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The Valencian autonomous elections of 2023: a new stage of the regional party system and two government crises

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Abstract
This study examines the 2023 autonomous elections in Valencia and their partisan and governmental implications. The elections occurred within a context defined by a weakened position of left-wing parties in the national government, strong campaign nationalization driven by the right, and pre-election polls predicting a tightly contested scenario. The results highlighted a reduction in party fragmentation, increased support for traditional parties, and greater polarization that advantaged the right-wing bloc. This was in line with broader trends observed in regions holding simultaneous elections. The electoral outcome marked the beginning of a new stage in the Valencian party system – as a coalition government was formed between the Popular Party of the Valencian Community (traditional right) and the Vox (radical right), the right returned to power after eight years in opposition. However, within a year, the government encountered two significant crises: the departure of Vox triggering swift government reorganization and the management of a natural disaster caused by a cut-off low in October 2024. These crises may have had important implications for both the government and the regional party system.

Keywords
Spain, Valencia, elections, political parties, party systems, government coalitions, government crisis

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1. Introduction

This article analyzes the autonomous elections of 2023 in the region of Valencia, as well as their consequences on the party system and governmental formation. The paper updates the body of literature related to the elections and the party system in Valencia (Abellán-López and Pardo-Beneyto 2018; Enguer and Barberà 2022; Franch 1995, 1996, 1998; Franch and Juan 2005; Martín Cubas and Ferrer 1999; Martín Cubas 2007, 2015; Martínez Sospedra 1999; Oñate 2013a, 2013b; Palop and Barberà 2019; Roig, 2019 2020).

Valencia was one of the 12 Spanish Autonomous Communities that held autonomous elections in 2023. These took place on Sunday, May 28, and their results at national level led the President of the Central Government, the socialist Pedro Sánchez, call for a snap general election. The Valencian elections had important internal implications, linked to the regional party system itself, but also external, linked to national phenomena.

Internally, the results of these elections initiated a new stage of the Valencian party system. The conservatives returned to the government after eight years in opposition; the two "protest parties", We Can (*Podemos*) and Citizens (*Ciudadanos*, Cs), which burst in 2015, were left without representation; and the two niche parties, Compromise Coalition (*Coalició Compromís*, CC) and Vox, consolidated their positions in the Valencian party ecosystem. At the national level, Valencia was the first Autonomous Community in which, after the elections, a coalition government was agreed upon between the traditional right and the radical right. This agreement opened the way to similar pacts in three other Autonomous Communities. The new Valencian coalition government experienced its first crisis only one year after its formation, when the radical right-wing party decided to leave the government. Moreover, only a few months after this rupture, a second crisis of the regional government took place. This was a consequence of the regional authorities' management of the cut-off low suffered by Valencia at the end of October 2024, one of the biggest climatic catastrophes in recent European history. This second crisis may have implications for governance and partisan competition in Valencia and has affected the political debate at the national level.

In order to address all these issues, this article is structured as follows. First, some of the territorial, institutional and political characteristics of Valencia are presented. Then, the context prior to the 2023 elections is reviewed. Subsequently, the results of those elections are analyzed, followed by the main characteristics of the new stage of the party system. The following section reflects, first, on the formation of the new regional government and then, on the two crises that, to date, have affected it: the exit of the radical right from the Executive, and the management of the consequences of the cut-off low. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

2. Valencia: territorial, institutional and political context

Valencia is one of the 17 Spanish Autonomous Communities. It is in a peripheral geographical position with respect to the capital of Spain (Madrid), at the eastern end of the Iberian Peninsula. Valencian society has certain distinguishing features within the Spanish context. It shares cultural and linguistic features with Catalonia, although it shows a very different political behaviour. In this sense, most of Valencians consider themselves regionalists, but within the Spanish national project. This brings Valencia closer to other Autonomous Communities such as Galicia and Navarra, but distances it from others such as Catalonia and the Basque Country (Barberà 2019: 44).

The region is subdivided into the provinces of Alacant, Castelló and Valencia, and its capital is the city of Valencia (third largest city in Spain). Valencia is the fourth most populated Autonomous Community of Spain with 5,210,600 inhabitants, the eighth largest with 23,254 km^2 (IGN 2024), and Spain's fourth largest economy in terms of GDP (INE 2024). Valencian self-government is recognized in the Statute of Autonomy of the Valencian Community, approved in 1982. Since the reform of the Statute in 2006, Valencia is considered a "historical nationality". Valencian self-government takes shape with the *Generalitat*. Its main institutions are the Council of the Generalitat, the executive body; the President of the Council, head of the Government, who appoints the members of the Council, the *consellers* (regional ministers); and the Valencian Courts, the legislative body. The Valencian Statute of Autonomy has some particularities that differentiate it from the statutes of other Autonomous Communities. Mainly: (1) the recognition of Valencian (Catalan) as its own and official language together with Spanish; (2) the capacity of the President to call elections (since 2006); and (3) the integration of Valencian civil law (however, this right is not currently recognized by the Spanish justice system).

The electoral system of Valencia has certain particularities. Like the rest of the regional electoral systems in Spain, the Valencian electoral system applies the d'Hondt formula, which generates proportional effects on large constituencies (such as Valencia itself). However, this proportionality is affected, in the Valencian case, by the legal barrier to access to the regional parliament. This barrier is particularly demanding for two reasons: first, because it is set at 5% (as opposed to 3% in the rest of the Autonomous Communities and in the Congress of Deputies); and second, because it is required for the whole community, and not for the provincial constituencies (as is the case in the rest of the Autonomous Communities) (Oñate 2013b: 139). These requirements have made it difficult for several parties to enter the regional parliament during the democratic period, especially the non-statewide parties (NSWPs) (Calvet 2010). In terms of turnout patterns, it is worth noting that Valencia has a higher electoral activation than the Spanish average. Although the general elections are the most participative, the autonomous elections have become more important over time, reaching levels like those of the national elections (Vizcaíno and García 2020: 275).

Since the recovery of democracy, the Valencian party system has been configured over four stages. The first two stages (1983–1991 and 1995–2011) are characterized by an imperfect bipartisanship, and the following two (2015–2019 and 2023 till present) by a moderate pluralism. These stages have followed similar dynamics to those of the Spanish party system. Therefore, the Valencian party system has been considered a subsystem of the Spanish one but endowed with certain singularities (Martín Cubas 2007; Oñate 2013a).

The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party-Socialist Party of the Valencian Country (*Partit Socialista del País Valencià*, PSPV), Valencian federation of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE) governed alone during the first stage (1983–1991). The main opposition party was Popular Alliance, re-founded as Popular Party (*Partido Popular*, PP) in 1989, and whose delegation in Valencia is called Popular Party of the Valencian Community (*Partido Popular de la Comunidad Valenciana*, PPCV). Other minor parties obtained representation: the Communist Party of the Valencian Country (*Partit Comunista del País Valencià*, PCPV) in 1983, and Democratic and Social Center (*Centro Democrático y Social*, CDS) and Valencian Union (Unió Valenciana, UV) in 1987. CDS disappeared from the regional parliament in 1991, and the PCPV merged into the United Left of the Valencian Country (*Esquerra Unida del País Valencià*, EUPV) in 1987. The PPCV won its first elections in 1995 led by Eduardo Zaplana, breaking the hegemony of the left (Franch 1996). The PPCV needed UV to form the first right-wing government since the restoration of democracy.

The second stage of the Valencian party system began with the first absolute majority of the PPCV in 1999 and lasted until 2011. The PPCV chained absolute majorities during the whole stage without any competitor in the right-wing space, as it managed to absorb UV shortly after they formed a government. Between 1999 and 2007, therefore, only three parties were represented in parliament: the PPCV, the PSPV and the EUPV. During these years, polarization was reduced, and there was a move towards an increasingly centripetal competition. However, in 2011 emerged CC, a left-wing NSWP, increasing to four the number of formations with parliamentary representation. This movement also contributed to regionalize the Valencian party system. Thus, the emergence of CC began to reverse the trends that had characterized this stage.

The third stage began after the 2015 elections, which gave victory to the left after more than twenty years. The main parties (PSPV and PPCV) experienced a fall, CC grew, and two new formations that had just burst onto the national scene emerged, Cs and Podemos taking advantage of the new fractures that emerged after the economic crisis. As fragmentation increased, the Valencian party system evolved towards moderate pluralism (Palop & Barberà, 2019; Roig, 2019). After the election results, the PSPV and CC agreed on a coalition government, led by the PSPV. WC rejected its entry into the government, but abstained so that the government could be formed. The left coalition was reissued in 2019, although this time it included United We Can *(Unidas Podemos*, UP), a

coalition between EUPV and Podemos. With the irruption of Vox in these elections, a radical right-wing party, there was a further increase in fragmentation and polarization. Finally, the fourth stage of the Valencian party system opened with the victory of the right wing in the autonomous elections of 2023.

3. The context of the elections

The political landscape in Spain in recent years has been strongly influenced by the consolidation of two main political blocs, particularly since the formation of the Pedro Sánchez government (PSOE) in 2018, following the motion of censure against Mariano Rajoy (PP). The left-wing bloc, led by the PSOE, has included Unidas Podemos (UP), which joined the coalition government in 2019, as well as the parliamentary support of various NSWPs, which have been crucial in securing majorities. In contrast, the right-wing bloc has been structured around the PP, with the support of Vox, a party that has solidified the radical right as a significant force in the Spanish political system since 2018. This bloc has also included Cs, which aligned itself with the right after opting not to form a coalition with the PSOE in 2019. The dynamics of the Spanish political blocs have significantly impacted regional politics, exerting a profound influence on the elections analyzed in this study.

The Presdient of the Generalitat since 2015, Ximo Puig (PSPV), announced the dissolution of the Courts on April 3, and called the next autonomous elections for May 28. With this move, Valencia returned to the common calendar of autonomous elections, since four years earlier, Puig moved them forward to make them coincide with the general ones. The electoral campaign for the regional and municipal elections of 2023 lasted, as usual, fifteen days. It began before mid-May and ended two days before election day. During the campaign period, as in the rest of the Spanish elections, live public debates were organized, which allowed the representatives of each party to openly expose their party's positions on each issue. The campaign was characterized, fundamentally, by the nationalization of the issues discussed, as well as by relatively high levels of polarization (Garmendia and Riera 2024: 237).

The municipal and autonomous elections of 2023 were strongly conditioned by the elections held between 2019 and 2023 in several Autonomous Communities (Garmendia and Riera 2024: 234). The results of the 2022 elections in Andalusia and Castile and León outlined some trends that were reflected in the results of the 2023 autonomous elections: a shift of the electorate to the right and an increase in the concentration of the vote in the traditional parties. The latter pointed to a slight regression towards bipartisanship (Fittipaldi 2022: 22–23). However, in Castile and León this trend would be tempered by two phenomena: the rise of the NSWPs and the growth of the radical right. Something that also happened in some regions in 2023.

In this general context, the polls in Valencia (GV 2024) predicted very close results between the right-wing bloc and the left-wing bloc. This made it impossible for the traditional parties, PSPV and PPCV, to reach an absolute majority, and they were forced to look for support to form a government.

The different parties ran for election under different circumstances and with different strategies. The left-wing parties (PSPV, CC and UP) came from a relatively successful government coalition since it was stable politically and performed well economically. Moreover, it was clear that, in the event of obtaining an electoral majority, revive the government coalition. However, the three formations faced different problems that compromised their electoral expectations.

The PSPV had to face the various criticisms that the right wing had been directing at the Socialist government at the national level. These criticisms focused on three aspects: the PSOE-led government's handling of the Covid-19 crisis; its coalition government pact with the radical left (UP); and its agreements with various NSWPs. In short, the PSPV had to fight against a nationalization of the campaign that threatened the re-emergence of the progressive coalition government. In turn, CC could not present as presidential candidate who was its charismatic leader since 2010, Monica Oltra, who since 2015 was councillor and vice president of the council. Oltra was charged for an alleged concealment of a sex crime by her ex-husband, and although she was later acquitted, media pressure drove her away from the political arena. CC was forced to look for Oltra's difficult replacement, deciding on Joan Baldoví, the party's deputy in the Congress of Deputies. In addition to its problems with the leadership, CC experienced several internal crises because of its electoral coalitions with other parties at the national level (Guillén, 2023). Finally, UP was experiencing significant attrition due to its participation in the national government, and due to the mediatization of some of the policies of the ministries it controlled. Especially, the “Trans law” on transgender rights, and also, the ‘Just Yes is Yes law’ on sexual consent. The erosion of UP was also contributed to by the emergence of a new left-wing platform, Sumar, which was formed by many former UP members. This weakness was picked up by the polls, which left the party at close margins (above and below) of 5%.

On the right, the PPCV presented as presidential candidate its leader, Carlos Mazón, president of the party since July 2021. Mazón and his team tried to nationalize the campaign, repeating the message that in Valencia had to begin “the end of Sanchismo” (in allusion to the Spanish president, the socialist Pedro Sánchez). Thus, the PPCV presented the autonomous elections as a first round of the general elections, which were to be held at the end of 2023. In turn, Vox came to the elections with good electoral prospects after its pact with the PP in Castile and León in 2022. However, Vox presented as candidate Carlos Flores, who was convicted in 2002 for gender violence. A priori, the appointment of Flores complicated its possible entry into a coalition government. Cs was in a worse situation after the hard electoral defeats in the previous general and autonomous

elections. This was reflected in many polls, which left the party below 5% of the support needed to enter the Courts. It should be noted that the PPCV tried to avoid talking about Vox during the whole campaign, and Mazón expressed his desire to govern alone on several occasions. On the other hand, and continuing with the usual course of action of the Valencian right since the Transition, conservative forces stirred up the Valencian identity conflict during the campaign. In this regard, they accused left-wing parties of being Catalanist, advocating a regionalist discourse of a Spanish nationalist nature.

For all these reasons, the elections in Valencia posed four great unknowns. First, if, as had happened in other Autonomous Communities, the two major parties were going to be strengthened. Secondly, whether the right-wing tendency that had begun in the 2019 elections, and which had also occurred in other Autonomous Communities, would be confirmed in these new elections. Third, what would be the performance of the parties competing with the traditional formations. And finally, what strategy would the right-wing parties develop to form a government in the event that the conservative bloc was to win a majority at the polls.

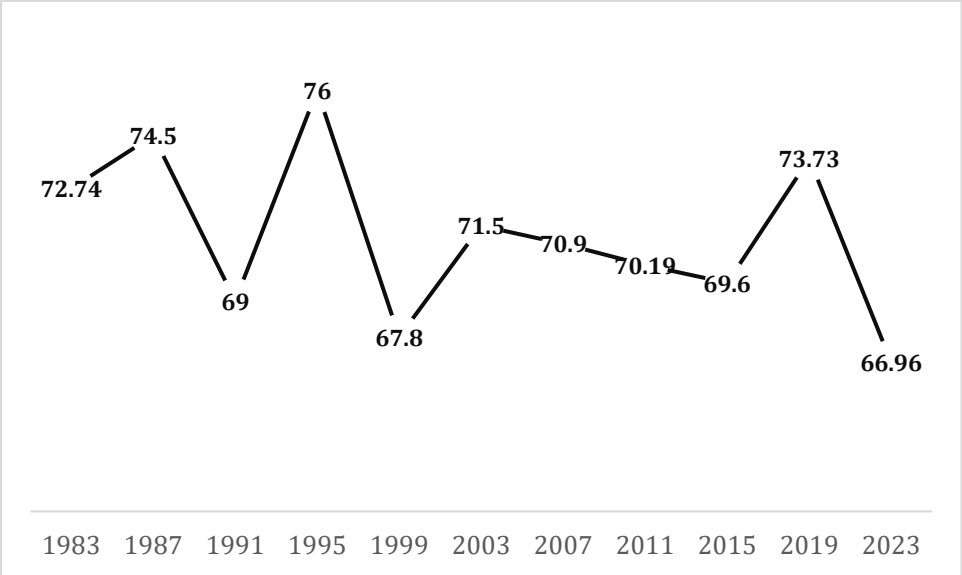
4. The elections and their consequences on the party system

The regional and municipal elections of 2023 were held on the last Sunday of May (28th), as is customary in this type of elections. They took place in 12 of the 17 Spanish Autonomous Communities: Aragon, Asturies, Balearic Islands, Canary Islands, Cantabria, Castile-La Mancha, Extremadura, La Rioja, Madrid, Murcia, Navarre, and Valencia. These elections coincided with the municipal elections, held throughout Spain.

At the national level, the votes confirmed the retreat of the members of the left-wing central government coalition between the PSOE and UP, and the growth of the main opposition party, the PP. These results caused a major shift to the right across the territory, prompting the Spanish President, Pedro Sanchez, to call a general election the following day (Garmendia and Riera 2024).

The results in Valencia did not deviate from this trend. The right-wing bloc surpassed the left-wing bloc by nearly six points and reached 53 of the 50 seats needed to achieve a parliamentary majority. At the municipal level, the right-wing won in the main cities of the community, recovering, among others, the capital (since 2015, governed by CC and PSPV). However, it is worth noting that the 2023 Valencian autonomous elections registered a relatively low turnout. Despite being the fourth Autonomous Community with the highest turnout that year (behind La Rioja, Castile-La Mancha and Extremadura), the turnout in Valencia decreased with respect to that recorded four years earlier (–6 .77 pp). The percentage of voters in 2023 was, moreover, the lowest in elections of this type since the recovery of democracy (see Figure 1). This should be considered in order to put the electoral results in context.

Figure 1. Turnout level in autonomous elections in Valencia (1983–2023)



Source: https://argos.gva.es/

In general terms, the election results in Valencia summarize the results of the 2023 autonomous elections. The two strongest parties, the PPCV and the PSPV, strengthened, as did Vox. However, Vox did not manage to overcome CC, nor did it manage to overcome other NSWPs in those Autonomous Communities where these parties are strong.

The big beneficiary of the elections was the PPCV, which doubled its results from four years earlier. The PPCV was the most voted party and achieved a lead of more than eight points over the second force, the PSPV. Mazón's strategy of nationalizing the autonomous elections, presenting them as a test to the Sanchez government, worked. The rise of the PPCV (+16.45%) connects directly with the collapse of Cs (–15.97 pp), which did not reach 2% of the votes. Eight years after its entry into the Courts, Cs disappeared from the regional map, in line with the poor results that the party reaped in the rest of the Spanish territory (Mannoni 2023).

For its part, the growth of Vox (+1.97 pp), which consolidated the most right-wing and Spanish and centralist electorate (Rodríguez-Teruel, Guillén and Tomás, 2023), was not enough for it to increase the seats obtained in 2019 (see Table 1). Be that as it may, the conviction of Carlos Flores in 2002 for male violence did not affect the performance of Vox, which with these results became the key to the future government of the community. It should be noted that, in terms of votes, the rise of the PPCV and Vox did not compensate for the fall of Cs. In this sense, the success of the right wing was due, rather than to a great mobilization of its bases, to a significant demobilization of the left.

Indeed, the left bloc (–60,000 votes) suffered a much more pronounced erosion than the right (–30,000 votes). The eight years of government, but above all the strongly nationalized and polarized climate, ended up taking its toll on the left. Among the forces of the ruling coalition, only the outgoing President's party, the PSPV, improved the 2019

results (+4.47 pp), adding four seats more than then. This growth was not enough to keep it in the government, given the decline of the other left-wing parties. CC was the third force in the elections, although it experienced a slight electoral decline (–2.11 pp) which caused it to lose two seats. More marked was the decline of UP (–4.46 pp), enough for it to lose its representation in the Courts. However, UP's situation was not as serious as that of Cs. UP still participated in the national government and had a more stable base of militants. However, the emergence of the Sumar platform at the national level threatened its future, also at the regional level. Be that as it may, the disappearance of UP from the Valencian regional map definitively removed any possibility of the left to keep the government of the community. In short, bad results for the progressive bloc that Puig blamed on the "state political polarization".

The change in these elections can be seen in the volatility patterns (see Table 1). The increase in total volatility is linked, especially to the disappearance of Cs and UP. On the other hand, the increase in intra-bloc volatility, and the decrease in inter-bloc volatility, reflect the anchoring of the different electorates in their respective ideological blocs.[2]

The Valencian elections of 2023 marked a turning point with respect to the political forces competing with the traditional parties. The new protest parties that emerged after the economic crisis followed (Morlino and Raniolo 2017) the trend of their European counterparts (Syriza, M5E, etc.), which went into decline after experiencing a successful electoral breakthrough. The poor electoral results plunged Cs into a serious crisis, and its recovery was now impossible. In fact, it was decided not to run in the July General elections. Although UP was also left out of the Courts, its situation was somewhat less critical than that of Cs. UP still participated in the national government and, moreover, had a more stable militant base. However, the emergence of the Sumar platform at the national level threatened its future at the regional level as well.

Meanwhile, the niche parties, which have a more defined ideological identity (Bischof 2017), performed better. Although it suffered a decline, CC maintained its presence in the Courts. However, with its return to the opposition (after having held government positions for eight years), it lost significant institutional power. In turn, although Vox's electoral rise was moderate, the party gained significant institutional power after its entry into the Council. This, however, threatened its status as an outsider party.

The election results of 2023 (Table 1) gave way to a new stage in the Valencian party system that put an end to the one that began in 2015. This new stage presented the following novelties. First and foremost, the return to government of the PPCV, although

[2] Volatility reflects net electoral shifts between consecutive elections driven by individual vote transfers. It includes total volatility across the party system, inter-bloc volatility reflecting changes between ideological blocs, and intra-bloc volatility capturing shifts among parties within the same bloc.

this time with the support of Vox. As we have already mentioned, the victory of the conservative bloc was not due to a very pronounced right-wing shift in the electorate, but to the significant decline of the left. The slight growth of the right at the electoral level was exponential in institutional terms.

Second, the decline in fragmentation indicates a shift in the distribution of political power: the ENEP (effective number of electoral parties) fell by 1.94%, and the ENPP (effective number of parliamentary parties) by 1.67%. As a result, there was a shift from hexapartidism to tetrapartidism. The reduction in fragmentation was caused by the exit of the protest parties, Cs and UP, but was limited by the stabilization of the niche parties, CC and Vox.

Table 1. Autonomous elections in Valencia 2023

	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats
Right-wing			
PPCV	881,893 (+373,359)	35.30 (+16.45)	40 (+21)
Vox	310,184 (+28,576)	12.41 (+1.97)	13 (+3)
Cs	37,095 (–433,581)	1.48 (–15.97)	0 (–18)
Left-wing			
PSPV	708,142 (+64,233)	28.34 (+4.47)	31 (+4)
CC	357,989 (–85,651)	14.33 (–2.11)	15 (–2)
UP	88,152 (–127,24)	3.52 (–4.46)	0 (–8)
Concentration	1,590,035 (+437,592)	63.64 (+20.92)	71 (+25)
Participation			
Number	2,498,090 (–199,844)		
%	66.96 (-6.77)		
Abstention			
Number	1,232,569 (+271,361)		
%	33.04 (+6.77)		
Competitivity			
Electoral	6.87 (+1.88)		
Parliamentary	9.09 (+1.01)		
Fragmentation			
ENEP	3.31 (–1.94)		
ENPP	4.17 (–1.67)		
Polarization	5.47 (+0.27)		
Volatility			
Total	24.83 (+8.77)		
Intra-blocs	3.25 (–1.73)		
Between-blocs	21.58 (+10.49)		

Source: https://argos.gva.es/

Third, the increase in vote concentration in the two main parties, from 42.72% in 2019 to 63.64% in 2023. This increase in vote concentration in the PPCV and PSPV was limited by

the strength of CC and Vox. The weight of these parties prevented a further strengthening of the two-party system in a context of decline of the protest parties.

Fourth, about competitiveness, the concentration of votes in the traditional parties was not reflected in a significant reduction in competitiveness compared to the previous stage (electoral +1.88, parliamentary +1.01), mainly due to the continued strength of CC, which limited the PSPV's increase in votes and seats.[3]

And finally, the slight increase in polarization (+0.27),[4] which reached a record high in the political history of the community. This increase is fundamentally linked to the weight of Vox, which has very right-leaning positions.

In short, the fourth stage of the Valencian party system maintains some features that differentiate it from the three previous stages. Far removed from the dynamics of the first two stages (1982–1995 and 1999–2011), this fourth stage has also differed substantially from the third (2015–2023). However, the Valencian party system remains on the margins of the moderate pluralism initiated in 2015.

After the disappearance of Cs and UP, the consolidation of the fourth stage of the Valencian party system will depend, fundamentally, on the future performance of CC and Vox. Although these parties have an apparently lower ceiling than the protest parties, they have demonstrated a greater capacity for institutionalization. The following is an analysis of some of the phenomena that could affect the future of the four leading parties in this fourth stage of the Valencian party system: PPCV, Vox, PSPV and CC.

5. The new right-wing government: an “express” agreement and two crises

5.1. Agreement for a coalition government and its subsequent break-up

As we have seen above, Mazón declared during the election campaign his intention to govern alone. This was maintained in the days immediately after the elections. Likewise, the PP tried not to make a pact with Vox before the general elections in order to avoid any erosion that might compromise its expectations at the national level. However, the PP quickly changed its strategy. After the disappearance of Cs, and in a logic of blocs, where the PP did not obtain an absolute majority, the temptation arose to govern with the radical right (Garmendia and Riera 2024: 247–248).

In Valencia, the PPCV sought an agreement with Vox to avoid the possibility of a failed investiture of Mazón. To do so, both parties had to resolve the thorny situation of Flores, whom the PP's campaign spokesman, Borja Sémper, publicly vetoed after stating

[3] Competitiveness shows the degree of rivalry between the main parties and is measured by the closeness of their respective results. An increase in the competitiveness index reflects a reduction in competitiveness.
[4] To analyze polarization trends, we apply Russell Dalton’s Ideological Polarization Index (DIP) to both the supply side (voter perceptions of party positions) and the demand side (voters’ self-placement).

that 'Anyone convicted of gender violence for us – in relation to the PP – is a red line'. Although this veto generated dissent in the PPCV, it was finally decided to exclude Flores from the Council and the presence of the Courts, and Santiago Abascal, national leader of Vox, reserved a place for him as head of the list for the national elections. Having overcome this stumbling block, the PPCV and Vox reached a 'firm agreement in principle' on 13 June, just two weeks after the elections. An agreement announced by Flores himself, but which was not staged. With the pact, Mazón secured the presidency of the Council of the Generalitat. This coalition is consistent with the work that shows that the pacts of the traditional right with the radical right can be the result of the convergence of some of their policies and the weight of radical right parties in the formation of coalitions (De Lange 2012).

The 'express' agreement made Valencia the first major Autonomous Community to be governed by a coalition between the PP and Vox. The pact paved the way for subsequent PP and Vox governments in Extremadura, Aragón and Murcia (in the Balearic Islands, the PP agreed to govern in a minority with Vox votes). The government pact in Valencia gave the presidency of the Council, the second vice-presidency and six out of nine Conselleries to the PPCV; and first vice-presidency, three Conselleries and the presidency of the Courts to Vox (see Table 2). The reshuffle of the government meant a reduction of two Conselleries with respect to the 2019-2023 legislature. The new composition of the Council was made public in the DOGV (Diari Oficial de la Generalitat Valenciana, i.e., Official Journal of the Valencian Government) on 13 July. On the same day, Mazon was sworn in as President at the Palace of the Government.

The agreements between PP and Vox implied explicit changes in what until then seemed to be positions shared by most parties in Spain on issues such as immigration, gender violence or public institutional support for the LGBTQ movement. They thus implied the normalisation of the radical right. In Valencia, moreover, the agreement contained measures with a strong anti-valencianist identity charge, such as, for example, the regression of Valencian in educational classrooms and public institutions.

Despite the synergies between the PPCV and Vox in Valencia, well symbolised by the good relationship between President Mazón and the first vice-president, Vicente Barrera, the Council suffered its first major crisis only a year after its formation. On 11 July 2024, Abascal announced the decision of Vox's National Executive Committee to withdraw its parliamentary support for the PP at the regional level, which directly affected Mazón's Council. The Vox leader justified this decision after accusing the PP of 'swindling' by 'applying socialist measures', and specifically attacking it for favouring 'the invasion of illegal immigration'.

Vox's decision responded to its strategy of straining relations with the PP following the party's exit from the ECR group and its entry into Patriots for Europe, led by Viktor Orbán. With this move, Vox presented itself as an alternative to both the PP and the PSOE, identifying them as allies, and harshly pointing out the agreements they might reach (for

example, the renewal of the General Council of the Judiciary). As part of this strategy, Vox took advantage of the agreement reached on 10 July by the Sectoral Conference on Childhood and Adolescence, represented by regional leaders of the PSOE and the PP, to voluntarily distribute 347 immigrant minors located in the Canary Islands among all the Autonomous Communities, in order to break with the PP. A far-reaching tactic with which Vox tried to gain projection and set its own profile in order to mobilise voters to the right of the PP.

Minutes after Abascal's announcement, Mazón dismissed the three members of the Vox Council, before they had a chance to resign. However, he kept the president of the Courts, also a Vox member. Early the next day, the President announced the restructuring of the Council, which became entirely dominated by the PPCV. He dissolved the Department of Culture, headed by Barrera, and merged it with the Department of Education, while Sport became part of the Presidency (see Table 2).

5.2. The management of the cut-off low: second governmental crisis

The second major crisis of Mazón's Council came a few months after the first one, as a result of the PPCV's management of the cut-off low that Valencia suffered at the end of October 2024. On the 29th of this month, heavy rains caused numerous rivers and ravines to overflow, generating heavy flooding that affected, to varying degrees, more than 80 municipalities in the community. Even though, since the morning of that day, various organisations had reported the danger of the situation, President Mazón announced at a press conference at 1 p.m. that the cut-off low was moving away from Valencia, and that by 6 p.m. it would have disappeared. It was only at 8 p.m., when many villages were already completely flooded, that the regional authorities sent out a telephone alert to citizens not to leave their homes. As a result, more than 220 people died.

The spotlight quickly turned to Mazón's management. He was criticised for acting too late and for providing contradictory information on where he was when the floods were occurring. He was also criticised for having eliminated the Valencian Emergency Unit, created by the previous Valencian government, which was intended to manage these catastrophes. Other regional authorities were singled out: Emilio Argüeso, the Regional Secretary for Emergencies, who was incommunicado until the day after the disaster; the Regional Minister for Education, José Antonio Rovira, for not closing schools in the province of Castellón on the 30th, where the cut-off low was headed; the councillor for Innovation, Industry, Trade and Tourism, Nuria Montes, who announced that she would not let the relatives of the victims who did not have documents into the morgue; the councillor for Justice and responsible for emergencies, Núria Martínez, who declared that she was unaware of the mobile phone alert system until the day of the cut-off. A long list of grievances was followed by numerous excuses from those responsible.

The management of the cut-of low served as an opportunity for the Valencian authorities and the opposition to the Spanish government of Sánchez, on the one hand, and the opposition to the government of Mazón, on the other, to reproach each other for their management. The main bone of contention was the discrepancies regarding the attribution of responsibilities to the different administrations (regional and state). This contributed to increasing political polarisation at the national level.

Table 2. Council de la Generalitat Valenciana XI legislatura (2023 till present)

Presidency	Carlos Mazón, PPCV	
Conselleria	Holder	Political party
First Vice-Presidency (dissolved on 12/07/24)	Vicente Barerra	Vox
Culture and Sport (dissolved on 12/07/24)	Vicente Barerra	Vox
Second Vice-Presidency	Susana Camarero Francisco José Gan Pampols (since 23/11/24)	PPCV Independent
Social Services, Equality and Housing	Susana Camarero	PPCV
Spokesperson for the Council	Ruth Merino Peña Susana Camerero (since 23/11/24)	Independent PPCV
Economic and Social Recovery (created on 23/11/24)	Francisco José Gan Pampols	Independent
Economy and Treasury	Ruth Merino Peña	Independent
Justice and Public Administration	Elisa Nuñez Salomé Pradas (desde 12/07/24) Núria Martínez (since 23/11/24)	Vox PPCV Independent
Health	Marciano Gómez	PPCV
Education, Culture, Universities and Employment	José Antonio Rovira	PPCV
Agriculture, Water, Livestock and Fisheries	José Luis Aguirre Miguel Barrachina (since 12/07/24)	Vox PPCV
Environment, Infrastructure and Territory	Salomé Pradas Vicente Martínez (since 12/07/24)	PPCV PPCV
Innovation, Industry, Trade and Tourism	Nuria Montes Marián Cano (since 23/11/24)	PPCV PPCV
Emergency and Interior (created on 23/11/24)	Juan Carlos Valderrama	PPCV

Source: https://www.gva.es/

On 9 November a mass demonstration was held in the Valencian capital demanding Mazón's resignation. The President, who was also criticised by some of the Spanish right-wing media, as well as numerous international media, did not resign. Instead, on 15 November he announced a restructuring of the Council that included a Vice-Presidency for Economic and Social Recovery and a Department for Emergencies. Three days later, he announced the dismissal of Nuria Montes, who was replaced by Marián Cano (PPCV), and on 19 November he appointed the military officer Francisco José Gan Pampols to the newly created vice-presidency. A day later, Mazón dismissed Salomé Pradas (PPCV) and divided the Department of Emergencies and Interior into the Department of Emergencies, headed by Juan Carlos Valderrama (PPCV), and the Department of Justice, headed by the independent Núria Martínez. On 22 November, the Council's changes (see Table 2) were published in the DOGV. The pressure on Mazón persisted, and in the city of Valencia, successive demonstrations calling for his resignation took place over the ensuing months. Although less attended than the first, these demonstrations still saw considerable participation.

This second crisis of Mazón's Council could have consequences for the Valencian party system. There is evidence that natural disasters harm parties in government (Achen and Bartels 2017), which benefits opposition parties. In particular, they would reinforce green parties, which put a premium on their environmentalist agenda (Hoffmann et al. 2022), and also radical right-wing populist parties (Cremaschi and Stanig 2024), which can channel the anti-party sentiments that often follow crises (Caiani and Císař 2018). In this line, the polls published after the cut-off low point out that Vox and CC are the parties that would grow the most in Valencia and that there could be a change in the parliamentary majority (CIS 2024). Movements that would undoubtedly alter the patterns of the current party system. It is not clear, however, that these trends can be sustained over time.

6. Conclusions

The results of the 2023 autonomous elections in Valencia were in line with the results in other Spanish Autonomous Communities. Following the general trend, Valencia saw a rise of the right-wing bloc, a reduction in fragmentation and an increase in polarization and support for the traditional parties. In Valencia, however, this trend has some nuances. First, the rise of the right was electorally moderate. This was mainly due to the fact that it had already increased in 2019, but also to a significant demobilization of the left. Second, the reduction in fragmentation, which responds to the decline of the protest parties (Cs and UP), was limited, not only by the weight of Vox, but also by that of an NSWP, CC, as was the case in other regions.

The election results initiated the fourth stage of the Valencian party system. The new stage moves away from the logic of the imperfect bipartisanship that characterized

the Valencian party system in its first two stages (1983–1995 and 1999–2011), and also presents some differences with the third stage (2015–2023), which opened the way to moderate pluralism. While remaining on the fringes of this moderate pluralism, the fourth stage of the Valencian party system differs from the third stage by describing a less fragmented, more polarized system, with a greater weight of the two main parties (PPCV and PSPV) and, above all, by the return of the right-wing to the regional government. The future of the fourth stage of the Valencian party system will depend, fundamentally, on the future performance of CC and Vox.

The government pact between the PPCV and Vox normalized the radical right and served as an example for three other Autonomous Communities. However, the government experienced two major crises. The first was due to Vox's exit from the Council, as a result of the party's decision at the national level to break all its regional agreements with the PP in July 2024. This forced the PPCV to restructure the Council and to govern alone. The second crisis of the regional government came shortly after, due to the PPCV's handling of the cut-off low that Valencia suffered at the end of October of that year. This exceptional circumstance forced the regional president to carry out a second restructuring of the Council, and his image was considerably eroded. Both crises could compromise the stability of the PPCV government, and thus alter the foundations of the fourth stage of the Valencian party system.

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