

The structure of Government

Spain



Spain overview

Population 47 million¹
Population per sq km 94²

Government expenditure as % of GDP 41%³

Place in World League

people's trust in government ⁴	31	(30%)
people's satisfaction with life ⁵	24	(55%)
GDP per capita ⁶	44	
Legatum Prosperity Index ⁷	25	
Freedom in the World ⁸	20	

Note: all data in this report are pre-2020 to exclude the effects of Covid-19

Governance Overview

Spain is structured according to a classical separation of legislative, executive and legal powers: Parliament, the executive and the judiciary.

There are six levels of governance in Spain: national; Autonomous Community; provincial; regional; municipal; and parish.

Electoral System

Elections at all levels of government use a proportional system. Seats in the Senate are distributed according to two methods:

- Each Community (except the islands and cities, which receive fewer) are allocated seats according to the share of the vote.
- Each legislature designates senators—one per Community, plus one for every million inhabitants. Thus, regional legislatures have a direct role in electing the upper house at national level.

Direction of devolution

Top-down: The Spanish constitution makes explicit many areas that fall within competence of the State and sub-State levels. Any competences not explicitly referenced may be claimed by Autonomous Communities, but these must be set out explicitly in their constitutions. These statutes may be reformed by Autonomous Communities, but this requires bilateral agreement with and approval by both regional and national legislatures. The Constitutional Court has the power to invalidate any reforms it considers unconstitutional.

Political style

Although the main centre-left and centre-right parties have alternated in government since the early 1980s, minority government, and formal and informal agreements with smaller parties, is a common occurrence.

Income equalisation

Reducing economic imbalances between the different territories is a policy aim set out in the Constitution. There are three funds dedicated to achieving such equalisation⁹:

- The Fund to Guarantee Fundamental Public Services, such as health and education, accounts for 75% of Autonomous Communities' finance from central government. They are based on demographic characteristics.
- The remaining 25% of transfers come, first, from the Sufficiency Fund based on Community income.
- And, second, from the Convergence Funds which are designed to reduce economic and demographic inequality between Communities.

Unusual features

Legislation can be proposed members of Congress and Senate, Communities and citizens (initiatives with 500,000 signatories), as well as by the government.

Parliament

	Congress of Deputies	Senate
Members	350	266
Population per member	134,000	226,000
Full or part time	full time	full time

Pay ratio to national average wage	2.5 ¹⁰	2.5 ¹¹
Weeks of sittings per year	26	26
Elections		
Electorate	province	province & legislature
Frequency	4 years	4 years
Turnout last time	76% ¹²	

Legislation process¹³

The legislation process follows three phases:

- Presentation of proposals: the government usually brings forward a proposed law.
- Scrutiny of proposals: the relevant committee in the Congress then considers the proposal, and can propose amendments. A first vote is then held if amendments are proposed to the entirety of the proposal. Otherwise, committees recommend a version of the text following votes on various amendments. The text then returns to the Congress for approval or amendment, before it is referred to the Senate.
- The procedure in the Senate is similar, but must be completed within two months whereas there is no time limit in the Congress. If the Senate makes any changes, the law has to return to the Congress for approval.
- Ratification of proposals: once approved by the Congress, they are sent to the King for final approval. The King or the government can propose further changes, suspend its progress or return it to Congress for further consideration.

Responsibilities¹⁴

Civil legislation, defence, economic planning, energy, environmental protection, fisheries, foreign trade, Immigration, intellectual property, international relations, judicial system, labour, law, maritime activities, monetary system, public works social security, referendums, state finances and inter-community transport.

Of total government expenditure, the amount

spent by national government	46%
for mandated grants	8% ¹⁵

Source of Funds

raised locally	100%
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Who decides

Tax type: Government
Tax rates: Government

Who collects tax

National Tax Agency

Autonomous Communities

Governance

The level of government below parliament is Autonomous Communities (Communities). Each has its own constitution, government and legislature, mirroring the national institutions.

Communities' right to self-governance derives directly from the Constitution, which guarantees the right to autonomy of the regions and nationalities within Spain. The indivisibility of the Spanish state is also protected in the Constitution.

Unusual features

Some Communities are made up of only one province, which means that their provincial governments are combined. Some cities have generally fewer competences than Communities.

Communities

Number	19
Population, average	2.5 million

Community government

Members	71
Population per member, average	33,500
Full or part time	most full time
Pay ratio to national average wage	2.0
Weeks of sittings per year	36

Elections

Electorate	Provinces within a Community
Frequency	4 years
Turnout last time ¹⁶	66%

Legislation process

The legislative process in Communities is similar to that at national level.

Responsibilities

Agriculture, cultural institutions, Community economic development, environmental protection, forestry, health, inland fisheries, ports and airports, Community public works, social assistance, sport and leisure, tourism, town planning, intra-Community transport and water. Mandated by the Spanish Constitution.

Expenditure as a % of¹⁷

total government expenditure	36%
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Main type of taxes¹⁸

Income, VAT and sales taxes.

Source of funds¹⁹

Raised locally	81%
Mandated grants	19%

Who decides

Tax type	National and Community governments
Tax rates	National and Community governments

Who collects tax

National and Community governments

Sub-Community government

Overview

The Constitution lays down that Communities are responsible for the organisation of their sub-Community government. They have a high degree of autonomy in deciding the structures and responsibilities of their subsidiary governments. This has led to great variations in the structures of Sub-Community governments.

As a consequence, useful data cannot be provided in the same detail. However, the following gives a broad picture of the amount of power that has been devolved.

Typically, power is devolved from Communities to four further levels of government: Provincial; Regional, Metropolitan and Associations; Municipalities; and Parishes.

Provincial Councils

Governance

The level of government below Community is a Province. 85% of provinces have Provincial Councils. The island governments have Island Councils.

Provinces are established by the State, as set out in the Constitution, but their organisation and functioning is the responsibility of Communities.

Provinces

Number	52
Population, average	900,000

Provincial government

Members	28
Population per member, average	32,000
Full or part time	most full time
Pay ratio to national average wage	-
Weeks of sittings per year	-

Elections

Electorate	provincial
Frequency	4 years
Turnout last time	67% ²⁰

Legislation process

The legislative process in Provincial Councils is similar to that at national level.

Responsibilities

Infrastructure maintenance and public services such as waste collection and management, and water.

Expenditure as a % of

total government expenditure ²¹	5%
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Source of funds²²

Raised locally	78%
Mandated grants	22%

Main type of taxes

Property, sales and vehicle taxes.²³

Who decides

Tax type	Communities
Tax rates	Provincial Councils

Who collects tax

Provincial Councils

Regional Government

Governance

The level of government below Province is Region, which consist of lower levels of government. These include:

- Regional Councils, which exist in just four Communities
- Metropolitan Areas for two large cities
- Associations, which exist in every Community.

Regional governments are mandated by their Community governments.

Regional government	Region	Metropolitan	Association
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Number ²⁴	82	3	967
Population ,average ²⁵	105,000	2.7 million	<5,000

Elections

Electorate	regional
Frequency	4 years
Turnout last time	-

Legislation process

The legislative process in Provincial Councils is similar to that at national level.

Responsibilities

Culture, education, environment, parks, social services, sport, tourism, water and youth services.

Regions expenditure

as a % of total government expenditure²⁶ 0.4%

Source of funds²⁷

Raised locally	54%
Mandated grants	46%

Main types of taxes

Limited powers, but some property tax income. Most locally raised income from service charges

Who decides

Tax type: Autonomous Community governments
Tax rates: Autonomous Community and Provincial governments

Who collects tax

Autonomous Community and Provincial governments

Municipal Government

Governance

Municipalities are the level below Regional Government. Their autonomy is guaranteed by the Constitution, which prescribes their structures as Town Councils of mayors and councillors. Mayors can either be elected directly by the municipal population or indirectly through councillors elected by the population.

Municipalities

Number ²⁸	8,131
Average population per Municipality	5,800

Elections

Electorate	Municipalities
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Frequency	4 years
Turnout last time ²⁹	65%

Legislation process

Municipalities are generally governed by committees made up of municipal mayors and councillors selected by the mayor.³⁰ Small municipalities sometimes use an open council structure, with an elected mayor who governs in directly with an assembly of local elected representatives, from whom the mayor can appoint deputies.

Responsibilities³¹

Public services, planning, environment, water, infrastructure, local police, fire, traffic, tourism, public health, culture, sport, education and technology.

Municipal expenditure

as a % of total government expenditure³² 10%

Source of funds³³

Raised locally	68%
Mandated grants	32%

Main types of taxes

Property and vehicle tax

Who decides

Tax type: Communities

Tax rates: Municipalities³⁴

Who collects tax

Municipalities

Parish government

Governance

Parishes are sub-divisions of municipalities. There is at least one in all but seven provinces.³⁵

Parish governments

Number of parishes ³⁶	3,358
Population per parish ³⁷	150

Elections

Electorate	Parish
Frequency	4 years
Turnout last time	-

Legislation process³⁸

Parish governments are run by directly elected mayors, who form councils alongside two to four members of the Parish community elected proportionally to reflect the share of votes received by different local parties.

Responsibilities

Beaches, building and opening licenses, cemeteries, children's services, culture, elderly care, local medical offices, parks and gardens, protected housing, public schools, rural roads, public safety, sewerage, sports, street lighting, urban planning, urban roads, waste collection, water supply, women's services and youth services.

Parish expenditure

as a % of total government expenditure³⁹ 0.1%

Source of funds

Raised locally	40%
Mandated grant	60%

Main types of taxes

No taxation powers. Locally raised income mainly from service charges

Who decides

Tax type: Communities
Tax rates: Municipalities

Who collects tax

Municipalities

Further reading

[Spanish Government: Organisation of the State](#)

[Spanish Constitution \(in English\)](#)

[Reforming Intergovernmental Relations in the UK: Case Study Annex - Spain](#)

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1

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