The General Election in Spain, 2000

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1. Background

For the fourth time in eight democratic elections, a single party obtained an absolute majority of seats in the Spanish parliament but not a majority of votes. The People’s Party (PP) had achieved alternation in government in 1996, after more than thirteen years of rule by the Socialist Party (PSOE), but by a very narrow margin (1.2% of the vote). During the subsequent four years, a PP minority cabinet had to rely on parliamentary support from the Catalan, Canary, and (for a while) the Basque nationalist parties. Despite its fragile majority, and following the longest governmental tenure in recent Spanish democratic history, the election of 12 March 2000 confirmed and enlarged electoral support for the PP beyond any public forecast, preelectoral poll, exit poll, or speculation. Moreover, it won a majority of seats. The main elements in explaining this electoral result are the governing record of the PP, the disproportionality in representation produced by the electoral system, and strategic mistakes by the main opposition party, the PSOE.

2. The candidates

Since the People’s Party is the successor party to the People’s Alliance, founded by several of Franco’s former ministers during the transition to democracy in the 1970s a significant proportion of the Spanish electorate had suspected that the People’s Party retained links with the former authoritarian regime. Aware of this, the party leader and Prime Minister, José-María Aznar, repeatedly declared himself to be, politically, in the ‘reforming centre’, even close to Tony Blair’s ‘third way’. In the 2000 election, the PP attracted new voters and found new strength on the basis of its record in government during the previous four years. Aznar recurrently declared that ‘Spain is going well’ (which became a common humorous expression among Spaniards). One of the PP’s major slogans during the electoral campaign was a logically connected message: ‘We are going further on’.

A major success of the PP’s government in its first term was associated with its economic policy of liberalisation, which allowed sustained growth and a dramatic reduction in unemployment. In contrast to some pessimistic forecasts, the Spanish
economy and public sector fulfilled the conditions of the Maastricht Treaty for joining the euro in 1999 even more comfortably than Italy and some other EU member states. Negotiations and social agreements between workers’ unions, employers’ organisations, and the government were resumed after ten years of a conflict-ridden relationship. In addition, in government, the PP took some credit for having appeased ETA, which maintained a cease-fire lasting fourteen months, the longest period without political killings in recent Spanish history. When ETA resumed its campaign of violence and announced its boycott of the election, PP’s leaders attributed responsibility to the Basque Nationalist Party, accusing the Basque regional government of weakness and naïveté in the face of terrorism.

In contrast to the PP’s record, the Socialist Party, once in opposition, proved incapable even of selecting a convincing new leader. After more than twenty-two years as General Secretary of the PSOE (including thirteen years as Prime Minister), Felipe González suddenly resigned in 1997. A former PSOE minister, Joaquín Almunia, was immediately appointed General Secretary. In April 1998, Almunia organised a so-called primary election for choosing the party’s prime ministerial candidate; Almunia himself ran as the official candidate. Participation in the primary was confined to card-carrying members of the party; in the event, turnout was only about 3% of the party’s votes in the previous general election. A surprise candidate, José Borrell, another former PSOE minister with a more radical stance on policy and the ideological position of the party, won a majority of the primary votes. Borrell then started campaigning as the party’s candidate as prime minister some two years before the latest possible date for the general election. A year later, however, having fallen victim to a corruption scandal involving one of his aides and the pressures of the party leadership, he resigned. Almunia, in spite of having lost the primary contest, then became the party’s prime ministerial candidate—what he would later declare to have been his ‘major mistake’.

The communist-dominated United Left (IU) had also lost its leader. Julio Anguita resigned on health grounds and was replaced by Francisco Frutos. During the period of PSOE governments led by González, Anguita had not only vigorously attacked the government’s pro-market economic policy, but also joined with the right in attacking the government about a series of scandals linking it to corruption and the deployment of ‘death-squads’. Thus, González and Anguita had frequently been at odds and had developed a mutual personal hostility. In contrast, the new PSOE and IU leaders, Almunia and Frutos, tried a new strategy of mutual cooperation against the PP in government.

In late January 2000, less than seven weeks before the general election, Almunia invited the United Left to agree an electoral pact. The IU would withdraw its candidates for the Congress of Deputies in 34 of the 52 electoral districts, anticipating that its supporters would then vote for the PSOE. Neither the IU, nor, previously, the Communist Party had ever obtained seats in those districts, partly due to their small electoral magnitude and the corresponding advantage of the larger parties, resulting in a significant number of ‘wasted’ votes for the left. In exchange for withdrawing IU candidates for the Congress of Deputies, PSOE would give the IU a number of potentially winning candidacies for the less powerful Senate, which is
elected using the single non-transferable vote that strongly favours the larger parties. Replication of the distribution of votes for the other parties and the sum of the two left parties’ votes in the 1996 general election would have given the left large pluralities, although, strictly speaking, not a majority of seats in either the Congress or the Senate.

The leadership of the two left parties engaged in highly publicised negotiations. The initial PSOE proposal was reduced to the withdrawal of IU candidates for Congress in only eight districts, those in which the sum of the two parties’ votes (based on the 1996 election) would have secured more seats for the PSOE. The IU’s leadership, however, refused to withdraw their candidates in any district, arguing that, by doing so, the future of the organisation would be in jeopardy.

Encouraged by warm support from left activists and some media opinion-makers, the two parties agreed, instead, on a ‘progressive’ government programme, partly inspired by the programme of the ‘plural left’ government in France. Although the IU did not withdraw any candidacies for Congress, it was allocated one-third of the joint candidacies for the Senate in 29 districts. The leaders of the two parties coordinated their campaigns by holding a number of joint meetings and making several joint public statements.

By brokering this agreement, Almunia may have forfeited the possibly advantageous ‘mechanical’ effects of single left candidacies for the Congress, while at the same time producing negative ‘strategic’ effects. Electoral competition in democratic Spain has been highly bipolar but centripetal, with only occasional harsh confrontation on a few issues. By making ‘common cause’ with the IU, however, the PSOE moved to a more extreme position on the ideological spectrum. At the same time, the IU moved toward a more moderate position in the eyes of many of its voters who had backed its earlier frontal opposition to PSOE governments. Centrist, moderate voters who had supported the Socialists, and radical left-wing voters who had supported the Communists, both felt somewhat alienated by the agreement between the leaderships of the two parties.

3. The campaign

In contrast to the two previous general elections, the electoral campaign in 2000 was short (only two weeks) and marked by a much lower level of debate. In contrast to the 1993 and 1996 elections, there were no televised debates between the two main contenders. Rather, the candidates concentrated on making an impact on only a few issues. The People’s Party attracted attention with its proposals for reducing taxes, especially on personal income and on small companies, and increasing certain public pensions for the retired. Neither the PSOE nor the IU, however, succeeded in making much impression on public debate with their proposals, although they

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1 In Catalonia the joint candidacies also included a minor left nationalist party, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC).
tried forcefully with their proposal for a 35-hour working week. Rather, in reaction to the incumbent government’s economic success, the left leaders developed a negative campaign, denouncing some entrepreneurs’ big profits and even improvised a proposal to penalise the most profitable companies with a new, retrospective tax, which met with widespread rejection. Finally, the Basque conflict became the subject of harsh accusations between the People’s Party and the Basque nationalists, to the advantage of both and at the expense of the Socialists.

4. The vote

Turnout in the election was 70%, a decline of about seven percentage points compared to the 1996 election. This is in line with turnout in half of the eight elections held under the present democratic regime. In the other, and more highly competitive elections, turnout reached up to 80% levels.

The People’s Party won over 600 000 more votes than in 1996, an increase of some six percentage points (of valid votes). It increased its percentage of the vote in 47 out of 52 districts (in the other five the corresponding increase was in favour of local conservative parties), and came top of the poll in 42 districts (in contrast to only 33 four years before). As a consequence of the majoritarian bias of the electoral system, the PP was over-represented; with 45% of the vote it obtained 52% of deputies’ seats and 61% of the seats in the Senate.

The PSOE and the IU together obtained about three million fewer votes than in 1996, a fall of some eight percentage points. The PSOE won in only six districts (four out of eight in Andalusia and two out of four in Catalonia). For the first time in recent democratic history, the major party on the right obtained more votes than the left parties taken together. The advantage was more than five percentage points.

According to some estimates, at least 20% of voters made a different choice (including abstention) in 2000 compared to the 1996 election. About 900 000 former PSOE or IU supporters voted for the PP; about one million voted for regional parties; and between 1.4 and 1.8 million became new abstainers. There were shifts both ways between the PSOE and the IU, but the IU experienced a net loss of 290 000 votes in favour of the PSOE. The joint candidacies of the left for the Senate obtained no new seats. In those districts in which the PSOE and the IU ran separate candidacies for the Senate, their support was, on average, four percentage points lower than their votes for the Congress seats; in the districts with joint lists the average difference was ten percentage points (Castro, 2000a,b).

The nationalist and regionalist parties, taken together, increased their electoral support by rather more than two percentage points compared to the 1996 election. While the electoral rules result in under-representation of the minor country-wide parties, they allow regional parties with large support in their constituencies to obtain

\[2\] These shifts were partly compensated with smaller shifts in the opposite directions. Estimates of swing voters are based on a Gallup survey (personal communication from Julián Santamaría), the author’s own calculations, and Wert (2000).
shares of seats roughly corresponding to their share of votes. The Catalan nationalists of Convergence and Union (CiU) won in two districts and the Basque Nationalist Party (PMV) in another two. The total number of regional parties with representation in the Congress of Deputies increased from seven to nine and their total number of seats went from 29 to 33 (see Table 1).

5. The outcome

The general election of 2000 confirmed certain majoritarian traits of the proportional electoral system in Spain. Deviation from proportionality was 10%, lower than in some previous Spanish elections, but still the highest among PR systems in Western Europe. The effective number of parties was only 2.5. Half of the democratic elections in Spain have resulted in a single party obtaining an absolute majority of seats; on this occasion this was achieved with 45% of the vote. By contrast, only about 10% of elections produce a single party majority in continental Europe, in general with about one half of the total vote (for a broader presentation of the Spanish political system in a comparative perspective, see Colomer (1996)).

From the outset, on election night, the leaders of the People’s Party declared that, despite their parliamentary majority, they would govern by consensus and in co-operation with other parties, especially the Catalan and Canary nationalists and, on some constitutional issues, also with the PSOE. José-María Aznar was appointed Prime Minister with the support of the PP and the (numerically) superfluous two nationalist groups, giving him a total of 202 votes out of 350. Only one Spanish Prime Minister under the democratic regime has enjoyed stronger support in Congress. Aznar has repeatedly

Table 1
Election results for the Spanish Congress of Deputies, March 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Valid votes (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People’s Party (PP)</td>
<td>10 321 178</td>
<td>45.23</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist Party (PSOE)</td>
<td>7 918 752</td>
<td>34.71</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Left (IU)</td>
<td>1 263 043</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convergence and Union (CiU)</td>
<td>970 421</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basque Nationalist Party (PNV)</td>
<td>353 953</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG)</td>
<td>306 268</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canary Coalition (CC)</td>
<td>248 261</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andalusian Party (PA)</td>
<td>206 255</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Left Catalonia (ERC)</td>
<td>194 715</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative for Catalonia-Greens (IC-V)</td>
<td>119 290</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basque Nationalists (EA)</td>
<td>100 742</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aragonese Junta (ChA)</td>
<td>75 356</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>736 233</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22 814 467</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://www.congreso.es/elecciones

3 Namely González in 1982, with 207.
committed himself not to run for Prime Minister after his second term, although there is no legal provision preventing him doing so. The following cabinet reshuffle led to the appointment of younger ministers and a number of independents. Particularly remarkable was the inclusion of four former members of the anti-Franco Communist Party of the 1970s, a higher number than in any previous democratic cabinet.

With its new absolute majority, the PP government is likely to venture more daringly towards further liberalisation policies. Yet it also has reasons to be even more cautious. One is that, in spite of all its success in approaching the political centre, the PP has not yet captured the median voter. It has no effective opposition on its right, and its victory was partly due to weakness and strategic mistakes on the part of the opposition parties. Another moderating factor is that, in parallel with the high central concentration of institutional power, political pluralism has expanded in Spain through the institution of autonomous regional governments, most of which the People’s Party does not control.

References


The 2000 presidential election in the Dominican Republic

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The majority runoff electoral system is now commonly employed throughout Latin America. This format can lead to unforeseen outcomes, however. On the one hand, it has the potential to narrowly elect a presidential candidate that came a distant second in the first electoral round. On the other hand, it may also deny a first-round victory to a candidate who nevertheless obtained a convincing plurality in the first

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