

## 2016 REGIONAL ELECTION IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY: RESULTS AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR PATTERNS

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### ***Right-wing Nationalist Party PNV wins the election***

The Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) won the regional election held on 25 September 2016, once again with the highest number of votes (37.2%). Despite the increase in abstention, the PNV obtained 13,500 votes more than in 2012 (an increase of 3.3 points). At a considerable distance, left-wing EH-Bildu remains second (21%) while losing 50,000 votes, that is, 3.4 points. Following the results of 2012, the two nationalist forces are back to the top of the most voted parties in the region but now the imbalance favors the PNV.

The PNV is now the major nationalistic force. Voters found the option of an agreed sovereignty more viable than EH-Bildu's pro-independence position. In addition, the stability offered by the Urkullu Government (PNV) has been the refuge of the most moderate vote, fearing instability.

### BASQUE COUNTRY: Results of the 2016 Regional Election

	Electoral roll	% abstention	
Residents in the Basque Country	1,714,281	37.7 (+3.8)	
Electoral roll, absent residents included	1,784,414	40.0 (+3.9)	
	Votes	% votes	Deputies
PNV	397,664	3.2 (+3.3)	28 (+1)
EH-Bildu	224,254	21.0 (-3.4)	18 (-3)
Elkarrekin-Podemos	156,671	14.7 (+10.5)*	11 (+11)
PSE-EE	126,139	11.8 (-7.0)	9 (-7)
PP	107,357	10.1 (-1.4)	9 (-1)
C's	21,362	2.0 (+0.1)**	0 (-1)

\* Variation with respect to IU + EB-B

\*\* Variation with respect to UPyD

Sources: National Statistics Institute (electoral roll). Government of the Basque Country (website, electoral results)

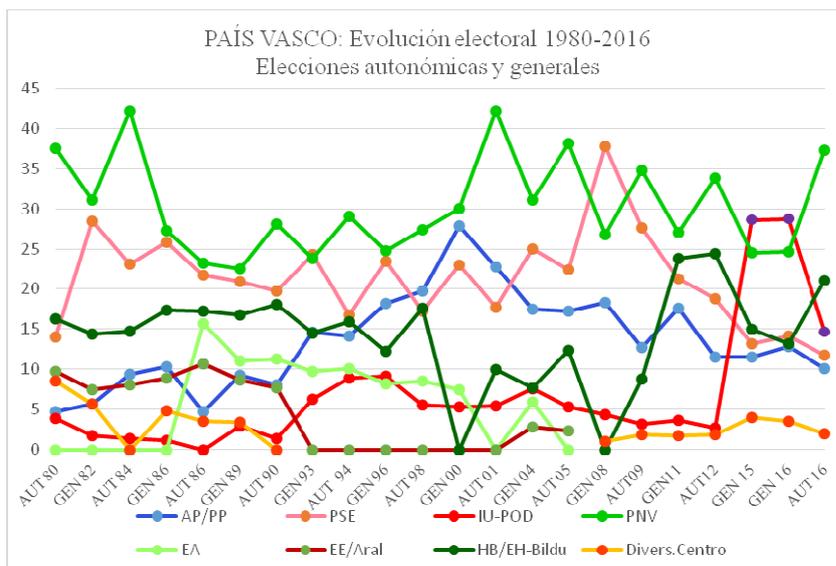
Left-wing Elkarrekin-Podemos' first election brought them to the third place (14.7% of the votes) with 110,000 more votes than those obtained by groups formed around Unidad Popular-IU and Ezker Batua-Berdeak. Surprisingly enough, they were the first political force in the general elections of 20 December 2015 and 26 July 2016. Surveys show that their new voters come mainly from the Socialist Party and from abstentions, as well as from previous Bildu and PNV voters attracted by the change and social transformation proposed by Elkarrekin-Podemos to fight against inequalities.

The Socialist Party (PSE) and the Popular Party (PP) were the fourth and fifth most voted parties. The PSE lost 90,000 votes with respect to 2012 –when they suffered a serious setback with respect to 2009. In the national sphere, the Socialists lost their leadership in 2010 in their efforts to put an end to the erosion of the welfare state. Since then they have been experiencing a continuing loss of voter support, reaching the lowest levels in 2016. On top of this, internal struggles within the party to build an alternative to the PP government, as well as their detachment from the approach based on a multi-national state, are two relevant specific factors that explain their loss of voters in the Basque Country.

The Popular Party still plays a secondary role in the Basque Country (10% of the votes). It is the worst result obtained in both general and regional elections since their “refounding” as Partido Popular. They have been going down since 2001 and the results obtained since 2012 bring the party back to their “dark times” during the 80s.

Finally, Ciudadanos (2%) only obtained very residual results.

The following chart shows the electoral evolution in the Basque Country from 1980 to 2016, including both general and regional elections.



\* In 2016, the sum of the results of IU-Podemos is marked in red.

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### ***High abstention rates***

The 2016 regional election in the Basque Country experienced an abstention rate of 40%. Since 1980, 40 elections (European elections aside) have been held in the Basque Country, with a regular abstention rate between 29 and 36% –only in 10 occasions it has been lower or higher. The level reached during this election is thus amongst the highest abstention rates recorded.

Usually, when there are expectations of political change elections foster mobilization and intense competitive campaigns. In the absence of other factors that might lead the other way, these kinds of elections record high levels of voter turnout. The 2016 election in the Basque Country does not follow this pattern. The PNV (in the Government to date) has carried out a moderate, low intensity campaign. The other major parties (that is, EH-Bildu, PSE, Podemos and PP) are used to being forced to sign a pact with the PNV to join the government, so there was no reason for the PNV to launch a strong campaign. In fact, it was the other parties who competed against each other to get better results... always after the PNV.

These parties did not come up with any coalition agreement or approach which could serve as an alternative to the PNV. On the contrary, their institutional perspective was rather a coalition or pact with the PNV. To put it briefly, no specific incentives were created to foster voter mobilization and consequently achieve, for some, the change needed and for others, the defense of a situation they consider threatened.

All elections record ups and downs regarding participation if compared to previous elections. Now, survey results show that, while all options have lost votes from citizens who prefer abstaining, PP and PSE have experienced the most remarkable demobilization flows with respect to both the 2012 regional election and the recently held 2016 general election. On the other hand, PNV and Elkarrekin-Podemos have been the most capable parties to mobilize previous abstentions.

### ***Dual behavior or process of change?***

Results have been clearly different to those registered during the last general election. Systematic changes and changes in behavior between general and regional elections are usual. However, high turnout in the general elections and high abstention in the regional ones, as well as the transfer of votes to national parties in the general elections and to autonomic parties in the regional ones, have had a limited expression. In the past, ETA terrorism and the different strategies related to this phenomenon drew a dividing line between the parties additional to the right/left-wing division and to the nationalistic controversy. These divisions created a rigid, almost impermeable political situation.

The end of terrorism and the changes in the party system at national level entailed significant changes in the Basque party system, with transformation processes and

higher volatility. In this new context, the regional election results showed important changes with regard to the general election held 3 months earlier. Basque parties (PNV and EH-Bildu) gained support at the expense of national parties.

In this regional-national relationship, the factors fostering this dual behavior will stay. However, their expression in terms of dimension of stability will be conditioned by the political situation in both institutional levels, as well as by the realignment of the parties creating more volatility.

### ***The new Government***

With 28 seats, the PNV needs 10 more to reach an absolute majority. Nevertheless, the investiture of Urkullu does not seem to be problematic. According to the Basque legislation, in the first round the investiture vote requires an absolute majority to be successful, but in the second round the candidate with more support will be the one appointed and no vote against is possible. This means that the 28 votes of the PNV will suffice for Urkullu to become *lehendakari* (President of the Basque Country) again, while no alternative majority seems feasible.

Given the composition of the Basque Parliament, it does not seem likely that the PNV will have problems to govern. He has different options to face the lack of an absolute majority: investiture agreements, pacts during the term of office, or pacts with different forces according to the matter at issue or the institutional level. Nothing new to the PNV.

It should be underlined that the PNV has pacts with the PSE in different municipalities and in the three provincial councils, and that the Socialists have given their support to the Urkullu Government. This will most probably lead to a pact PNV-PSE. However, it will not be determined until the severe internal crisis facing the Socialist Party at national level is solved.

On the other hand, it must be taken into account that the supporters of the right to decide are a majority in the Basque Parliament, the greatest majority ever. Despite the fact that PNV, EH-Bildu and Elkarrekin-Podemos share this idea, they differ in its specific conception and materialization. But, if the PP continues to develop the centralizing policy carried out during the last term of office, the option for the nationalistic parties to reach agreements will be reinforced.