

# Spanish Socialist Workers' Party

**Spanish Socialist Workers' Party**, Spanish Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), Spanish socialist political party.

## HISTORY

Spain's oldest political party, the PSOE was founded in 1879 by Pablo Iglesias, a Madrid typesetter and union organizer. Iglesias was also the founder in 1888 of the party's affiliated trade union confederation, the General Union of Workers (Unión General de Trabajadores; UGT). The party grew slowly at first, partly because the UGT had to compete with the anarchist trade union confederation in organizing the working class. It was also hampered by its rigid Marxist ideology, its fierce anticlericalism, the small size of the Spanish working class, and the political strength of other left-wing competitors. The PSOE elected its first parliamentarian in 1910, but the party was further weakened by a split in 1921 that produced the Communist Party of Spain. By the time the Spanish Republic was proclaimed in 1931, however, the PSOE had become the country's largest political party, despite schisms between reformist social democrats and revolutionary socialists. The PSOE participated in coalition governments during the years 1931–36 and was among the principal supporters of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), with the head of the UGT, Francisco Largo Caballero, serving as prime minister of Republican Spain during 1936–37. The PSOE was banned following the victory of the Francisco Franco-led Nationalist forces and the fall of the Republic in 1938.

The PSOE lacked the organization and unity to survive during most of Franco's long dictatorship (1936–75), during which the party had little presence inside Spain. In the mid-1950s a new generation of post-Civil War Spaniards revived the party, and in 1974 the young Sevillian Felipe González and his supporters managed to wrest control from the older generation of leaders who were still bickering in exile. Subsequently the charismatic González was able to rapidly increase the party's membership.

The PSOE was legalized in 1977, and in that year's elections—the first held since the return of democracy—the party captured nearly 30 percent of the vote, establishing it as the second largest party in Spain and the official opposition. As a result, the PSOE played a crucial role in drafting Spain's new democratic constitution in 1978 and in campaigning for its ratification by the electorate.

Convinced that the PSOE's radical socialist platform had contributed to its failure to win the elections of 1977 and 1979, González favoured major ideological and organizational changes. After delegates to the national party conference refused to endorse his change of course in May 1979, González resigned as party leader only to regain control of the party at an emergency party congress in September. Later he secured overwhelming approval for his policy and

structural changes, which weakened extremist elements and purged much of the Marxist verbiage from the party's platform.

With a centrist platform and a unified and unchallenged leadership, the PSOE swept the 1982 elections, winning a large majority in the Cortes (Spanish legislature) and becoming the first single party to win a governing majority. As prime minister, González led the PSOE to victory in the next three elections. The PSOE enacted numerous reforms during its tenure in power from 1982 to 1996. It professionalized and tamed the armed forces and made important contributions to the consolidation of Spanish democracy. It negotiated Spain's entry into the European Economic Community (later succeeded by the European Union) and, despite the party's traditional rejection of participation, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization military alliance. The PSOE also restructured the country's economy to make it more competitive, consolidated the process of regional devolution, reduced the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in education, and implemented a wide range of social reforms.

A number of factors slowly eroded support for the PSOE. Economic restructuring made the Spanish economy more competitive but increased unemployment, embittering relations between the party and the trade union movement. A number of high-profile corruption scandals and the discovery of a secret war against Basque terrorism projected an image of an aloof and arrogant government. Within the PSOE there was a growing movement for greater democracy and accountability, and in 1989 it failed to win a parliamentary majority and retained power only with the support of regional parties. In 1996 the PSOE lost power to the conservative Popular Party (PP), and González resigned as party leader the following year. Defeated again by the PP in 2000, the PSOE led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero returned to power in elections in the aftermath of the March 11, 2004, terrorist bombings in Madrid. In alliance with regional parties, the PSOE under Zapatero pursued market-friendly economic policies but also implemented an ambitious agenda of social reforms, including the liberalization of divorce laws, the legalization of same-sex marriage, and a ban on smoking in public places. In addition, Zapatero followed through on his campaign pledge to remove Spanish troops from Iraq that were deployed during the Iraq War. He also supported a reform of the autonomy statute for Catalonia in 2005 and the declaration the following year of that region as a nation. The PSOE won a second term in the 2008 general elections, defeating the PP. Zapatero pledged to boost Spain's slumping economy and continue his agenda of social and political reform. As Spain became one of the central players in the European debt crisis, support for Zapatero and the PSOE plunged. Soaring unemployment, widespread protest, and staggering PSOE losses in local elections in 2011 inspired Zapatero to schedule early elections in November of that year. In the event, the PSOE had its worst showing since the party's legalization in 1977, and the PP won a clear majority in parliament. The PSOE had an even poorer showing in the 2015 parliamentary election, as it dropped from 110 seats in 2011 to 90

seats, finishing second to the PP, which fell from 186 seats in 2011 to 123 seats. Both traditionally dominant parties lost strength to surging third parties.

## POLICY AND STRUCTURE

During Spain's transition to democracy in the 1970s, the PSOE's party platform and internal structure were still characteristic of traditional working-class parties. The official ideology was Marxist, and the party structure gave considerable power to trade unionists and rank-and-file members. Over the final two decades of the 20th century, however, the party moderated its policies, becoming a centrist social democratic party and isolating its Marxist elements. Once in office, the PSOE supported European integration, the Western military alliance against the Soviet Union, and a mixed economy. After its win in the 2004 elections, the PSOE became more radical and its ideals often clashed with those of the PP and the Roman Catholic Church.

The PSOE is composed of local *agrupaciones* (branches) grouped into provincial and regional organizations. Party membership levels rose dramatically in the late 1970s, increasing from 3,500 members in 1974 to 50,000 in 1977, and steadily grew thereafter. In the early 21st century, the PSOE had some 400,000 members. The party is governed by the 25-member Federal Executive Committee, essentially the cabinet of the party, and the 255-member Federal Committee, a type of standing legislature that meets several times each year. In the late 1990s, internal democratic reforms were introduced, including the establishment of a primary system that allowed party members to vote directly for local and regional leaders and to select the PSOE candidate for prime minister.

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