

Rajoy's new government: Spain's deadlock is over, but uncertainty continues

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/11/10/spain-rajoy-new-government-deadlock-uncertainty/

10/11/2016

After more than 10 months of deadlock, Mariano Rajoy was finally successful in winning enough support to continue as Spain's Prime Minister on 29 October after a large number of MPs from the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) agreed to abstain from voting on the formation of the next government. But as [Javier Astudillo](#) and [Marta Romero](#) write, with a government that is supported by less than 40 per cent of Spanish MPs, it is unclear how much Rajoy can hope to achieve.



Following an unsuccessful bid in late August, incumbent Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative People's Party (Partido Popular – PP), Mariano Rajoy, finally won the Spanish parliament's confidence on 29 October. This came just two days before the deadline for a new government to be established before Spain would have been forced to head back to the polls for the third time in less than a year. In addition to the affirmative vote of his own party, the new liberal party Ciudadanos, and a small regionalist party, Coalición Canaria, also supported Rajoy, while he obtained the abstention of the majority of MPs from the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). This abstention was preceded by a traumatic crisis within PSOE that prompted the removal of the party's leader, Pedro Sánchez – the first Socialist leader directly selected by party members.



Now the country is in the process of leaving behind its political stalemate, while the risk of new elections being held before Christmas has also been seen off. And Rajoy's second term, after ruling the country with a comfortable absolute majority in his first term, can begin in earnest. Among his top priorities, Rajoy has made clear the need to implement promises to Brussels to cut Spain's fiscal deficit, consolidate the reforms that have contributed to the country's economic recovery, and maintain the unity of Spain by confronting the separatist challenge posed by the Catalan regional government.

However, a short legislative term cannot be ruled out given the difficulties that the minority government may encounter. The Spanish Parliament is highly fragmented and polarised, which is a recipe for the continuation of uncertainty. For a start, no other governing party since the return of democracy has had so few seats (137) in the *Congreso de los Diputados*. At the moment, the Spanish premier has only the predisposition of some support from Ciudadanos, provided he honours the agreement signed in August with the party to win their confidence vote. Ciudadanos have rejected the possibility of formally entering a government headed by Rajoy. Still, even when both parties are taken together they lack an absolute majority.

The parliamentary session in which Rajoy was sworn in as Spain's PM illustrated the confrontational atmosphere that now dominates Spanish politics. First, there is a sharp confrontation between the major national parties of the left and right, and between these parties and the nationalist parties that exist in Spain. The corruption trials that continue to engulf the PP do not make it easy for any party to give support to Rajoy's minority government in the full view of its voters. But the demand of the Catalan nationalist parties for an independence referendum in exchange for their support does not permit the building of an alternative coalition either.

Furthermore, the left is bitterly divided at the national level between PSOE and Podemos. The leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, is presently trying to leapfrog PSOE and become the primary voice of the left, and the party has grasped its opportunity to accuse the socialists of betrayal for allowing the continuation of a 'venal and corrupt right-wing government'. PSOE, which is currently in the hands of a caretaker leadership, fears ceding to Podemos the mantle of opposition. The socialists have therefore vowed to fight Rajoy every step of the way. To make things even

more complex, Pedro Sánchez, the former leader of the party who was forced to resign in late September due to his point-blank refusal to allow the PP's continuation in power, has announced his intention to run in the party's next leadership contest and represent its alienated grassroots supporters.

Nevertheless, Rajoy's main trump card is his power to threaten fresh elections. According to the latest opinion polls, the PP would continue to recover part of the ground it lost in the December 2015 elections if Spanish voters returned to the ballot box. Aware of this, the conservative premier has made clear to the rest of the country's parties that if there is no political stability, he will call new elections (according to the Spanish Constitution he could do this from next May). Faced with parliamentary weakness, in his investiture session, Rajoy called for congress to come together, and look for agreement with other parties on specific issues such as the pension and education systems. But he also made clear that he is not going to accept reviewing or amending the laws passed in his first term.

Moreover, given the composition of his new government, Rajoy has sought to demonstrate his understanding of the present political situation. In policy terms, his new government is a mere continuation of the previous one, with the most important ministers keeping their posts. In procedural terms, however, his designation of the minister for Education, Culture and Sports, Íñigo Méndez de Vigo, as spokesperson of the government may represent a calculated attempt to give a more conciliatory façade to his administration, given Méndez de Vigo's reputation as a politician open to dialogue.

As a first test of his new term, Rajoy's government will have to make the parliament approve a budget for 2017. This will not be easy. To meet Spain's promises to the European Union to cut its public deficit to 3.1 percent of GDP next year, it has been estimated that the budget will have to make additional spending cuts of nearly 5.5 billion euros or raise taxes. At the moment, Rajoy lacks the support required to pass the budget or to negotiate with the European Commission for a further extension to meet the deficit target. How he handles this first test will probably set the tone for the future of Rajoy's second term in power.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [La Moncloa – Gobierno de España](#) (CC-BY-SA-2.0)

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2fzf2dF>

About the authors

Javier Astudillo – *Universitat Pompeu Fabra*

Dr [Javier Astudillo](#) is Associate Professor and Vice-director of the Department of Political and Social Sciences at Universitat Pompeu Fabra.



–
Marta Romero – *Political Analyst*

[Marta Romero](#) blogs regularly about Spanish public opinion on politics at [El Diario](#).

