

# Spain: ‘Popular Unity’ Councils Sworn In Amid Huge Enthusiasm

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Image: Pablo Iglesias and Ada Colau. [Photo: [Luis Valiño/Flickr](#)]

*The squares in front of scores of town halls across the Spanish state were jam-packed with enthusiastic crowds on June 13. Tens of thousands had gathered to celebrate the inauguration of progressive administrations elected in a leftward swing in the [May 24 local government elections](#) for Spain’s 8144 councils. The joy was greatest in the capitals where “popular unity” tickets threw out conservative administrations. These tickets were citizen election platforms supported by the majority of the radical left, which defeated right-wing incumbents from the People’s Party in Madrid, A Coruna in Galicia and Cadiz in Andalusia.*

The Catalan right-nationalist Convergence and Union (CiU) was also defeated by a popular unity ticket in Barcelona. In Barcelona, central St. James Square was packed tight with chanting and confetti-throwing supporters of the victorious Barcelona Together ticket and its leader, former housing-rights activist Ada Colau. When the city’s newly elected councillors left the town hall to make the traditional visit to the premier of Catalonia (CiU’s Artur Mas), they found it almost impossible to push through a crowd set on greeting Colau and the rest of the Barcelona Together team.

In the Andalusian provincial capital of Cadiz, a wildly enthusiastic crowd of thousands greeted Jose Maria Gonzalez, the victorious mayoral candidate for the For Cadiz Yes We Can ticket. Gonzalez later said: “What we lived through in the city on June 13 was something historic. I saw people moved, people full of hope, people who were again believing – or believing for the first time – in a political project, a political project of change. People don’t believe in the political class, and it’s up to us, the new political people, to revive their trust and restore prestige to a task that must be voluntary and for a limited period.”

## “Ordinary People”

In A Coruna, Xulio Ferreiro, the successful mayoral candidate for the citizen platform Atlantic Tide, handed the mayoral baton to people in the crowd outside the town hall, commenting: “We have come into office as ordinary people and we’ll leave as ordinary people.” The municipal police looked on with concern as the precious piece of council property passed through the hands of pensioners, unemployed workers, students, housewives and other ‘untrustworthy’ elements.

In Aragon’s capital, Zaragoza, Pedro Santistevé, human rights advocate and incoming mayor from Zaragoza Together, issued an “apology” for the “naturalness and spontaneousness” of

his team of young councillors. Some citizens had interpreted their jumping for joy after inauguration as an offence against the solemnity of council protocol.

The gale of fresh air represented by these citizen platform wins blew through other provincial capitals where such tickets did not win a relative majority, but supported other left forces, usually nationalist and regionalist that did.

In Irunea, capital of Navarra (known as Pamplona in Spanish), the Basque left nationalist coalition EH Bildu was supported by the Navarra regionalist force GeroaBai, the citizens' platform Aranzadi and the Navarra affiliate organization of the all-Spanish United Left. This alliance was enough to win the mayoralty for EH Bildu's Joseba Asiron. In his inaugural speech, delivered in Basque and Castilian (Spanish), Asiron committed to working for peace and "achieving a space for coexistence based on respect for all persons, their ideas and projects."

This was a reference to the divisions in Navarra between its Basque-speaking and Basque Country-oriented community and its Spanish-speaking community. The Spanish speakers mainly vote for the right-regionalist Union of the People of Navarra and the Socialist Party of Navarra, the Navarra affiliate of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE).

### **PP Apoplexy**

The result in Navarra, which the Spanish-centralist world view conceives as a front line in the ongoing war against Basque nationalism, was paralleled by the result in Valencia, capital of the Valencian Community. In Valencia, the [People's Party](#) (PP) lost to the Valencian regionalist Commitment Coalition, in PP eyes a dreadful win for "pan-Catalanism."

Outgoing mayor Rita Barbera was so outraged by the decision of the PSOE's Valencian affiliate to join with the citizen platform Valencia Together to support the Commitment Coalition's Joan Ribo for mayor, that she resigned from the council. On June 13, Ribo stated he would be locking the baton away because, while respectful of traditions, "I want to work through participation, through dialogue with people, and the baton really isn't the best symbol of that." The contrast between Ribo arriving at Valencia town hall on his pushbike and Barbera driving up in her Ferrari dramatized how much had changed in this former PP stronghold.

In Madrid, a 3000-strong demonstration supported the successful Madrid Now! ticket and its mayoral candidate, former labour rights activist and judge Manuela Carmena. It overwhelmed a 30-strong counter-demonstration in support of outgoing PP mayor Esperanza Aguirre. "We don't want communism in Madrid, we don't want communism in Spain," yelled the right-wingers, parroting Aguirre's claims that a Madrid Now! win would mean soviets in the Spanish capitol's suburbs.

PP outrage was directed most of all at the PSOE. Along with the PP, it is one of the two main parties that have alternated in power since the end of the Franco dictatorship in the 1970s.

In order to overcome PP relative majorities, in nearly all cases the PSOE gave support to, and received support from, citizen platforms, United Left and left-regionalist forces. The PSOE had no choice but to build alliances to its left. With mass political sentiment moving leftward, the PSOE has already been abandoned by millions of working people and viewed as suspect by millions more. It is in no position to give free kicks to the new anti-austerity

party [Podemos](#) (We Can) or other progressive forces.

The PP now controls only 19 of the Spanish state's 50 provincial capitals (down from 36), the PSOE has 17 (up from nine), the new citizen platforms five, the Basque Nationalist Party three (up from one), and CiU, United Left, the Galician Nationalist Bloc, Commitment Coalition and EH Bildu one each.

After the 2011 council elections, 36 councils on the Spanish mainland were run by absolute majorities. Today, four years after the *indignado* movement occupied 80 city squares and began the popular fight back against austerity, Spain's two party system has almost entirely collapsed. Only one provincial capital is run by an absolute majority.

### **Citizens and Podemos**

The PP's disaster would have been greater if the national leader of the new-look centre-right "anti-Podemos" force Citizens had not hauled local leaders into line when they were tempted to support the PSOE. Citizens' tactic was to support the party winning the highest vote, provided it supported Citizens' anti-corruption charter. With this approach, Citizens managed to save the PP in five provincial capitals.

But Citizens also supported a PSOE government in Andalusia, which had been blocked since the March 22 Andalusian elections, thus giving the appearance of even-handedness.

Citizens has not decided to take part in any administrations as junior partner, preferring to "keep itself clean" until it can win in its own right.

Podemos's tactics were roughly parallel from the other side. The radical party led by Pablo Iglesias, which formed last year, did not stand in its own name in the municipal poll, although it did in the 13 regional elections held at the same time.

In general, its approach urged the citizen platforms it was part of to give unconditional support to the PSOE or any progressive coalitions that could form a majority against the PP, but to decline taking part in the resulting administrations.

As the price of its support for the PSOE in Seville, Podemos managed to get it to agree to stop evictions and keep schools open for meals during the coming summer holidays.

In the four autonomous communities (states) where Podemos's vote will be critical in deciding whether the PSOE will replace the PP in government - Extremadura, Baleares, Asturias and Castilla-La Mancha - the draft agreements negotiated with the PSOE will be submitted to members to vote on.

All possible options, from rejection through to full participation in what would be a PSOE-Podemos joint administration, will be put forward.

### **Intensifying Battles**

What can we expect to see from the "popular unity" councils?

Their most urgent commitments are already being tackled. These include cuts in councillors' and mayors' wages to the level of skilled workers; emergency social support plans - including a ban on evictions and guarantees that power and water will not be cut off; halting

or cutting pointlessly expensive mega-projects; steps to guarantee a minimum income; and a citizens' audit of council debt and a reworking of municipal tax scales to provide relief to the poorest while extracting more from the richest.

In Cadiz, the council will investigate converting the city to renewable energy, a potential source of badly needed job creation in the city with Spain's highest unemployment – more than 70 per cent for under 25-year-olds.

None of these councils – all of which govern in minority – will have it easy. The PP wants them to be disasters, while the PSOE wants them to be seen as well-intentioned but without the know-how, experience and wisdom that comes from being the oldest political force in the Spanish state.

On the other hand, the new citizens' platforms, built through mass participation, enjoy huge popular support. Too crude and brutal an attack on them, as seems likely from the PP, could explode in the face of the aggressors. It could help the struggle for popular unity and resistance to rise to a higher level.

***Dick Nichols** is based in Barcelona and the European correspondent of [Green Left Weekly](#), where this article first appeared.*

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