

European elections seen as prelude to general election in Spain

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The results of elections to the European Parliament have considerably altered the political landscape in Spain, where they went against the general trend in the rest of Europe. Turnout was up by 5 percent as compared with 1994, from 59.14 percent to 64.34 percent. The Social Democrats increased their support, while the right wing lost some. The moderate nationalists lost ground, while the more radical separatist movements gained.

The governing right-wing Popular Party (PP) obtained 27 of the 64 seats in the European Parliament (1 less than 1994). The Socialist Party of Spain (PSOE) won 24 seats (2 more than 1994). Izquierda Unida (IU—United Left) won 4 seats (5 less than 1994) and different nationalist groups and alliances won 9 seats (4 more than 1994).

Both the socialists and the radical nationalists made big gains in a number of municipal councils and autonomous communities. This was at the expense of both the PP and the moderate nationalists such as the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) and the Catalan Convergencia i Unió (CiU), both of which are in coalition with the PP. In Barcelona the Catalan PSOE won overall control in the council.

Euskal Heritarrok, the electoral name of Herri Batasuna, the political arm of the Basque separatist ETA, increased their share of the vote from 0.97 to 1.47 percent. In both the municipal and autonomous elections they increased their vote. In the Basque councils they obtained 48.15 percent and 9 new councillors, giving them an overall majority of one seat.

Various factors contributed to the relative success of the PSOE. The social democrats have not been in power in Spain since 1996, nor shared power, as opposed to most European nations. The European

elections coincided with the municipal and autonomous region elections. The corruption scandals that marred the PSOE while in government have been overtaken by those now plaguing Aznar's PP. Above all the elections were seen as primaries for next year's general elections, and the PSOE gained from hostility to the PP.

The majority of the abstentions came from working class areas. There were also a large number of invalid votes: 351,403 blank papers and 162,448 spoiled papers. Over half a million people made the effort to go to the polling stations in order to show their contempt for all three elections and the candidates.

The elections were in the main contested on the personalities of the candidates, rather than their programmes. Political discussion on issues such as the long overdue State of the Nation speech by Prime Minister Aznar and the peace talks with ETA were postponed until after the elections.

The biggest upset was the electoral debacle suffered by Izquierda Unida (IU—United Left)—a coalition of Stalinists, reformists, nationalists and ex-petty bourgeois radicals, led by the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and headed by its Co-ordinator General, Julio Anguita. IU's share of the vote went down from 13.44 percent to 5.77 percent, and from nine to four seats. In bitter exchanges, some leaders of the coalition blamed this on Anguita's opposition to NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia and his support for Milosevic. Others blame IU's leading role in negotiating the Pact of Lizarra in the Basque country last year, where the Basque separatists formed a bloc with other Basque parties and trade unions to call for greater independence from central government.

This collapse of their support sent the organisation into a deep crisis. Anguita offered his resignation to the Federal Committee of IU. This was rejected. The

Communist Party intervened and Anguita withdrew his resignation. He then demanded that every member of the executive write letters of resignation, which he subsequently accepted.

The increased vote for regionalist parties produced an immediate adaptation to separatists aspirations by the PSOE. To strengthen its own hand, it declared immediately that—in those councils and autonomous regions where the PP lost control—it would make pacts with anybody except those “who support violence or carry out 'mafioso' practices”. A few days later the PSOE put its words into practice by allying to the hard-line separatists of Galicia in the North West of Spain, the Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG). This pact ousted the PP from over 30 municipal councils in the region. In the Basque country, where 17 councils have no overall control, the PSOE refused to sign a global agreement, proposed by the PP, in order to keep out the radical nationalist supporters of the ETA.



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