

Force of resistance: The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)

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The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) faced a challenging political environment after it left office in 2011, confronted not only by a centre-right opponent which had obtained its best-ever general election result, but, for the first time, by a rival to its left seemingly capable of relegating it to the political margins. This piece draws attention to the role played by structure and agency in underpinning the PSOE's characteristic resilience, enabling it to display the flexibility required to re-establish its credentials as a formidable party of government capable of implementing a clearly progressive social democratic programme.

The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* – PSOE) is one of Europe's most electorally successful social democratic parties. Since Franco's death in 1975 it has been in office for longer than any other political party in Spain: between 1982 and 1996, under Felipe González; between 2004 and 2011, under José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero; and since 2018, under its current leader, Pedro Sánchez, who, since January 2020, has been governing as head of Spain's

first left-wing (PSOE-Podemos) coalition. Following the July 2023 general election, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, leader of the centre-right People's Party (Partido Popular – PP), was unable to secure the parliamentary endorsement required by prospective prime ministers following a general election, obtaining the backing of only his own party (137 votes), the far-right populist Vox (33 votes) and one vote each from the Canary Islands Coalition and the Navarrese People's Union. As this piece goes to press (October 2023) Sánchez claimed he could obtain the parliamentary backing denied Feijóo, albeit at the cost of passing legislation offering an amnesty to those sanctioned for their role in the unofficial Catalan independence referendum held in October 2017. Should Sánchez be successful, his continuation in office will serve as the latest example of the PSOE's distinctive resilience.

This tenacity was especially necessary after the PSOE was last ejected from government in 2011. As the incumbent at the time of the global financial crisis and the instigator of austerity policies aimed at mitigating its impact, the PSOE's hard-won reputation for economic and governmental competence appeared irreparably damaged. Like many of its social democratic sister parties across Europe it was unable to stem its electoral decline and incapable of mounting a robust challenge to a more confident centre-right, in Spain's case, the PP government led by Mariano Rajoy. Amidst widespread corruption and economic hardship, the Spanish party system became fragmented. Affective polarisation accelerated, revealing itself on both the left-right and territorial dimensions. Within this period of political flux, the PSOE faced a battle with the populist left Podemos to maintain its status as the leading political force on the Spanish left. While subsequent fractures in the right bloc – first the rise of the centre-right Ciudadanos (Citizens) and latterly the far-right Vox – offered opportunities to exploit the PP's growing electoral weakness, it also posed twin problems for the PSOE with increasing polarisation limiting inter-bloc volatility and Vox's 'cultural threat' and 'left behind' pitch targeting disgruntled, longstanding PSOE supporters.

So, amidst the political volatility, how has the PSOE managed to avoid the fate of all too many of its social democratic sister parties and remain a potent political force in Spanish politics? To address this question, the article details the travails suffered by the PSOE since 2011; from the fight for survival in 2015 and 2016; the PSOE's return to office in 2018 under Pedro Sánchez; the fallout from the two 2019 elections, the last of which led to the left coalition; and the successes and failures of the PSOE-Podemos coalition culminating in the public's judgment at the July 2023 election. The article will conclude by identifying those PSOE attributes which may prove to be of use to social democratic sister parties seeking to learn from the PSOE's experience. Ostensibly, this contribution stresses the importance of structure and agency in the PSOE's resilience.

Organisationally embedded across Spain but with notable areas of longstanding support in autonomous regions such as Andalucía, Extremadura and Castilla-La Mancha, the party resisted electoral collapse when times were hard. Moreover, the PSOE leadership's sober grasp of the party's reduced circumstances, allied to a strategically acute assessment of the challenges and opportunities presented by the apparent demise of Spain's previously rigid two-party system, were essential to the PSOE's recovery post-2011. Sánchez's key role in this achievement has confounded his critics, both internal and external, allowing him to establish a high degree of personal control over the PSOE. In government, Sánchez has had to withstand highly personal attacks from the right and its campaign promises to end '*Sanchismo*', but his stature grew as the left coalition successfully engineered progressive reforms and painstakingly rebuilt reputational competence on the economy. Together with coalition partner Yolanda Díaz, leader of Sumar, an alliance of parties to the left of the PSOE, Sánchez enjoyed higher personal ratings than their counterparts on the right. Like González and Zapatero before him, having Sánchez on the ballot paper matters for the PSOE and remains critical to its political longevity.

The PSOE in opposition: 2011-2018

The PSOE left office in 2011 after a general election at which it obtained fewer seats – 110 – than at any previous election since the restoration of democracy. The PSOE's second term in office under Zapatero (2008-2011) had been a veritable calvary. In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, after first downplaying the scale of the challenges facing the economy, and then putting in place significant fiscal stimulus measures, the government had ultimately fallen into line with the austerity approach adopted across the EU from 2009-2010. Public sector cuts and pension freezes were notable examples of this policy U-turn. Coming against the background of unemployment spiralling above five million and a growing public perception that the government had mishandled the post-2008 crisis, the popularity of both Zapatero and his party nosedived. Three months before the 2011 election, Zapatero complied with the EU's request, within the context of the ongoing Eurozone crisis, that he amend the Constitution to prioritise deficit repayment, the first major amendment since the Constitution had come into force in 1978. By so doing, Zapatero appeared to be leaving his party open to the accusation that there was little difference between the PSOE and the PP (who supported the measure), and that the government had ceded control of economic policy to the EU. Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, Zapatero's successor as party leader, was therefore handicapped on a number of levels at the general election: he had been a leading figure within Zapatero's by now clearly unpopular government, and his efforts to

differentiate the PSOE from the PP were thwarted by the Constitutional amendment in the run-up to the election.

Following its crushing defeat, the PSOE was faced not only with the dominance of its traditional rival within the two-party system, the PP (which had obtained its best ever result at the 2011 general election), but was also confronted by an existential threat from the new, social media-savvy, radical left party Podemos, led by Pablo Iglesias. Formed in 2014, Podemos was able to take advantage of the PSOE's failings – both real and imagined – to present an alternative vision to the party's disillusioned supporters. The depiction of the PSOE as a spent force – and a key component of a corrupt, complacent *casta* which had failed Spain – struck a chord with many long-standing supporters of the party. While the haemorrhaging of younger, more highly educated voters also weakened the PSOE's electoral base.

After a further electoral setback at the 2014 European elections, a relatively unknown Pedro Sánchez succeeded Rubalcaba as party leader. A disastrous showing at the 2015 general election, when the PSOE lost a further twenty seats, obtaining just twenty-one more than Podemos and its regional allies, indicated how real the threat of a *sorpasso* (being overtaken by Podemos) remained. That election marked the end of the previously solid two-party system based on the PSOE and the PP: the two parties obtained just over half of the vote. The PSOE obtained an even worse result at the general election held the following year: its capture of just 85 seats marked an historic nadir. The 5.5 million votes obtained were less than half the number achieved by the party at its most recent general election victory eight years before. In 2016, polls throughout the election campaign universally predicted that Podemos would have a larger share of the vote than the PSOE and match or even surpass its seat share. Like 2015 this proved ill-founded. For the PSOE, structure proved vital. Crucially, the PSOE's vote shares in 2015 and 2016 showed a smaller variation across districts than Podemos. So, while the PSOE won seats in 96 per cent and 94 per cent of districts across the two election years, this was substantially lower for Podemos who obtained seats in only 71 per cent and 73 per cent of districts. The PSOE's organisational strength therefore ensured that even in the darkest times it managed to retain a toehold in almost every district across Spain while simultaneously retaining many seats in regions of longstanding support.

Although the PSOE had narrowly retained its status as the main alternative to the PP, Sánchez, after two successive general election defeats, faced critics within the upper echelons of the party. His refusal to abstain to allow the PP's Rajoy to remain as prime minister provoked a level of dissension within the party's governing Federal Committee which led to Sánchez resigning as leader and stepping down as a parliamentary deputy in October 2016. However, many party members resented

the harsh treatment to which he had been subjected by the party apparatus and opposed the decision to mandate an abstention in the parliamentary vote on Rajoy's continuation as prime minister. At leadership primaries held the following May, Sánchez was therefore able to present himself as the champion of the PSOE's grassroots and the guardian of the party's progressive essence. Beating the odds, he returned as party leader with just over half of the vote.

Just a year after returning as leader, Sánchez tabled the first ever successful vote of no confidence leading to the fall of a government. Myriad corruption allegations, combined with a heavy-handed approach to Catalonia's separatist regional government, had obscured the slow but steady economic recovery under Mariano Rajoy's tenure. Despite the PSOE having the fewest seats in its modern history, Sánchez was able to mobilise the disgust engendered by the PP's endemic corruption to obtain the support of over half of parliamentary deputies, including those of seven parties other than the PSOE. Sánchez's subsequent tenure as prime minister would be notable for the support provided by these very same parliamentary forces (including parties in favour of Basque and Catalan independence) in passing legislation. These parties provide the basis for Sánchez's hopes of continuing as prime minister following the July 2023 election.

The PSOE in office: 2018-2019

As if to underline that the change of government had brought a different set of values, Sánchez's first initiative was to offer safe port in Valencia to a search and rescue ship carrying more than six hundred migrants. The vessel, *Aquarius*, operated jointly by Médecins Sans Frontières and SOS Méditerranée, had previously been refused permission to dock by both Italy and Malta. Sánchez indicated that he had acted to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe, and to meet Spain's obligations under International Law. A progressive 2019 budget, which included expansionary measures such as a significant hike in the minimum wage, further demonstrated that the PSOE with Sánchez at the helm had little intention of resuming the austerity which had characterised both its own final years in office under Zapatero and its PP successor.

These early initiatives indicated Sánchez's desire to impose a personalist style of government based around his own hands-on role as prime minister, thereby challenging those within the party apparatus who had opposed him. Sánchez calculated that a general election victory and a clear improvement on his historically low number of seats obtained in 2016 would strengthen his position. He therefore duly sent Spaniards back to the polls in April 2019 and was able to win an additional 38 seats, giving the PSOE 123 seats, well ahead of the 66 obtained by the PP.

Moreover, Unidas Podemos, the latest incarnation of Podemos following an alliance agreement with the communist-dominated United Left (*Izquierda Unida*), was also in decline, winning twelve fewer seats. The much-feared *sorpasso* had been resisted: the PSOE's status as both the main party on the left and as the dominant party overall – the PP obtained 71 fewer seats than in 2016 – appeared secure.

Nevertheless, overconfidence and strategic overreach were evident when Sánchez dissolved parliament and called a general election in November 2019. Mindful of Unidas Podemos's vulnerability, Sánchez calculated that the PSOE would improve on its April performance. He was overly confident. When the election took place, the left suffered a reverse in fortunes with the PSOE and Unidas Podemos losing three and seven seats respectively. By contrast the far-right Vox continued to build momentum, winning more than 15 per cent of the vote and establishing itself as the third largest party in the Congress of Deputies with 52 seats, behind a PP which was itself recovering, winning an additional 23 seats at the expense of Ciudadanos, which had entered free fall.

Spanish politics had changed. Two antagonistic blocs had emerged in response to a wave of Spanish nationalism that had intensified since the Catalan crisis of autumn 2017 when Rajoy's PP government had used force to suppress an unofficial independence referendum. Feelings of Spanishness and defending Spanish identity now dominated the discourse of the right. The prospect of a reinvigorated right alliance composed of the PP and Vox was sufficiently concerning for Sánchez to enter into immediate negotiations with Pablo Iglesias to form the first coalition government in modern Spain's political history, with Iglesias appointed as one of Sánchez's deputy prime ministers. The ten seats lost by the PSOE and Unidas Podemos nevertheless left the coalition government more dependent on the parliamentary support of pro-independence parties, a vulnerability exploited by the PP and Vox, who claimed that the government was effectively posing a threat to national unity. This accusation became a major fault line between the left and right blocs throughout the tenure of the left coalition and would subsequently play a particularly prominent role in the strategy adopted by the PP and Vox during the July 2023 general election campaign.

The left (PSOE-Unidas Podemos) coalition: 2020-23

Defying public expectations, the Left (PSOE-Unidas Podemos) coalition comfortably lasted for three-and-a-half years. Despite a precarious parliamentary majority, it managed to navigate Spain through unprecedented worldwide 'shocks', including the coronavirus pandemic which began shortly after the formation of the government, the instability caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent

global economic downturn. The coalition's longevity owed much to both coalition partners never losing sight of what unified them as opposed to what divided them. Although senior figures on both sides played a vital role, it is undeniable that the success of the coalition owed much to the statecraft of Sánchez. The PSOE under Sánchez reestablished its reputation for effective government based on the pillars of economic pragmatism and social progressiveness, while the Prime Minister cut a 'statesmanlike' figure both domestically and internationally. Throughout the electoral cycle, the right ensured that the Spanish national question – heightened by coalition measures such as changes to the penal code on sedition and the granting of pardons for pro-independence Catalan politicians – and debates around cultural identity remained at the forefront of the political discourse. The coalition government responded through numerous progressive social and economic reforms.

Prominent amongst these was the 2021 labour reform implemented by labour minister Yolanda Díaz, who replaced Pablo Iglesias as one of Sánchez's deputy prime ministers in May 2021. This initiative was the latest attempt to reduce the above-EU average proportion of temporary contracts within the labour market. Over the previous four decades numerous labour reforms had failed to solve this chronic structural problem. That Díaz was able to secure the backing of both employers' organisations and trade unions for the new measure underlined her political skills, an achievement which contributed towards her leading Sumar into the July 2023 general election. And while Díaz drew plaudits, the reform came with the blessing of a canny Sánchez, enabling the PSOE to reinforce its progressive credentials and gain credit from the public for the outcome. Economic data following the reforms painted a rosy picture: a rapid acceleration in permanent employment contracts; a pronounced decline in short-term contracts and by July 2023 an unemployment rate of 11.6 per cent, the lowest level since 2008. Moreover, with PSOE ministers occupying the key economic portfolios in the coalition government, Spain's economic success story post-pandemic – GDP growth higher than the Eurozone average; inflation one of the lowest in the Eurozone bloc; and unemployment falling – did much to restore the PSOE's reputational competence for economic stewardship, particularly within the context of a European-wide cost of living crisis.

Further progressive measures enacted by the coalition included a boost to pensions; legislation to address the housing shortage; a 47 per cent increase in the minimum wage; financial support for heating and transport costs; an assisted dying law; LGBT+ legislation; additional initiatives on Historical Memory which aimed to provide financial support to the families of those who had suffered at the hands of the Franco regime (the remains of the dictator himself were removed from his resting place at Cuelgamuros, north of Madrid, in 2019); and significant financial aid for those at risk of losing their jobs or businesses during the coronavirus pandemic. However, the coalition government had less reason to congratulate itself

with respect to the clumsy introduction of legislation governing sexual consent, which, despite the best intentions, inadvertently led to a number of sexual offenders being released from detention prematurely.

The primary criticism of the PP and Vox was the coalition's willingness to obtain the support of parties in favour of Catalan and Basque independence as and when parliamentary votes dictated. And many of the reproaches were personal, with the PP and Vox orchestrating a media onslaught on the need to defeat 'Sanchismo', portraying Sánchez as a liar for backtracking on aligning with separatists and u-turning on pardons. In reply, the coalition government highlighted the fact that tension in Catalonia had decreased significantly since the nadir of October 2017 and noted that ETA announced the end of its armed struggle during Zapatero's final year in government. As for dealing with the party which had been considered the political wing of ETA – the terrorist group definitively dissolved itself in 2018 – EH Bildu (Euskal Herria Bildu – Basque Country Unite), the coalition argued that participation in Spain's democratic institutions was to be welcomed rather than criticised. This justification failed to dissuade the PP and Vox from suggesting that a notorious convicted terrorist, Txapote, would be advised to vote for Pedro Sánchez in the July 2023 general election (*Que te vote Txapote*). Such cultural war sloganeering from both the PP and Vox dominated their election campaign discourse and seemingly played well with core supporters on the right.

However, the right bloc's targeting of Sánchez was not without risk. First, Sánchez consistently remained more popular with the Spanish public than his right-wing opponents. The PSOE knew that if it was to challenge the right by persuading undecided voters to vote for the party whilst mobilising its own supporters, Sánchez was key. Unsurprisingly, unlike his PP counterpart, Sánchez remained front and centre of the PSOE's election campaign, appearing throughout on both supportive and unfavourable media outlets. Secondly, the ever closer alignment between the PP and Vox – speaking as one on the 'Sanchismo' narrative and openly working together in regional administrations across Spain – allowed Sánchez to tap into voters' fears of the far-right Vox winning power on the coat-tails of the PP. Strategically, Sánchez knew that if the PP failed to win an outright majority, the presence of Vox 'boxed in' the PP in any future coalition negotiations with parties demanding Basque and Catalan independence, given that the far-right party sought to outlaw them. It was an electoral calculation that has so far borne fruit.

Conclusion

Pedro Sánchez has a justified claim to being one of the most successful centre-left politicians active today. The party he leads, the PSOE, can also point to its extraordi-

nary resilience over its long, and often tragic, history. No more so than in recent times when sister social democratic parties are ostensibly on the back foot across Europe with some battling for their very existence. The July 2023 election epitomised the party's steadfastness against all odds with familiar mutually inclusive themes underpinning the PSOE's electoral resilience. Structure once again proved invaluable. The PSOE's organisational reach and ability to secure support across Spain acted as a buffer when party system fragmentation was at its peak and proved essential to preventing the right bloc from succeeding at the July 2023 general election. The PSOE's ability to balance its progressive reformist instincts with economic pragmatism and tailor its approach to the situation at hand remains a considerable strength. As such it has been able to retain a 'big tent' appeal to longstanding supporters and non-partisan voters alike. Since democracy was restored, it remains the only Spanish party to never fall below 20 per cent of the national vote. And lastly, agency remains crucial to the PSOE's continued longevity. González and Zapatero passed the baton to Sánchez, who, despite being initially dealt a challenging hand, has been pivotal in re-establishing the PSOE's dominance on the left, as well as possessing the foresight to join forces with previous foes (despite the reservations of influential figures in his own party) and then display the statecraft to oversee socially progressive reforms and economic advances against the backdrop of significant global instability. Not for the first time under Sánchez's leadership, the PSOE surpassed expectations at the 2023 election, coming within striking distance of the PP and denying Feijóo, and his far-right junior partner, Vox, access to power. Should Sánchez prove incapable of obtaining the parliamentary support required to form a viable government, another general election will have to be held in early 2024. That prospect should hold no fears for the PSOE under his leadership.

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