

A new political bandwagon? The rise of Ciudadanos in Spain



Support for Ciudadanos has risen substantially in Spanish opinion polls over recent months, with the party in first place in several cases. But is the party really on the brink of taking over from Mariano Rajoy's People's Party and becoming the dominant force in Spanish politics? [Alejandro Quiroga](#) highlights several factors, including the crisis over Catalan independence, that are currently working in the favour of Ciudadanos, but notes there are still major challenges that will have to be overcome if the party is to translate its polling figures into an election victory.



Albert Rivera, Credit: [Carlos Delgado](#) (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Over the last two months, opinion polls have been predicting a drastic change in Spanish politics. The centre-right *Ciudadanos* (Citizens) has become [the most popular party](#) in the country. If the forecast is right and general elections were to be held today, *Ciudadanos* would [win the vote](#). For the first time since the early 1980s, the People's Party (PP) could lose its hegemonic position on the right of the Spanish political spectrum.

Ciudadanos is a relatively new party. Created in 2006 by a group of Catalan scholars and journalists, the party has presented itself as the defender of Spanish identity in a territory dominated by Catalan nationalists and endorsed the 1978 Constitution territorial framework. Initially, the party limited its actions to Catalonia, where it gained some MPs in the regional parliament. From 2014, however, *Ciudadanos* [began to grow](#) outside Catalonia. In the 2015 Spanish elections the party came fourth, winning 14% of the national vote. The latest survey forecasts [29% of the vote](#) would go to *Ciudadanos*.

Ciudadanos has also mutated ideologically. At the outset, the party would define itself as centre-left and promote individual rights and freedoms. But in the last few years *Ciudadanos* has become increasingly conservative. Nowadays, [most voters](#) place *Ciudadanos* firmly on the right. The ideological transformation of *Ciudadanos* has worked well from an electoral perspective. After all, [opinion polls](#) show that the party led by Albert Rivera is getting most of its new backing from former PP voters. The rapidly eroding support of the PP is often portrayed as a key aspect in *Ciudadanos*' upsurge. Spain's governing party has been at the centre of numerous corruption cases, including illegal financing, embezzlement, fixing public tenders, tax evasion and the falsification of public documents. These seemingly never-ending scandals have benefited *Ciudadanos*, always keen to portray itself as a new, clean party on a mission to regenerate Spanish politics.

Yet the main factor in *Ciudadanos*' recent rise lies in the Catalan crisis. On 21 December 2017, *Ciudadanos* won the Catalan regional elections. Although *Ciudadanos* will not be able to form a government, for the pro-independence parties have a majority in the regional parliament, the party emerged as the clear leader of the unionist camp and one of the political winners of the turmoil of the current [Catalan independence](#) drive. "Catalonia has been a trigger for us", acknowledged Mr Rivera in the [Financial Times](#) when explaining the party's good prospects nationwide. Surveys have also confirmed the centrality of the Catalan crisis. *Ciudadanos*' pro-Spanish discourse and its staunch defence of the constitutional order [have granted](#) the Catalan party a good deal of sympathy all over Spain.

The big question now is whether *Ciudadanos*' good omens are going to materialise into support at the ballot box. In some respects, there is a feeling of déjà vu. In the run-up to the December 2015 general elections, some opinion polls forecast that *Ciudadanos* would get 24% of the vote, but the party ended up reaching 14%. Are the recent predictions simply new hype? There is no doubt that *Ciudadanos* have very good press among some media, particularly the *El País* newspaper, and some of the opinion polls could have exaggerated the strength of Mr Rivera's party seeking to create a positive image among the Spanish public. However, the political climate has changed in the last few years. In 2015, the threat for the status quo posed by anti-austerity party *Podemos* was perceived to be a real one and most conservative voters opted then for the PP. In 2018, the fear of *Podemos* gaining power has diminished among some conservative voters, as the anti-austerity party is [not doing as well](#) in the opinion polls, so the predicted transfer from the PP to *Ciudadanos* is more likely to happen.

Still, the transformation of *Ciudadanos* into the hegemonic force of the centre-right implies very important challenges. First, [according to the electoral surveys](#), the transfer of votes from the PP to *Ciudadanos* is mainly taking place in urban areas. *Ciudadanos* still have a problem in the Spanish countryside where PP voters are very loyal to President Mariano Rajoy's party. Secondly, *Ciudadanos*' support across Spain is geographically fragmented. The party is powerful in Catalonia, Madrid, Murcia and Valencia, but very weak in the Basque Country, Galicia, Castilla-La Mancha, Aragon and Extremadura. Next year's municipal and regional elections will give us an indication of how accurate the current forecast is. If *Ciudadanos* are able to make headway in rural areas and those regions where they are currently weak then its chances of becoming the first party of the Spanish right are very good. Above all, *Ciudadanos* needs to break the PP clientelist political network in the countryside and expand the party's infrastructures in those areas where they are weak.

Likewise, *Ciudadanos* requires that the political radicalisation continues in Spain, so it can present itself as a centrist party which appeals to the moderate voter. As [lucidly explained](#) by Juan Rodríguez Teruel, the current situation, with *Podemos* and the Spanish socialists fighting for hegemony on the left and the PP leaning towards the far right, benefits *Ciudadanos*. The Catalan conundrum certainly facilitates the growth of *Ciudadanos* in a political context where both socialists and *Podemos* have been electorally penalised for their moderation and the PP has been punished due to its incompetence. Yet the firm *Ciudadanos*' support of the PP minority government in the Spanish parliament could also hamper the rise of Albert Rivera's party. If seen as being too close to the conservatives, *Ciudadanos* runs the risk of becoming a sanitised copy of the PP.

It is a very delicate balance and national elections are not due until 2020... unless *Ciudadanos* decides to pull the plug earlier.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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