Formación Perofesional*	María Isabel Celaá (1949 female, PSOE)	10 July 2021	Pilar Alegría (1977 female, PSOE)	Cabinet reshuffle
	Minister of Science and Innovation	*Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación*	Pedro Duque (1963 male, PSOE)	10 July 2021	Diana Morant (1980 female, PSOE)	Cabinet reshuffle
	Minister of Universities	*Ministerio de Universidades*	Manuel Castellas (1942 male, UP)	20 December 2021	Joan Subirats (1951 male, UP)	Cabinet reshuffle

D.	Party/gender composition on 31 December 2021			Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
				N	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*	(PSOE)	18	79.2%	12	66.6%	120	34.3%
	United We Can	*Unidas Podemos*	(UP)	5	20.8%	3	60.0%	35	10.0%
	Totals			23	100.0%	15	65.2%	155	44.3%

Source: La Moncloa (2021).

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PSOE candidate for the regional elections in Catalonia, his post was assumed by Carolina Darias (PSOE), who was in turn replaced by new Cabinet member Miquel Iceta (PSOE) as Minister of Territorial Policy.

The second Cabinet reshuffle was held in March after Pablo Iglesias (Podemos), second Vice-President and Minister of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, resigned to run as candidate in the regional elections of the Community of Madrid. Nadia Calviño (PSOE) replaced him as second Vice-President and kept her position as Minister of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation. Ione Belarra (Podemos), assumed the portfolio of Social Rights and Agenda 2030. Yolanda Díaz (Podemos) was appointed third Vice-President and retained the portfolio of Labour and Social Economy.

At the beginning of July, barely three months after the second reshuffle, a subsequent more profound reshuffle took place. This was the biggest Cabinet change since Pedro Sánchez became Prime Minister and one of the deepest in history, which turned the legislative session upside down. Seven ministers left and were replaced with seven new Cabinet members. The new Cabinet consists of 15 women and eight men. Carmen Calvo and José Luis Ábalos, two ministers who had been appointed in the Sánchez I Cabinet and were important figures within the Socialist Party, were dismissed. The former was replaced by Félix Bolaños (PSOE) as Minister of the Presidency; and the latter was replaced by Raquel Sánchez (PSOE) as Minister of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda; Pilar Llop (PSOE) assumed the post of Minister of Justice and replaced Juan Carlos Campo (PSOE); Isabel Rodríguez (PSOE) became the new Minister of Territorial Policy and the Government Spokesperson, replacing Miquel Iceta (PSOE), who became head of the Ministry of Culture and Sport, a role previously occupied by José Manuel Rodríguez Uribes (PSOE); José Manuel Albares (PSOE), new Minister of Foreign Affairs, replaced Arancha González Laya (PSOE); Pilar Alegría (PSOE), new Minister of Education and Vocational Training, replaced Isabel Celaá (PSOE); and Diana Morant (PSOE), new Minister of Science and Innovation, replaced Pedro Duque (Independent). The reshuffle only affected PSOE ministers, whereas all Unidas Podemos ministers continued in their post.

Sánchez argues that the reasons for the reshuffle were the government's main task of consolidating economic recovery and job creation, and managing the enormous opportunity that the Next Generation EU stimulus package represented for underpinning the modernization of the Spanish economy. Moreover, with the appointment of three female ex mayors the reshuffle involved a reinforcement of women in Cabinet, a generational renewal and a commitment to people who had succeeded in the municipal sphere.

The last change in Sánchez's Cabinet affected the quota of Podemos in the coalition government. In December, the Minister of Universities (an independent nominated by Podemos) left the government due to health problems and was replaced by Joan Subirats (independent), a minister with experience in municipal politics as a councillor for Culture and Education in the Barcelona City Council headed by a branch of Podemos.

Parliament report

During 2021, the Lower House (table 3) validated 32 royal decrees issues by the government. Many of them did not achieve approval in Parliament. Of these, one-third dealt with issues

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Table 3. Party and gender composition of the lower house (*Congreso de los Diputados*) in Spain in 2021

			1 January 2021				31 December 2021			
			All		Women		All		Women	
Party			*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
People's Party	*Partido Popular*	(PP)	88	25.14%	19	21.6%	88	25.1%	17	19.3%
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*	(PSOE)	120	34.29%	27	22.5%	120	34.3%	27	22.0%
United We Can	*Unidas Podemos*	(UP)	35	10.0%	21	60.0%	35	10.0%	20	57.1%
Citizens	*Ciudadanos-Partido de la Ciudadanía*	(Cs)	10	2.9%	5	50.0%	10	2.9%	4	40.0%
Republic Left of Catalonia-Sovereigntists	*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya-Sobiranistes*	(ERC-Sobiranistes)	13	3.7%	7	53.9%	13	3.7%	7	53.9%
Together for Catalonia	*Junts per Catalunya*	(JxCat)	8	2.3%	4	50.0%	8	2.3%	4	50.0%
Basque Nationalist Party	*Partido Nacionalista Vasco*	(EAJ-PNV)	6	1.7%	2	33.3%	6	1.7%	2	33.3%
More Country-Commitment	*Más País-Compromís*	(MP-C)	3	0.9%	1	33.3%	3	0.9%	1	33.3%
Navarrese People's Union	*Unión del Pueblo Navarro*	(UPN)	2	0.6%	0	0.00%	2	0.6%	0	0.0%
Basque Country United	*Euskal Herria Bildu*	(EH-Bildu)	5	1.4%	2	40.0%	5	1.4%	2	40.0%
Asturias Forum	*Foro Asturias*	(Foro)	1	0.3%	0	0.0%	1	0.3%	0	0.0%
Canarian Coalition	*Coalición Canaria*	(CCa-NC)	1	0.3%	1	100.0%	1	0.3%	1	100.0%
New Canary	*Nueva Canarias*	((NC))	1	0.3%	0	0.0%	1	0.3%	0	0.0%
VOX	*VOX*	(Vox)	52	14.9%	15	28.9%	52	14.9%	15	28.9%
Popular United Candidacy	*Candidatura de Unidad Popular*	(CUP)	2	0.6%	1	50.0%	2	0.6%	1	50.0%
Cantabrian Regionalist Party	*Partido Regionalista de Cantabria*	(PRC)	1	0.3%	0	0.0%	1	0.3%	0	0.0%
Galician Nationalist Bloc	*Bloque Nacionalista Gallego*	(BNG)	1	0.3%	0	0.0%	1	0.3%	0	0.0%
Teruel Exists	*Teruel Existe*	(TE)	1	0.3%	0	0.0%	1	0.3%	0	0.0%
Totals			350	100.0%	105	30.0%	350	100.0%	101	28.9%

Notes: MP Alberto Rodríguez (UP) was barred from holding public office on 22 October 2021 due to a judicial sentence. UP has left this seat empty.
MP Pablo Cambronero left Cs on 17 March 2021, but not his seat in the Lower House. Since then he belongs to the Mixed Parliamentary Group (*Grupo Mixto*) in this House.
Source: Lower House (Congreso de los Diputados) (2022).

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related to the pandemic, natural disasters (a volcanic eruption and a snowstorm), the transposition of European directives, and other related to various policies.

A total of 11 organic laws were passed, for which the government enjoyed mixed support. The government was supported by the PSOE, the other left-wing parties and most regional and pro-independence parliamentary groups. In some cases, the laws obtained the support of the opposition People's Party. These include laws relating to doping in sports, the civil registry, and also child protection and personal data, the latter two of which were amended by Parliament. On the other hand, the PP voted against the law on euthanasia, two laws related to the judiciary and another on enhanced cooperation for the creation of the European Public Prosecutor's Office. Cs (centre) and VOX (populist right) sometimes abstained, other times voting in the same manner as the PP.

A total of 22 ordinary laws were also passed with mixed support. These included laws for the protection against violence against women, another for the protection of children and adolescents, and another on the introduction on labour rights in digital services. Another law, which transposed a European directive on the prevention of tax fraud, was supported by a majority in Parliament after introducing amendments.

At the end of the year, another seven laws were passed to meet the requirements of the EU recovery plan Next Generation EU and to achieve some of the policy goals of the coalition government. This included legislation on the reduction of temporary employment in public administrations (170 votes in favour and 156 abstentions), the guarantee of the sustainability of pensions (176 votes in favour and 148 votes against), as well as the annual budget, the minimum living income and the law on animal rights.

Political party report

The major changes in political parties in 2021 were limited to the two coalition government partners (table 4). As mentioned in the Cabinet report, Pablo Iglesias left the government to run as candidate in the regional election of the Community of Madrid, and subsequently resigned from his position as Secretary General of Podemos. On 13 June, Ione Belarra was elected as the new Secretary General of Podemos.

For its part, the PSOE held its 40th Congress on 15–17 October 2021 in Valencia. Pedro Sánchez was re-elected as Secretary General in an uncontested contest. In accordance with the Socialist Party rules, there was no need for a leadership election as there were no alternative candidates. Worthy of mention is the resignation for personal reasons of the former Minister José Luis Ábalos as Secretary of Organisation of the PSOE, which is the second most important position within the party. He was succeeded by Santos Cerdán.

Institutional change report

After years of deadlock due to the lack of political consensus, the Constitutional Court was partially renewed with the election of four new members by the Lower House (*Congreso de los Diputados*) upon the proposal of the PSOE and PP. The agreement between the two major political parties also allowed for the renewal of the Court of Auditors, the ombudsman

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Table 4. Changes in political parties in Spain in 2021

Party leadership changes in 2021												
Podemos	Podemos	Secretary General	Pablo	Iglesias	1978	Male	Election of new Secretary General	13 June	Ione	Belarra	1987	Female	Podemos

Source: Podemos (2022). https://podemos.info.

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and the director of the national public radio and television broadcaster (RTVE). By contrast, the renovation of the General Council of the Judiciary, pending since 2018, continued to be unsolved. The Basic Law of the Judiciary was actually reformed to limit the competences of this organ when its mandate expires to operational tasks.

Issues in national politics

The year 2021 was particularly dense and challenging for the Spanish government. The management of the COVID-19 crisis occurred in a climate of political turmoil both inside and outside the executive. Within the government, fatigue of several members of the Cabinet and, in particular, of Vice-President Iglesias, culminated in a large reconfiguration of the executive. Besides, the results of the regional election in Catalonia and, above all, Madrid, with the PP nearly obtaining an overall majority of the votes, placed the government in an uncomfortable position. Indeed, the contrast between the central and Madrid's regional government's respective management of the health and economic crisis became one of the axes of comparison and assessment of crisis management success in public opinion, with the central government being in favour of stronger COVID-19 restrictions.

The adverse climate for the executive was reinforced by a Constitutional Court judgement that declared unconstitutional the first COVID-19 state of alarm declared by the government in March 2020, and which involved the general lockdown of the country, as well as its extension for a period of six-month (second state of alarm) and the suspension of parliamentary work during this later period were all three unconstitutional. In addition, the government's decision to pardon the Catalan secessionist leaders convicted for sedition by the Supreme Court over the failed independence bid of 2017, and the launching of a bilateral process of negotiation between the central and Catalan government, were also controversial.

Since the beginning of 2021, Spain began to experience an energy crisis. The price of electricity began rising gradually and the electricity tariff changes introduced by the government in the summer did not solve the situation. Moreover, other fuels such as natural gas experienced supply shortages due to different sets of factors including the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and the closure of the Maghreb–Europe gas pipeline by Algeria.

In the international arena, Spain experienced a migratory conflict with Morocco. In May, the Spanish government concealed the irregular entry of Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front, to be treated for COVID-19 in a hospital in Spain. This event led to a migratory crisis with the complicity of the Moroccan government that allowed the entry both by land and by sea of more than 5000 illegal immigrants in a single day to the Spanish city of Ceuta. This conflict was partially solved with the dismissal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Arancha González Laya in the Cabinet reshuffle of July.

On a more positive note, in 2021 the government met the EU requirement to access the Next Generation EU funds. In April, the government presented the Spanish Plan of Recovery, Transformation and Resilience to the European Commission. Its positive assessment by the EU institutions allowed for an initial funding tranche of €10,000 million in December 2021.

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