

Spain's fascistic Vox party surges in Catalan regional elections

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Amid mass abstention, the February 14 Catalan regional elections saw the far-right Vox party enter the Catalan parliament, the first time an avowedly far-right party has done so since 1982. Vox took 11 seats and nearly 8 percent of the vote, making it the fourth-largest party in the legislature.

No party won anywhere near the 68 seats necessary for a majority. The Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC), the Catalan branch of the ruling Socialist Workers' Party of Spain (PSOE), received the most votes of a single party. It took 33 of the 135 seats in the Catalan parliament, a significant increase on the 17 seats won in the 2017 elections.

The second and third parties were the pro-independence Catalan Republican Left (ERC) and Together for Catalonia (JxCat). The ERC took 33 seats, gaining one, and JxCat took 32 seats, losing two. The Catalan branch of Podemos, In Common We Can (ECP), maintained its eight seats.

Salvador Illa, who led the PSC ticket, and Pere Aragonès of the ERC have both announced plans to form a government in Catalonia. Aragonès will seek an alliance with JxCat and the pro-independence, pseudo-left Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), having ruled out any coalition with the PSC. He is considered most likely to be installed as the next regional president, thus leaving a Catalan-nationalist government in power in Barcelona.

It is the first vote held in Catalonia since 2017, when Spain's right-wing Popular Party (PP) government called special elections after the October 1 Catalan independence referendum. In this election as in the 2017 elections, Madrid's hopes to resolve the stand-off with the Catalan nationalists in their own favour backfired, however. The 2021 elections returned a narrow majority for the separatist parties, as before, but the PP vote collapsed.

In this year's election, voter turnout fell to 51.3 percent, the lowest ever since the 1978 Transition to democracy

with the end of the Franco regime. This compares to a turnout of 79.1 percent in 2017 elections, the highest on record.

While COVID-19 certainly impacted the vote, the record low turnout cannot be explained by the pandemic alone. There is widespread popular disillusionment with a false "choice" between reactionary nationalist parties, whose pro-austerity policies and separatist rhetoric is discredited among workers and youth, and pro-Madrid parties which have moved far to the right. Moreover, Catalan nationalist parties have backed Spain's PSOE-Podemos government, even as it imposed austerity and brutally cracked down on protests in Catalonia.

A recent survey by the Catalan government-linked Centre for Opinion Studies (CEO) found that only 44.5 percent of Catalonia's population supported Catalan independence. Despite the stability of the Catalan nationalists' parliamentary delegation, the record low turnout meant that the total number of votes they received plummeted. ERC and JxCat went from nearly a million votes each in 2017 to around 600,000 and 570,000, respectively.

Only with the seats of the pseudo-left Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), which increased its parliamentary representation from four to nine members, can separatist parties command a majority in the Catalan parliament. Pro-independence parties now hold 74 seats in the 135-seat parliament, an increase of four on 2017.

The Catalan-nationalist parties also failed to receive a majority of the popular vote: they collectively obtained 48 percent of ballots, only 0.5 percent more than in 2017. The PSC gained from this fall in support for the Catalan nationalists, increasing their vote by over 48,000.

So discredited are the Catalan nationalists that the PSC's Santiago Illa, who as health minister presided over the PSOE-Podemos government's disastrous response to the pandemic—which has claimed around 68,000 lives in

Spain according to underestimated official counts—won the most votes. This was a vote by default, benefitting largely from opposition to Catalan nationalism. But Illa’s candidacy did not prevent Catalan nationalist parties from gaining a parliamentary majority.

The main beneficiary of the fall in support for the Catalan nationalists was Vox, which won 218,000 votes, and more seats than the right-wing Citizens party and the PP combined. Citizens’ performance was disastrous, losing nearly a million votes since the last election and falling from the single biggest party in the legislature to the second-smallest, with only six seats. They were beaten in the race to the bottom only by the PP, which won a mere three seats.

Vox ran best in tourist areas along the Tarragona coast, including small towns like Roda de Berà, Mont-roig del Camp, Cunit, Cambrils and Calafell, where it won over 12 percent of the vote. The pandemic has devastated these tourist destinations: small businesses reliant on holidaymakers saw their income almost completely dry up. Vox also won the most votes in two small municipalities, La Pobla de Mafumet (21.3 percent) and Vilamalla (22.5 percent), both traditional strongholds of anti-separatist sentiment, which saw mass abstention.

Responsibility for the surge in votes for Vox lies squarely with the PSOE-Podemos government and its regional affiliates, the PSC and ECP, who have shifted so far to the right that they have allowed Vox to present its policies as part of the mainstream. With tacit support from Podemos, the PSOE caretaker government of 2019 violently cracked down on mass protests in Catalonia against the jailing of Catalan nationalist politicians for organizing peaceful protests and the peaceful 2017 referendum on Catalan independence.

The PSOE-Podemos government has upheld the convictions of Catalan nationalist political prisoners throughout its time in office. A day after the Catalan elections, the government’s Prosecutors Office ordered that jailed Catalan independence activists be returned to prison, only two weeks after the Catalan regional government freed them with semi-liberty status.

All the established parties carried out rotten right-wing electoral campaigns. Their chief characteristic was an almost complete absence of debate on the “herd immunity” policies pursued by the PSOE-Podemos government. There was barely a mention of the tens of thousands of lives lost to the pandemic, the hundreds of thousands more who have lost jobs and livelihoods, the millions infected with the virus, or the billions of euros

handed to banks and big business in EU bailouts.

Vox dominated the stage with xenophobic, anti-migrant rants and a “Stop Islamisation!” campaign.

Significantly, during the campaign, Vox spokesperson Javier Ortega Smith declared Vox’s willingness to back a minority PSOE government in Catalonia, stating: “If you put me in the position of choosing between a government led by the PSOE and a government led by the coup-plotters [referring to the Catalan nationalists’ 2017 independence referendum] and separatists, if we have to choose between the bad and the worse, we would choose the bad.”

“It is always easier to recover the government of Catalonia with the socialists [of the PSOE] than with the separatists of the ERC.... We will do everything in our power to support the investiture of a government which is not of separatists and coup-plotters,” Ortega Smith stated.

Illà and the PSC, for the time being, have ruled out a coalition with Vox.

Whatever parliamentary alliance eventually emerges from the elections, neither the bankrupt pro-austerity and separatist policies of the Catalan nationalists nor the reactionary politics of the PSOE/PSC and Podemos/ECP will combat the far-right. The PSOE-Podemos government has acceded to virtually every demand placed on it by Vox—from its refusal to implement lockdown measures to combat the pandemic to its brutal crackdown on refugees.

The way forward for the working class is to reject Catalan separatism and the pseudo-left and social-democratic parties alike. Workers in Catalonia must turn to their class brothers and sisters throughout Spain, and Europe as a whole, in a common struggle for the socialist transformation of society and the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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