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Spain Pre-Civil War

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**The Spanish Pre-Civil War**

Nonmonotonic electoral results in which the loser in popular votes becomes the winner in seats can help to explain high levels of political bipolarization that, under certain circumstances, may lead to revolution, *coup d'état*, and civil war. This was the case in the Spanish Second Republic, which was established in April 1931 in reaction to the previous involvement of the Monarchy in a military dictatorship.

A few weeks after the Republic was proclaimed, the Provisional Government decreed new electoral rules for parliamentary elections to the Cortes. As was explained by the Prime Minister, Manuel Azaña, in a further discussion in Parliament, a majoritarian electoral system was chosen in order to produce a clear parliamentary majority upon 'the indestructible conviction that Republicans and Socialists were the majority of the country'. To the protest that the minorities would be crushed, Azaña, however, acknowledged that he 'didn't know yet whom we are going to crush, or even who will be the crushers and the crushed' (in *Mori* 1933, vol. xiii : 345ff.).

The electoral system combined majority and plurality rules. About one-seventh of the deputies were elected in ten urban districts and the rest in fifty rural districts with an unfair apportionment of seats. Every elector was given a limited vote for a lower number of candidates than seats to be filled in the district. In each district, the seats were distributed between the two party or coalition lists with higher numbers of votes, respectively called 'the majority' and 'the minority'. If a list was supported by a majority of voters, it was given the proportion of seats they had been allowed to vote for (about 80 per cent). If no list obtained a majority of votes, the most voted list was given 67 per cent of the seats under the proviso that it had obtained at least 20 per cent of votes (40 per cent since 1933). If no list obtained this minimum support, a second round of voting was held. Thus, the second candidacy in votes, the so-called 'the minority', was given only between about 20 and 33 per cent of seats in the district independently of the amount of votes obtained.

It was presumed that these 'majoritarian' rules would favor the fabrication of an oversized, clear parliamentary majority at every election. But unfair district apportionment of seats combined with uneven distribution of votes for different parties across the territory could make the winner in votes a loser in seats.

The electoral system created strong incentives to form large, heterogeneous coalitions of parties at the first round, in the expectation of obtaining the over-representation promised to the most voted list in every district. The numerous, small parties in the broadly populated political center tended very quickly to join either of the two large coalitions with more extreme parties that were formed on the two sides of the left-right spectrum, thus producing increasing bipolarization. The party leaders' strategies to form electoral coalitions were developed asymmetrically on the left and the right and with no continuity from one election to another. In these conditions, the electoral system produced two winners in seats with a minority of votes: in 1933 in favor of the right and in 1936 in favor of the left. On both occasions the opposition to the winner in seats took the form of an armed rebellion.
In the first election in June 1931, the Republican parties (including Left-Republicans, Radical-Socialists, Radicals, and Liberals), running together with the Socialists, obtained a very large, centrist majority over the Monarchists. The Republicans obtained over-representation and a large majority of seats on their own (even without those of the Socialists). In contrast, the disunited Monarchist groups, including Catholics, Agrarians, and Basque and Catalan regionalists, were under-represented.

In the second election in November 1933, the Republican center split into two factions. In contrast to the so-called Left-Republicans and the Radical-Socialists, center-right Republicans, like the Radicals and the Liberals, were now ready to collaborate with the recovered Monarchists.

The center-right Republicans reached irregularly distributed, sometimes informal, pre-electoral agreements in most districts with a reinforced right which was able to organize a new large party, the CEDA, with the Catholics and the Agrarians. Both the candidacies of the center-right and those of the right obtained fewer votes but were given more seats than the more separated center-left and left parties if the latter are counted together, as shown in the electoral results compiled in Table 3.3. Specifically, while the separated center-left and left parties obtained \((22 + 14)\) 36 per cent of votes, they were given only \((13 + 8)\) 21 per cent of seats. This was because the parties on the right half of the spectrum attained narrow majorities or pluralities in a high number of districts and were rewarded with oversized representation. In contrast, the center-left Republicans and the left Socialists, now running separately, became frequent district ‘minorities’ and were badly affected by the electoral system favoring the larger candidacies. After the 1933 election, a rather moderate Cabinet led by the center-right Radical party was

**Table 3.3. Bipolarized, Nonmonotonic Spanish Elections (1931-6)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1931 Votes</th>
<th>1933</th>
<th>1936 Votes</th>
<th>1936 Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>Seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic-Socialists</td>
<td>85 89</td>
<td>22 13</td>
<td>Popular Front</td>
<td>46 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>15 11</td>
<td>Center-left</td>
<td>14 8</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100 100</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>30 37</td>
<td>National Front</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Under majoritarian rules, large coalition candidacies obtain higher proportions of seats than votes, in contrast to separated candidacies. Votes and seats are given in percentages. As in other tables in this book, percentages are rounded by the method of greatest remainders: the integers with the greatest remainders are rounded up until they sum 100, and then the other integers are rounded down (following Balinski and Rachev, 1997).*

Left: Socialists (PSOE, USC); Communists (PCE); and minor groups.
Center-left: Left-Republicans (AR/IR, UR); Radical-Socialists (RS), Regionals (ERC, ANV, ORGA).
Center-right: Radicals (PRR); Liberals (PP, PC, ASR, DLR, LD); Regionals (PNV, LC); Independents.
Right: Catholics (AN/CEDA); Agrarians (PA); Monarchists (RE, CT); Fascists (FE).
formed, thanks to the parliamentary support of the right. The largest party in votes and seats, the Catholic CEDA, did not enter the Cabinet directly. Despite this, and in the belief that the CEDA would eventually obtain more influence, in October 1934 the extreme left of the Socialists and the Anarchists organized an armed rebellion to which they were able to attract some center-left Republicans. The rebellion was fought by the army and resulted in more than 1,500 deaths (on both sides) and about 15,000 prisoners.

The election of February 1936 was a kind of revenge. The center-left Republicans and the left Socialists and Communists united and formed the Popular Front. This was basically an electoral coalition that demanded amnesty for the prisoners of the 1934 rebellion and the re-establishment of previous reforms. Significant disagreement on other issues between moderate reformists and revolutionaries was reflected in the programmatic weakness of the coalition.

The center-right Republicans, and especially the Radical party, were badly affected because of their record in the incumbent Cabinet, which underwent several scandals concerning corruption. Some members of the Radical party joined the Popular Front. A new Center party improvised by the incumbent prime minister was not even able to recruit candidates in half the districts. Therefore, this time it was the center-right that was weaker than the large coalition of the center-left and left parties. In addition, the fear of wasting their votes moved a significant number of citizens to vote strategically either for the Popular Front or for the rightist National Front formed by the Catholics, Agrarians, and Monarchists.

The increasing bipolarization promoted by the incentives supplied by the electoral system did not correspond to the degree of bipolarization that could be found among voters' sincere preferences. Using the preferential vote available on the ballot, the citizens gave more votes to the moderate candidates within each coalition or bloc. The center-left Republicans obtained more support than did the Socialists or the Communists in the same lists, while the Catholics received more votes than the Monarchists. In the knowledge of these voters' preferences, party leaders facilitated these choices by placing the more moderate candidates at the top of the lists. Moderate candidates within each of the two blocs were much closer by aligned to each other than to the extreme candidates of their own bloc. In fact, some of the candidates running on opposite coalitions had been members of the same electoral candidacy (or even the same party) just a few years earlier. The more extreme parties obtained almost no support. The Fascists of Falange, with less than 1 per cent of the vote did not obtain representation. The Communist party obtained only 2 per cent of votes, but it was given some over-representation through the coalition lists of the Popular Front (Jackson 1965: 518-25; Linz 1978).

This time it was the Popular Front that obtained fewer votes but was given more seats than the less unified center-right and right parties, if the latter are counted together, as shown in Table 3.3. Specifically, while the separated center-right and right parties obtained (23 + 31) 54 per cent of votes, they were given only (15 + 25) 40 per cent of seats. Out of 60 districts, the Popular Front was given over-representation by winning in 30 districts (including all the urban constituencies), frequently with narrow majorities, and in three districts by plurality against the disunited majority of the center-right and the right. The right and center-right candidacies won in the remaining twenty-seven districts, including all the five that needed a second round due to their division in the first round, with relatively larger electoral support.
If the center-right and right parties had run in perfect unity in the first round and had obtained the same amount of votes that they had received separately, they would have collected a majority in votes but still fewer seats than the Popular Front, according to district-per-district calculations (Tusell 1976: 111). This indicates that the perverse results were not only the consequence of party leaders’ asymmetrical skill in forming electoral coalitions but also a mechanical result of majoritarian electoral rules and unfair apportionment. The uneven distribution of votes for the different political groups in the territory only amplified the distorting effects of the drawing of districts. As a consequence of both the electoral rules and the coalition strategies, relatively minor changes in voters’ choices between successive elections produced upheavals in institutional representation.

Following the 1936 election, a rather moderate Cabinet led by center-left Republicans was formed without direct participation of the Socialists or other leftist parties. Yet, a military uprising, initially supported by the Catholics and Agrarians, was consummated less than five months after the election. The division of Spain into two camps supporting the Republic and the rebel military, roughly conformed to the territorial division of votes in the previous election. The two blocs, however, were soon dominated by the initiative of the Communists and the Fascists, respectively. During an almost three-year cruel Civil War, about 300,000 people were killed and a comparable number went into exile. The outburst of a bipolarized conflict at the induction of electoral institutions, rather than from social unrest, greatly surprised many Spaniards. The lack of understanding why civil war had occurred fed a great fear that a similar conflict might reappear in the future. The subsequent military dictatorship lasted for almost forty years.